

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007
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Lecture Notes, September 11

I. Epistemology

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge.

Since we want to get a theory of knowledge, it will help to get a sense of the kinds of things that we know.

So, what do you know?

Here is the list we compiled (I adjusted the order, and added a couple of things):

Things we know

1. The sky is blue.
2. Democracy is better than autocratic tyranny
3. A major third is sonorous; a flat five is dissonant
4. I'm in philosophy class right now.
5. I can speak English.
6. Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492.
7. How to ride a bicycle/hit a baseball.
8. I hate my mother/I love my mother
9. How to breathe
10. To be afraid of bears (or dishonor, or something).
11. To love
12. My name is...
13. An object in motion remains in motion, an object at rest will remain at rest, unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.
14. 'Visiting relatives can be annoying' is ambiguous.
15. The measure of the exterior angle of a triangle is equal to the sum of the two remote interior angles.
16. $5+7=12$
17. I exist

Katie also provided us with two lists to characterize our knowledge:

Areas of knowledge: mathematics, history, social sciences, arts, natural science, ethics

Ways of knowing: perception/emotion/reasoning/language

These are intriguing lists, and I will try to spend a bit of time on them again.

But, we will certainly spend some time again on the prior list.

II. Descartes, the new science, and scriptural circularity

Read ¶1 of Meditation 1.

Descartes wants something firm and lasting in the sciences.

We can interpret science broadly, as covering all legitimate knowledge.

We can also see some of his concerns about falsehoods he learned in his youth as applying to a narrower, more sophisticated interpretation of science.

In particular, Descartes is trying to accommodate the new science of Galileo and Newton, and eliminate some false medieval dogmas.

Aristotle had claimed that the heavens are constant; that the Earth is at the center of the universe; that there are two kinds of motion (linear motion for terrestrial objects, circular motion for celestial objects); and that causes are (partially) explained teleologically, by purposes.

Ptolemy, who thought of the sky as a roof on the Earth, had claimed that the heavens contain starry perfect spheres (stars and planets) which revolve in perfect circles around the Earth.

These beliefs were accepted through medieval times, but the new science of the 16th and 17th centuries called them into question.

Adding to Descartes's belief that he had many false opinions were direct attacks on religion, and its role in medieval thought.

There was a general rise of the individual against (Earthly) central authority, in the guise of humanism, and natural reason.

Skepticism in philosophy became increasingly popular.

Part of Descartes's motivation was scientific.

Part of his motivation also appears to be religious.

For example, Descartes was worried about the problem of scriptural circularity.

The following is from the letter of dedication of the *Meditations*.

I have always been of the opinion that the two questions respecting God and the Soul were chief among those that ought to be determined by help of Philosophy rather than of Theology; for although to us, the faithful, it is sufficient to hold as matters of faith that the human soul does not perish with the body and that God exists, it seems impossible to persuade unbelievers of any religion, or even of almost any moral virtue, until these two things are proved to them by natural reason. And since in this life there are frequently greater rewards held out to vice than to virtue, few would prefer the right to the useful, if they neither feared God nor anticipated an afterlife; and although it is quite true that the existence of God is to be believed since it is taught in the sacred Scriptures, and that, on the other hand, the sacred Scriptures are to be believed because they come from God (for since faith is a gift of God, the same Being who bestows grace to enable us to believe other things, can likewise impart of it to enable us to believe his own existence), nevertheless, this reasoning cannot be proposed to unbelievers, who would judge it to be circular. (AT 1-2) (Page numbers for Descartes's work are often given in terms of the standard Adam and Tannery edition; thus: AT1-2)

Here is a more succinct version of the problem of scriptural circularity:

Why believe that God exists? Because it says so in the Bible.

Why believe that the Bible is true? Because God wrote it.

Compare scriptural circularity to: Why believe that the crystal ball tells the truth? Because the crystal ball tells you to.

III. Doubt and denial

Descartes is seeking certainty for the new science, and for religious beliefs, by way of doubt.

He will doubt everything, and then only affirm those beliefs of which he is sure.

In seventh replies, Descartes uses an analogy of a basket of rotten apples: we dump out the whole basket and put back only the good ones.

Be careful to distinguish doubt from denial.

'I doubt that p' means that I do not know whether p is true or false.

'I deny that p' is an assertion of the falsity of p.

That is, it is a claim to know that p is false.

Descartes provides three arguments for doubt.

If they are successful, they will make us doubt, but not deny, everything on the list.