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Philosophy 25B

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February 2nd, 2010

Descartes' Definition of Insanity and its Effects on Sensory Doubt

Descartes' intellectual exercise documented in the *Meditations* is based on one fundamental rule: any principle that holds reason for doubt must be discarded entirely. He writes, "I should withhold my assent no less carefully from opinions that are not completely certain and indubitable than I would from those that are patently false. For this reason, it will suffice for the rejection of all of these opinions, if I find in each of them some reason for doubt" (Descartes, First Med 18.5). Descartes immediately applies this directive to his senses. He looks for reasons to doubt the principle that he can trust the evidence of his senses so he can reconstruct what he knows upon a foundation of certainty. Just like one would have to look for holes in a water balloon before one can be sure that it isn't leaking, before Descartes can be certain of the evidence of his sense, he must look for reasons for doubt. However, he is unable to deny that he is sitting by the fire, wearing a night-gown, and holding a piece of paper. In following his method of probing for doubt, Descartes briefly entertains the possibility that he is insane.

Although Descartes' discussion on insanity is short-lived, his comments leave plenty of room for further inspection. He writes about being insane as if it prevents one from sensing what is truly there. "The insane," he proclaims, "are impaired by... an unrelenting vapor of black bile"

(Descartes, First Med 19). But what is this black bile that makes one insane and why might it give one reasons to doubt that Descartes can trust the evidence of his senses? The options depend on how Descartes defines insanity. He could either mean that the senses aren't properly feeding true information about reality to the brain, or that the brain is incapable of taking sensory information and creating rational inferences. In this essay, I will examine what Descartes means by insanity within the scope of his argument and whether or not his definition lends itself to providing a good reason to doubt sensory evidence.

Descartes could be insane by means of his senses' inability to take in information as it truly is. It would be as if all the mechanisms by which he is aware of his existence were to malfunction, causing him to "steadfastly insist" that he is a king instead of a pauper, or "arrayed in purple robes," or "made of glass" (Descartes, First Med 19.1). In this case, he would not be able to trust the evidence of his senses, for the black bile of insanity would prevent his senses from taking in information without distorting it.

However, a problem remains. If Descartes believed that insanity was solely the inability of one's senses to properly intake reality, wouldn't this example be enough for him to doubt the principle that he could trust sensory evidence, making it unnecessary for him to continue to explore dream skepticism or entertain the evil genius theory? This type of insanity would have already called sensory perception into doubt, requiring him to disregard it in its entirety. Since Descartes doesn't use insanity in place of dream skepticism or the evil genius theory to doubt the principle that he can trust evidence of his senses, he must consider insanity something other than sensory failure.

As an alternative, Descartes might be insane by being irrational. While his senses could acquire information without distorting it, he would be unable to make logical inferences based

upon such true information. Descartes would properly see that he was in rags and wearing a milk carton as a hat, but he wouldn't understand that these rags weren't silk robes and the milk carton wasn't a gold crown. To use his wax example, Descartes could see, feel, hear, taste and smell the honeycomb wax as it truly is, but when the wax melts he would not be able to rationally equate the two. Though he might believe he was made of glass, if he stubbed his toe, he wouldn't see himself break into pieces. In these scenarios, Descartes may doubt his senses, asking, for instance, why they don't show him shatter. However, his insanity has no bearing on the truth of his sensory information. As long as his senses are still effectively recognizing reality and transmitting it to the brain, Descartes' insanity is not a *good reason* to doubt the principle that he can trust the evidence of his senses. His insanity does not change the fact that his senses are trustworthy.

As a counterargument, one might argue that insanity based in irrationality is still in part caused by sensory malfunction, since the senses are always somewhat deceptive. As Descartes writes, "the senses do sometimes deceive us when it is a question of very small and distant things" (Descartes, First Med 18.17). If everyone is somewhat deceived by their senses, it would be logical to assume that insanity is just having more deceptive senses than normal. This assumption could then be used to conclude that insanity is a good reason to distrust the evidence of one's senses more than any normal person would. This increased sensory perception could be the cause of the increased irrationality seen in people considered insane.

In response, besides adhering to the fact that Descartes doesn't use insanity in place of dream skepticism or evil genius theory to call all sensory evidence into doubt, one could argue that Descartes' insanity is always based upon fundamentally true information recognized by the senses. To use his own painter analogy, Descartes might be insane in that his thoughts are

like “the members of various animals” fused together in “especially bizarre forms” and in no rational manner (Descartes, First Med 20.2). He could believe at one instant that he was flying and at the next that he was underwater. In addition, he could also be more affected by sensory deception than most people. That is, the things considered large and close for most people would be far and distant for him. However, he still would use fundamental sensory truths, like color. Since the basic and essential elements of his senses would remain true, there would be no good reason to doubt his sensory evidence.

In conclusion, the possibility that Descartes is insane is not a good reason for him to reject the principle that he can trust the evidence of his senses. In this essay, I first showed how Descartes’ insanity could mean sensory malfunction. However, if this was the case, then Descartes would have had no motive to continue his argument with dream skepticism or evil genius theory, for he would have already proven that he has reason to doubt the evidence of his senses. I then presented irrationality, or the inability to make logical inferences, as an alternative definition of insanity. Using this definition, I argued that Descartes would be unjustified in doubting the evidence of his senses, since this version of insanity has no bearing on sensory function. After exploring the possibility of insanity as irrationality caused by an abnormal increase in sensory deception, I concluded that even if Descartes’ senses deceived him more than others, they still provide him with basic truths like color, and therefore are fundamentally trustworthy. Unless Descartes defined insanity as the complete and fundamental distortion of reality by his senses, he has no good reason to use the possibility of insanity to doubt the principle that he can trust his sensory evidence.

Works Cited

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