Duelling with Dualisms:
Descartes, Foucault and the History of Organizational Limits

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Abstract

Critical perspectives in organization studies often dismiss Descartes' philosophical contribution because it is seen to legitimate a patriarchal and phallogentric mode of reasoning. In particular, the Cartesian mind-body dualism is said to reinforce gender inequality in organizations by privileging the rational mind over the emotional body. However, not only is this view incomplete and misleading, it also fails to consider the more significant division between reason and madness in Descartes' work. For Foucault, Descartes' *Meditations* plays a role in excluding madness from the domain of thought at the beginning of the classical age; this mirrors organizational practices of exclusion in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, namely the incarceration of the mad in houses of confinement. This tells us that Descartes work has relevance for understanding the relation between philosophy and organizations in a specific historical context. In place of the historically de-contextualized use of philosophy we frequently find in organization studies, we propose that organizational scholars should seek to identify physical exclusions, conceptual binaries and historical breaks in order to conduct a critical ontology of the present - what we call a 'history of organizational limits'.

Keywords

Descartes; Foucault; history; mind-body dualism; philosophy.

Introduction

According to Žižek (2008: xxiii), a spectre is haunting Western academia: the spectre of the Cartesian subject. This ghostly figure takes the form of an ideal *cogito* ('mind') that is irrevocably separated from any material manifestation ('body'). Žižek notes that the mind-body dualism, which is seen to originate in the work of seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes, is universally reviled by scholars across the theoretical spectrum. While post-Marxists consider the *cogito* to be indicative of capitalist individualism, feminists hold Descartes responsible for legitimizing gender inequality; and while cognitive scientists consider the unity of the Cartesian self to be illusory, environmentalists point out that Descartes' distinction between mind and matter has sown the seeds of ecological catastrophe. Descartes, it appears, is the pariah of contemporary social theory, philosophy and science. Even if they disagree about everything else, there is harmonious agreement among commentators that the mind-body split on which the Cartesian subject rests should be decisively overcome. As Žižek puts it: "All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre" (2008: xxiii).

Organization studies is no exception to this rule; it, too, wishes to exorcise the spectre of the Cartesian subject. We find avowedly anti-Cartesian sentiments expressed in such diverse areas as leadership (Collinson, 2005), organizational culture (Flores-Pereira, Davel, and Cavedon, 2008), knowledge innovation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), workplace surveillance (Ball, 2005), organizational architecture (Dale, 2005), consumer research (Giesler and Venkatesh, 2005), business ethics (Kjonstad and Willmott, 1995), strategy (Calori, 1998), stress management (Styhre, et al., 2002) and institutional economics (Waller and Jennings, 1990). Although these critiques are often varied, one important strand in the

literature concerns the gender inequality that results from the Cartesian mind-body dualism (Ross-Smith and Kornberger, 2004). By privileging the rational mind over the emotional body, Descartes is held responsible for contriving a patriarchal and phallocentric mode of reasoning that continues to inform management thought and practice in contemporary organizations. Critical perspectives in organization studies frequently argue that the Cartesian mind-body dualism must be rejected in order to counteract its negative consequences and to ensure fairer ways of thinking and acting at work.

Like Žižek, we take issue with this view of Cartesian duality and seek to challenge the idea that the Cartesian mind-body dualism should be ‘overcome’ in the name of critique. As we will show, Descartes does not dogmatically insist upon a split between mind (*res cogitans*) and body (*res extensa*) from the outset; rather, this distinction is made as a result of his method of doubt. For Descartes, even if we are sometimes deceived by our bodily senses, the very fact that we are thinking cannot be doubted. The mind-body dualism is thus a methodological outcome, not a metaphysical assumption. This serves to undermine the view, widely held in organization studies, that there is something intrinsically misogynistic about the Cartesian duality between transcendental cognition and empirical corporeality.

The division between madness and reason in the *Meditations*, however, is of a different order entirely. It is this dualism that has been examined, most prominently, in Foucault’s *History of Madness* (2006a). For Foucault, Descartes’ work plays a specific role at a certain moment in history – the beginning of the classical age (1650-1800) – when madness is systematically excluded from the domain of philosophy and science. This, Foucault contends, mirrors organizational practices of exclusion whereby those deemed to be mad were put under lock and key during the Great Confinement in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This

approach suggests that it is the division between reason and madness in Descartes' work, and not the dualism between mind and body, that has most relevance for studying organizations from a critical perspective.

While the paper is framed within the context of an engagement with Descartes' *Meditations*, our ultimate objective is to make a renewed case for an historical analysis of the relation between philosophical reflection and organizational practices. We do this by taking Foucault's reading of Descartes as a case in point. Following Foucault, we argue that organization studies would be best served by describing how forms of thought (such as the Cartesian method of doubt) and sets of institutions (such as the houses of confinement) come to shape human subjects at particular points in time (in this case, the classical age). The critical task for such a project would be to describe historical shifts in apparatuses of knowledge and power in order to unsettle the self-evidence that has developed around contemporary modes of organizational life. This is what we might call a 'history of organizational limits': in place of the historically de-contextualized use of philosophy we frequently find in organization studies, we propose that organizational scholars should seek to identify physical exclusions, conceptual binaries and historical breaks in order to conduct a critical ontology of the present. What we are arguing for here is in line with calls for a more robust organizational historicism, especially in relation to Foucault, that have been articulated in this journal and elsewhere (see e.g. Booth and Rowlinson, 2006; Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; McKinlay, 2006; Rowlinson and Carter, 2002). We hope to add to this call by highlighting the importance of engaging historically with philosophy and its relation to organizational forms.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section discusses the treatment of the Cartesian mind-body dualism within organization studies. The second section addresses the work of Descartes, focusing on the split between mind and body in the *Meditations*. The third section examines Foucault's interpretation of Descartes' *Meditations* in the *History of Madness*, placing emphasis on the relation between philosophical reflection and organizational practices in a specific historical context. The fourth section outlines the consequences of Foucault's approach for developing a 'history of organizational limits'. The paper closes by outlining how organization studies might begin to deal with philosophy along an historical-organizational register.

The Mind-Body Dualism in Organization Studies

Feminist thought has long emphasized the political dimension of duality. 'Binary thinking', on this view, is not a neutral characterization of opposing poles; rather, it expresses a hierarchical preference by elevating one term over the other. This is historically exemplified by the Cartesian mind-body dualism, which some feminist scholars have focused on in their critique (see e.g. Bordo, 1986; 1987; Braidotti, 1991; Burkitt, 1999; Lloyd, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Hodge, 1988). It is frequently claimed that, from Descartes' *Meditations* onwards, scientific inquiry was to be undertaken by reason alone, which was conceptualized as universal and disembodied. Descartes' emphasis on an abstract, 'pure' reason meant that the corporeal body, with all of its unpredictable and sometimes deceptive senses, had to be excluded from the realm of true science (Bordo, 1986: 450; Burkitt, 1999: 10; Grosz, 1994: 6-7). The mind-body dualism thus elevates one of its terms (the rational mind) over the other (the irrational body). Feminist critics have pointed out that this dualism is implicitly gendered. Whereas the mind is perceived as masculine and resolutely stable, the body is

understood as feminine and prone to emotional disturbances (Bordo, 1986: 450-1; Burkitt, 1999: 90; Grosz, 1994: 3-4; Keller, 1985: 6-7). This tells us that the supposedly universal subject of reason is no such thing; it is in fact the product of a highly partial and patriarchal mode of thinking, which relies on the exclusion of its feminine other at the very moment of its celebrated inauguration (*cogito ergo sum*). This certainly puts into context the revival of interest in the body in contemporary socio-political thought and the related attempt to rethink the subject beyond Cartesian abstraction (Gatens, 1996: 67-71; Grosz, 1994: 15-9; Rose, 1998: 6-7). It also helps to explain why Descartes has become such a figure of derision for many working within academia today.

The feminist critique of Cartesian duality has had considerable influence on debates within organization studies, particularly from a critical and poststructuralist perspective. One notable early example is Mumby and Putnam's (1992) feminist deconstruction of Herbert Simon's notion of 'bounded rationality'. It is argued that this concept prioritizes the masculine and rational task of conception over and above the feminine and physical task of execution, thus serving to exalt the mind of the manager at the same time as denigrating the body – along with all of its sensations and emotions – of the worker (1992: 469-471). It is not so much the mind-body dualism *per se* that is problematic for Mumby and Putnam, but the way in which one term of the opposition (i.e. the 'masculine' mind of the manager) is erroneously separated from and unjustly privileged over the other (i.e. the 'feminine' body of the worker) (1992: 480-1). In response to this state of affairs, Mumby and Putnam put forward the concept of 'bounded emotionality' in an attempt to "recover the integration of the mind and body" by emphasizing alternative ways of organizing that do not rely on the strict hierarchical division between managers and workers, thus undermining the division between the conception and execution of tasks (1992: 474).

This approach to critiquing the mind-body dualism is widely shared by feminist thinkers in organization studies. Drawing on the work of Foucault and Derrida, Knights and Kerfoot (2004: 431) claim that “all binaries involve a hierarchy” whereby one term is prioritized over the other. Of particular concern is the gender binary, which they see as placing men at the centre of rationality at the same time as confining women to the emotional margins (2004: 431). While their anti-Cartesianism here remains largely implicit, Knights and Surnam (2008: 3) leave us in no doubt that the sexist distinction between ‘masculine’ rationality and ‘feminine’ emotion “has a very long history stretching back to the mind-body dualism of Descartes and the Enlightenment”. Knights (1997: 4) echoes this point by arguing that binary divisions associated with Enlightenment thought – for example, reason/emotion, rationality/irrationality, objective/subjective, masculine/feminine – should be ‘deconstructed’, thus serving to undermine “the mode of reasoning that reproduces the subordination of women in western society”. These authors do not seek to deny or abandon such distinctions altogether; rather, the aim of their critique is to draw attention to and challenge the historical subordination of women to men that is reinforced by binary thinking (Knights, 2000/2001: 81; Knights and Kerfoot, 2004: 431; Knights and Surnam, 2008: 3; see also Knights and Thanem, 2005: 32-3; Surnam, 2002: 221).

There is a strong suggestion in these discussions that the mind-body dualism is an artificial construct rather than an inherent property of the individual. In their study of organizational pedagogies, Baxter and Hughes (2004: 364) suggest that the mind-body dualism is a “learnt state of being” rather than a natural way of thinking or acting; it is, moreover, implicated in a set of “normative, gendered, and other social relations” that are open to contestation (2004: 376). Thus we find repeated references to the importance of “overturning dualistic

frameworks” (2004: 364), “moving beyond the dualistic frameworks” (2004: 376), and the need “to overcome dualism” (2004: 379) as a way of counteracting Cartesian misogyny.

For some commentators, however, it is not enough simply to reconcile the poles of the mind-body dualism; it is necessary, instead, to insist on the fundamental instability of gender roles. For example, Linstead and Pullen (2006: 1288) claim that critical accounts of gender identity in organization studies continue to engage in binary thinking and, as a result, do not accurately reflect the true fluidity of gendered experience. To rectify this, it is proposed that gender is discussed in terms of constant flux and ceaseless becoming, thus permitting us to surmount dualistic categories once and for all (2006: 1304). But while such thinkers are keen to distance themselves from organizational theorists who seek to reconcile (and therefore reproduce) binaries, it is clear that the object of their critique remains the same: namely, “the classical Cartesian mind/body dualism” (2006: 1304).

While it is rare for organizational scholars to extol the virtues of binary thinking,¹ Borgerson and Rehn (2004: 470) point out that “dualisms are not the enemy”. Although they concede that hierarchical opposition may in some cases create unwelcome social inequality (2004: 455), Borgerson and Rehn are critical of the trend in organization studies to dismiss dualistic frameworks out of hand. This repetitive formula, they argue, “runs the risk of becoming a handy cheat-sheet for theorizing” (2004: 456-7) in which every dualism is seen as intrinsically ‘bad’ and all fluidity is viewed as unquestionably ‘good’. They go on to note that dualisms are often used in a productive way by poststructuralist feminist thinkers such as Butler, Irigaray, and Kristeva, precisely to draw attention to the inequalities contained within them (2004: 456). On this view, there are valid – indeed critical – reasons for maintaining “a

¹ One notable exception is Reed’s (1997) trenchant defence of the agency-structure dualism in organization studies.

fixed gaze upon dualistic poles” (2004: 457) rather than attempting to reconcile binary oppositions.

We intend to take heed of such advice in the remainder of the paper. We will fix our gaze upon the mind-body dualism in Descartes’ *Meditations* in the next section and then go on to discuss the division between reason and madness. This will enable us to show that while there is much to dislike about Descartes’ project, notably his treatment of the mad, poststructuralist critiques in organization studies miss their mark by focusing exclusively on the mind-body dualism.

Descartes’ *Meditations*

Descartes’ stated objective in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, originally published in 1641, is to establish a stable and permanent foundation for the sciences (1968: 95). This requires him to rid himself of all knowledge that cannot be proven to be “certain and indubitable” (1968: 95). Accordingly, “the slightest ground for doubt” is sufficient reason for Descartes to reject any opinion he happens to hold. There is no need to sort through every opinion one by one, however, since Descartes is satisfied that “the destruction of the foundations necessarily brings down with it the rest of the edifice” (1968: 65). This leads Descartes to target only the most basic of his assumptions, beginning with sensory perception:

Everything I have accepted up to now as being absolutely true and assured, I have learned from or through the senses. But I have sometimes found that these senses

played me false, and it is prudent never to trust entirely those who have once deceived us. (1968: 96)

Descartes says that all the knowledge he has accumulated over the years has been received through the senses, by seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling. But it is unwise entirely to trust the senses because we are sometimes deceived by them, particularly concerning “things which are barely perceptible or at a great distance” (1968: 96). Since the senses are neither certain nor indubitable, Descartes has good reason to reject them as secure foundations for knowledge about the world.

But this is not completely satisfactory for Descartes. After all, there are some things we receive through the senses that seem impossible to doubt, such as the fact that Descartes is currently sitting by the fire in his dressing-gown and writing on a piece of paper (1968: 96). Even this apparently incontrovertible fact, however, can be doubted: “How many times have I dreamt at night that I was in this place, dressed, by the fire, although I was quite naked in my bed?” (1968: 96). The case of dreams gives Descartes pause for thought, since it is quite possible that he is not sitting by the fire writing (as his senses tell him) but in fact tucked up in his bed fast asleep.

Assuming we are asleep and dreaming, Descartes continues, is there not perhaps something that remains certain and indubitable? Indeed, while our actions may be illusory and our body may not be where we perceive it to be, “we must at least admit that the things which appear to us in sleep are, as it were, pictures and paintings which can only be formed in the likeness of something real and true” (1968: 97). On this view, the illusion of dreams corresponds in

some way to the reality of the world: we cannot doubt that we have a body, even if it is not perhaps where we think it is.

But what if we admit the possibility that our body is entirely imaginary, the mere artifice of dreams? Even so, Descartes contends, “there are even simpler and more universal things which are true and exist, from the mixture of which...all the images of things, whether true and real or fictitious and fantastic, which dwell in our thoughts, are formed” (1968: 97-8). There remain aspects of dreams that surely cannot be doubted, regardless of whether they pertain to actual concrete things or completely fabricated chimeras: “Corporeal nature in general, and its extension, are of this class of things” (1968: 98). Descartes wonders here whether dreams can be said to contain basic elements – size, shape, and quantity – that are certain and indubitable. This is affirmed by the seemingly incontestable fact that, whether one is asleep or not, two and three always make five and a square always has four sides (1968: 98).

Descartes is not content with this conclusion either. For him, the method of natural doubt has not gone far enough. What is now required is a new stage of radical doubt that will enable Descartes to divest himself utterly of all his opinions about the world and its laws. To this end, he formulates the ‘evil demon’ or ‘evil genius’ [*genium malignum*] hypothesis:

I shall suppose, therefore, that there is...some evil demon, no less cunning and deceiving than powerful, who has used all his artifice to deceive me. I will suppose that the heavens, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things that we see, are only illusions and deceptions which he uses to take me in. I will consider myself as having no hands, eyes, flesh, blood or senses, but as believing wrongly that

I have all these things. I shall cling obstinately to this notion; and if, by this means, it is not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of any truth, at the very least it is in my power to suspend my judgement. (1968: 100)

Descartes vows to believe that there is an evil genius who is able to deceive him all the time about everything, including the very existence of the external world, his own body, and the basic truths of mathematics and geometry; all that remains is Descartes' ability to doubt, even if he is unable to know anything with certainty or indubitability. At this point, at the end of the First Meditation, Descartes' task appears to end in absolute scepticism: nothing whatsoever can be known for sure. But, at the beginning of the Second Meditation, Descartes confronts the evil demon once more to overcome radical doubt once and for all:

[T]here is some deceiver both very powerful and very cunning, who constantly uses all his wiles to deceive me. There is therefore no doubt that I exist, if he deceives me; and let him deceive me as much as he likes, he can never cause me to be nothing, so long as I think I am something...[T]he proposition: *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true, every time I express it or conceive of it in my mind. (1968: 103; emphasis in original).

While the evil genius has the power to trick and mislead his every thought, the very fact that Descartes is thinking proves unquestionably that he exists. This provides Descartes with the 'Archimedean point' he has been looking for as a principle for knowledge about the world (1968: 102), thus marking the end of doubt and the start of certainty in the *Meditations*. The remaining five Meditations will see Descartes rehabilitate all that he previously subjected to doubt on the secure foundation of the *cogito* – the real task of the book.

The foregoing discussion shows us that the Cartesian mind-body dualism is a methodological outcome, not a metaphysical assumption. Since the senses sometimes prove deceptive, Descartes considers them (and consequently the body) inadmissible as a firm basis for knowledge. The mind or *cogito* is the only thing that is certain and indubitable at this stage in the *Meditations*, although Descartes will of course go on to restore the body as something that exists beyond doubt (1968: 159). The claim that Descartes is responsible for gender inequality, as discussed in the previous section, begins to look incomplete and somewhat misleading. Put simply, there is nothing intrinsically misogynistic about the Cartesian mind-body dualism. Indeed, some commentators have argued that Descartes' work in fact provided early feminists in the mid-seventeenth century with the resources to assert their own intellectual capacities by drawing on the gender-neutral notion of reason found in the *Meditations* and the *Discourse on Method* (Atherton, 1993: 20; Harth, 1992: 3; Hutton, 2005: 5-6; Kinnaird, 1979: 61-3; Perry, 1985: 475; Smith, 1982: 203). Even admitting that the problem lies with the reception of Cartesianism in the philosophical tradition, rather than with Descartes' work itself, it is nonetheless clear that critical perspectives in organization studies miss their mark by focusing exclusively on the mind-body dualism.

This is not to say that Descartes' work has no relevance whatsoever for studying organizations critically. The remainder of the paper will discuss Foucault's treatment of the *Meditations*, focusing in particular on the binary division between reason and madness, before reflecting on its significance for developing a 'history of organizational limits'.

Foucault on Descartes

Foucault's *History of Madness* was published in the original French in 1961, but was not fully translated into English until 2006. The crucial passages in which Foucault discusses Descartes' *Meditations* are completely excised from the abridged (and better known) version of the book published under the title *Madness and Civilization* in 1965. This perhaps accounts for the lack of attention paid to Foucault's treatment of Descartes' work in organization studies, and indeed elsewhere (see Gordon, 1992), but it is a significant if understandable omission.² Located at the beginning of the chapter 'The Great Confinement', it is in these few pages that Foucault lays out his view of the intersection between philosophical thought and organizational practices in the classical age. For an academic field that has canonized Foucault in the UK as the critical organizational thinker *par excellence* (Carter, 2008), his discussion of Descartes' *Meditations* in the *History of Madness* is a potentially important contribution to organization studies – perhaps no less so than Foucault's discussion of Bentham's *Panopticon* in *Discipline and Punish* – in that it serves to deepen our understanding of the relation between power, knowledge and the formation of subjects in specific institutional sites.

In the opening chapter of the *History of Madness*, Foucault discusses the liminal position inhabited by the mad in Renaissance society. This borderline experience is exemplified by the image of the 'Ship of Fools', whereby the mad are exiled from cities and forced to embark on symbolic journeys in search of their lost reason (2006a: 8-12). The banishment of the mad to the margins of society mirrors the place of madness in philosophical reflection: for thinkers such as Montaigne and Erasmus, rational thought is haunted by the possibility of being mad at the same time as madness is viewed as being a bearer of truth and reason. This attests to an acceptance by these thinkers "of the unbroken circle joining wisdom and folly...of their reciprocity and the impossibility of dividing them" (2006a: 32-3). Madness, on this view, is

an integral part of the Renaissance imagination, skirting its fringes and circling its literal and metaphorical gates and walls.

The relation between reason and madness, Foucault argues, undergoes a radical transformation in the mid-seventeenth century. Reason's uneasy conversation with madness is gradually reconfigured into a one-sided monologue; reason now talks *of* and not *with* madness. Foucault finds empirical evidence for this in the Great Confinement, beginning in 1656 with the founding of the Hôpital Général in Paris and continuing over the next one hundred and fifty years with the spread of workhouses and houses of corrections across Europe (2006a: 47-55). Foucault alerts us to the scale of this confinement by noting that, within the space of a few years, one percent of the Parisian population found itself sequestered within the wards of the Hôpital Général (2006a: 54). This institution, as much an instrument of repression as a place of charity, served as a site of detention for the mad, the unemployed, the criminal, the licentious and the venereal. It made full use of techniques of punishment and constraint, including gallows, iron collars, and dungeons, and attempted to instil in its inmates a strict morality of work (2006a: 69-72). This reflected the fact that madness had become a question of social and economic order, "a 'police' matter" (2006a: 62). No longer exiled beyond the city limits to trouble its borders, the mad in the classical age were interned within a society that all the more decisively excludes them alongside its other deviant groups.

Reason's triumph over madness in the classical age is signalled by "an ensemble of institutions", but it is also indicated by "a philosophical experience of knowledge" (2006a: 47). Descartes' *Meditations* is exemplary in this respect. This work, for Foucault, replicates

the confinement of the mad in society by a gesture of exclusion within its pages. Having just subjected his body and senses to doubt, Descartes turns briefly to the question of madness:

And how could I deny that these hands and this body belong to me, unless perhaps I were to assimilate myself to those insane persons [*insanis*] whose minds are so troubled by the black vapours of the bile that they constantly assert that they are kings, when they are very poor; that they are wearing gold and purple, when they are quite naked; or who imagine that they are pitchers or that they have a body made of glass. (Descartes, 1968: 96; see Foucault, 2006a: 44)

Descartes follows this by adding hastily: “But these are madmen [*amentes*], and I would not be less extravagant [*demens*] if I were to follow their example” (Descartes, 1968: 96; see Foucault, 2006a: 45). In other words, it is mad to pretend to be mad, and Descartes is clearly not mad because he is thinking, doubting, meditating. Without further hesitation, he continues along his path of doubt to consider the case of dreams and other illusions before arriving, finally, at the indubitable moment of the *cogito*.

At stake in this passage is the status of madness in Descartes’ “economy of doubt” (Foucault, 2006a: 45). Whereas dreams imitate the world around us to the extent that we can no longer tell the difference between waking and sleeping, madness bears no such resemblance to the world. Descartes (1968: 96) recalls countless instances when he dreamt he was sitting here, writing beside the fire, when he was in fact in bed asleep, and this memory is so strong for him that he sees “no conclusive signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep”. Such similarity between dreams and reality confounds Descartes: “my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I am

asleep now” (1968: 97). Madness, by contrast, is of an entirely different character to dreams. Instead of reflecting reality and doubling our immediate surroundings, madness distorts reality and fabricates a set of patently false perceptions. As Descartes says, the minds of the insane are so clouded that they believe themselves to be, quite simply, something they are not: kings, when they are in fact paupers; dressed in gold and purple, when they are in fact naked; and made of glass, when they are in fact made of skin, muscle and bone. This demonstrates the incommensurability between dreams and madness in Descartes’ economy of doubt: “Dreams and illusions are overcome by the very structure of truth, but madness is simply excluded by the doubting subject” (Foucault, 2006a: 45).

It is no coincidence that the experience of madness in the *Meditations* is rendered invalid for the doubting subject. Whereas the Renaissance imagination is constantly haunted by the possibility of being mad, reason in the classical age is no longer threatened by this spectre: the very fact of thinking, for Descartes, automatically neutralizes the risk of insanity. As Foucault puts it, “madness is precisely a condition of impossibility for thought” (2006a: 45). By virtue of their irrationality, “those insane persons” are effectively barred from the path of doubt that leads, inexorably, to the founding principle of the *cogito*. The mad are thus excluded from *Meditations* as decisively as they are incarcerated in the houses of confinement throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. For Foucault, this is no arbitrary comparison; indeed, the relation between philosophical thought (such as the Cartesian method of doubt) and organizational practices (such as the confinement of the mad) lies at the heart of Foucault’s analysis of power, knowledge and the formation of subjects in the *History of Madness*.

Philosophy, History, Organizations

For Foucault (2002a), philosophy – alongside human sciences like biology, philology and economics – can never be extracted from the specific conditions of its own formation. This is as true for Descartes' *Meditations* in the seventeenth century as it is for Bentham's *Panopticon* in the eighteenth century or Marx's *Capital* in the nineteenth century; such texts are part of a wider 'discursive formation' that connects together modes of thinking and sets of practices (Foucault, 2002b). The relation between "a philosophical experience of knowledge" and "an ensemble of institutions" serves to produce a certain type of subject in a specific historical context: the madman, the disciplined individual or the value-producing labourer. Individuals thus come to be shaped as subjects by the application of techniques in organizations such as houses of confinement, prisons or workplaces at particular points in time (Foucault, 1991).

The task is not simply to describe these discursive formations but also to reflect on *who we are today*, with the intention of transforming ourselves (along with the types of knowledge and forms of power that make us who we are) (Foucault, 2007). The nature of critique - or more accurately, the critical ontology of the present - is intrinsically historical: by showing how discursive formations undergo sudden mutations (for example, the shift from Montaigne's dialogue with madness to Descartes' exclusion of madness), Foucault demonstrates that systems of thought and modes of practice we commonly accept as universal and necessary are in fact contingent and subject to change. The notion of 'mental health', around which an entire medical apparatus has been developed, affords us with a contemporary example of a discursive formation that has been the target of sustained interrogation (Rose, 1999). On this view, the division between reason and madness - along with the modes of subjectivation to which it gives rise - is an historical fabrication that

emerges from the interplay between theoretical reflection and organizational techniques. By bringing to light the caesura between reason and madness, in its epistemological and institutional forms, Foucault is thus able to render problematic the moment of the *cogito* and the incarceration of the mad in the classical age. This is part of what Foucault calls the “history of limits” (2006a: xxix), which would later become the “history of the present” (Foucault, 1991): identifying physical exclusions, conceptual binaries and historical breaks in order to demonstrate that who we once were is no longer who we are today (Foucault, 2007).

Foucault’s historical approach to critique is brought to the fore in a series of exchanges with Derrida about the place of Descartes in the *History of Madness*. In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida challenges Foucault’s idea that Descartes’ *Meditations* is a “*philosophical* internment of madness” (2001: 52; emphasis in original). In particular, Foucault’s assertion that dreams and other illusions have an altogether different function to madness in Descartes’ “economy of doubt”, –is strongly contested by Derrida, who –insists that madness is “only a particular case...of the sensory illusion which interests Descartes at this point” (2001: 60). On Derrida’s view, madness is rejected by Descartes not because he wants to exclude the mad from forms of thought in a classical gesture of confinement, but because the case of dreams is “a more common, a more universal experience” than madness and so, for this reason, simply provides a better example for the doubting subject (2001: 61). In other words, madness effects only some people – “those insane persons” – whereas dreaming is experienced regularly by almost everyone, and it is on this basis that Descartes is able to universalize natural doubt. For Derrida, Foucault’s critique of philosophical reflection and organizational forms in the classical age is misplaced because madness does not have such a privileged place in Descartes’ text.

What's more, Derrida goes on to argue that Descartes in fact admits madness at the stage of radical doubt. As he encounters the evil genius, Descartes (1968: 100) puts into doubt everything he once judged to be certain by considering himself "as having no hands, eyes, flesh, blood or senses, but...as wrongly believing I have all these things". This attests to the fact that the evil genius evokes in the *Meditations* "a *total madness*, a total derangement", "a madness that will bring subversion to pure thought" (Derrida, 2001: 63-64; emphasis in original). The hypothesis of the evil genius thus indicates, for Derrida, the appearance of madness – albeit in an extreme form – at the heart of the *Meditations*, at the very moment when Descartes recognizes himself as a thinking, existing subject. From this perspective, Foucault's interpretation of Descartes' text is doubly wrong: it sees Descartes' exclusion of madness in the *Meditations* as decisive and absolute, when in fact madness is rejected only temporarily at the stage of natural doubt, and it sees the *cogito* as the triumph of reason over madness, when in fact the *cogito* is valid "even if I am mad, even if my thoughts are completely mad" (2001: 67; emphasis in original). Derrida can confidently conclude that, contrary to Foucault's claims, "Descartes never interns madness" (2001: 67).

Foucault responded to Derrida's critique in two separate pieces (2006b; 2006c), offering a robust defence of his interpretation of the *Meditations*. Of particular interest, for our purposes, are Foucault's comments about the relation between philosophical reflection and organizational practices in a specific historical context. Foucault accuses Derrida of neglecting his claims, supported by archival research, about the experience of madness in the classical age (2006b: 573). On this view, Derrida is not interested in actual historical events examined in *History of Madness*, such as "the confinement of a few tens of thousands of people, or the setting up of an extra-judiciary State police" (2006c: 577). Instead, Derrida chooses to focus on a work of philosophy that he detaches from the discursive formation in

which it is situated, treating Descartes' *Meditations* as a 'textual trace' rather than as a 'discursive practice' (2006b: 573). As a result, Derrida overlooks what is most significant about Foucault's work, namely, the analysis of relations between knowledge (philosophical, scientific, legal) and power (organizational, medical, judicial) that come to constitute subjects (the mad, the unemployed, the criminal, the licentious, the venereal) in a specific historical context (the seventeenth and eighteenth century). As Foucault writes,

the most essential part of the work was in the analysis of these events, these bodies of knowledge, and those systematic forms that link discourses, institutions and practices, and these are all things about which Derrida has not a word to say in his text. (2006c: 578).

Critical organization studies, too, has not a word to say about the relation between the ideas contained in the *Meditations* and their relation to a set of exclusionary mechanisms that took shape in the classical age. Instead, we find repeated pronouncements on the need to somehow 'overcome' the Cartesian mind-body dualism in a contemporary organizational context. Like Derrida's interpretation of the *Meditations* (though admittedly without his close attention to the text), organizational scholars detach Descartes' work from the conditions of its formation. In so doing, there is a missed opportunity to engage in a meaningful critique of types of knowledge, relations of power and modes of subjectivation within a specific historical context. Rather than seeking to 'reconcile' binaries, organization studies – if it is serious in its attempt to examine the relation between philosophical reflection and organizational practices – would benefit from following Foucault's example by analyzing how forms of thought and sets of institutions come to shape human subjects at particular points in time.

Put simply, in place of the historically de-contextualized use of philosophy that we frequently find in organization studies, researchers would do well to identify those physical exclusions, conceptual binaries and historical breaks in pursuit of a critical ontology of the present. The task for such a history of organizational limits would be to interrogate the discursive formations that constitute who we are (e.g. productive workers, knowledgeable professionals, socially responsible managers, or charismatic leaders) with the intention of transforming ourselves along with the apparatus of knowledge and power that makes us who we are in particular organizational settings. In short, organization studies needs to treat works of philosophy less like ‘textual traces’ – in the case of the anti-Cartesians, very weak traces indeed – and more like ‘discursive practices’ that are connected to a wider set of institutional arrangements.

Conclusion

The Cartesian mind-body dualism is a curious *idée fixe* in organization studies, particularly among those scholars working from a critical and poststructuralist perspective. Descartes is often held responsible for devising a patriarchal and phallogentric mode of reasoning that continues to have an impact on—management thought and organizational practice. To counteract the misogynistic influence of Cartesianism on contemporary forms of work, we are incited to do away with the mind-body dualism once and for all, either by reconciling the opposing poles or by dismissing the very premise of duality in the first place. It is no doubt hoped that a rejection of binary thinking will help to eliminate problematic assumptions about organizations, such as the hierarchical division between managers and workers or the sexist division between ‘masculine’ rationality and ‘feminine’ emotion.

In this paper, we have sought to undermine such claims about the Cartesian mind-body dualism. For us, the notion of somehow ‘overcoming’ the division between transcendental cognition and empirical corporeality in the name of critique is both inaccurate and misleading: inaccurate because Descartes arrives at the split between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* as a result of his method of doubt (and indeed reintegrates mind and body later on in the *Meditations*), and misleading because it is the Cartesian dualism between reason and madness that has most relevance for a critical analysis of organizations. By drawing on key passages in Foucault’s *History of Madness*, we have shown that Descartes’ work is most productively understood as part of a wider ‘discursive formation’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth century in which “an ensemble of institutions” and “a philosophical experience of knowledge” make certain types of subjects knowable and governable in particular ways. Rather than somehow ‘reconciling’ the division between reason and madness, Foucault’s critical task is to identify the historical conditions of its formation and so bring to light those “obscure gestures...through which a culture rejects something for which for it will be the Exterior” (2006a: xxix). Those vast houses of confinement that sprung up during the classical age are one such gesture, and Descartes’ exclusion of the mad from forms of thought is another.

In effect, we are making a case here not simply for a more nuanced engagement with philosophy in organization studies, but more specifically for an *historical* engagement with philosophy in relation to organizational forms. As we have seen in the case of Descartes, this opens up a fruitful direction of inquiry into the treatment of the mad in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. But while Foucault’s analysis of the *Meditations* serves as a particularly illustrative example of how we might historically contextualize modes of philosophical thought and types of institutional practice, our recommendations go further than examining

the apparatus of power and knowledge that constitute the ‘Great Confinement’ of the classical age. Indeed, we propose that organization studies should approach philosophy more generally as a historical task and not just as a hermeneutic endeavour. This would perhaps allow organizational scholars – especially those who espouse a critical approach – to interrogate the practical effects of philosophy along a historical-organizational register, rather than arbitrarily applying various theoretical concepts (such as the ‘Cartesian mind-body dualism’) to contemporary modes of managing and organizing. The ‘history organizational limits’ is one way in which this project might be pursued, but there are no doubt others (see e.g. Booth and Rowlinson, 2006). What is important is that philosophy is read as part of the ‘archive’ that comprises accepted ways of thinking and acting in organizations, rather than as a ‘lens’ for viewing the same.

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