

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007
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Lecture Notes, September 13

I. Recapitulation

We discussed some background for Descartes's project.
Descartes is seeking to clean up his beliefs.
He starts by eliminating as many beliefs as possible.
We will shortly discuss his three arguments for doubt.
First, let us characterize Descartes's goal: knowledge.

II. Knowledge and belief

Since Descartes is aiming at knowledge, it is important to distinguish knowledge from belief.
Consider two people in the Middle Ages
Person A: I know that the sun revolves around the earth.
Person B: I believe that the sun revolves around the earth.
What happens when we find out that the earth revolves around the sun?
Both A and B now deny that the sun revolves around the earth.
Person A recants his previous claim that he knew this.
A never knew that the sun revolved around the earth, but only thought that he did.
Person B maintains his previous claim.
He believed that the sun revolved around the earth, even though it was false.
The difference between A and B arises since you can not have false knowledge, but you can have a false belief.
Philosophers sometimes call knowledge a success term; belief is not a success term.

Traditionally, philosophers have taken knowledge to be, approximately, justified true belief (JTB).
We will not spend a lot of time on the characterization of knowledge as JTB.
There is a short, influential piece about it in the text, by Edmund Gettier, p 161.

Another characterization of knowledge, which is more controversial, involves the inability to doubt.
That is, if I know p, I can not doubt it.
Consider the KK thesis:

KK: In order to know p, you must know that you know p.

Is the KK thesis true?

Consider the example of being asked what the capital of Illinois is.
Imagine that you think that the answer is Springfield, but you are not sure.
You decide that you are right, that is you believe it, but are willing to doubt it.
In fact, Springfield is the capital of Illinois.
Additionally, the reasons you thought so were good ones: you learned it in school, you remember a puzzle which taught the state capitals.
But, it has been a while since you have thought about it, and you are willing to admit doubt.

This may be a case in which you know that p , but you do not know that you know that p .
Still, we will put the contentious claim that the KK thesis is false aside.
Descartes seems to hold the KK thesis.
So, Descartes has a pretty high standard for knowledge.

III. Two varieties of epistemology

Read MI through “from the senses or through the senses”, p 102.
What is the difference?
Why would Descartes, who constructs the *Meditations* carefully, include both phrases?

Descartes seems to be making a distinction between knowledge which comes directly from experience, like knowing that it is hot outside, and knowledge which requires reasoning in addition to sense experience.

Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know.
There are at least two possible answers to the question of how we know what we know.

First, we might insist that all knowledge comes from the senses only.
Empiricism is the label given to the thesis that all our knowledge somehow traces back to sensory experience.
According to the empiricist, all knowledge is a posteriori.
Empiricism is intuitively very plausible, since our senses seem to be the source of all of our beliefs, as Descartes notes.
But empiricism is difficult to reconcile with our knowledge of mathematics: we never sense mathematical objects like perfect circles.
Also, some statements, like ‘bachelors are unmarried’, do not seem to depend on sense experience for their justification.
We need only to know the meanings of the words to know that it is true; we need not see any bachelors.
Locke, Berkeley, and Hume all held varieties of empiricism.

Second, we might claim that some knowledge comes from reason, or pure thought, in addition to that which comes from the senses.
Rationalism is the label given to the theory that at least some knowledge is based on reason and is independent of sense experience.
According to the rationalist, some knowledge is a priori.
Logical and mathematical beliefs are often taken to be justified a priori.
So are our beliefs in sentences like the one about the bachelors.
Descartes and Anselm held varieties of rationalism.
I think that Kant is a rationalist, but some people disagree.

One of Descartes’s premier achievements is to cleave thought from sensation, clearing the way for an account of non-empirical, rationalist knowledge.
Descartes believed that a priori beliefs were innate in our minds, built in to our minds.

VI. Illusion: the first argument for doubt

Consider optical, or other sensory, illusions, or hallucinations.
Now, consider our list of beliefs from last class:

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

Which beliefs can we eliminate?

Illusions call into question our beliefs about distant or ill-perceived objects, perhaps very small ones.

The square building may look round from afar.

But our knowledge of close objects, like our own bodies remains.

While we might see a mirage, we can also approach it, and discover that it is not real.

Illusion may allow us to doubt some specific properties of physical objects, but that's about all.

We might extend the doubt based on other kinds of illusions, including ones where our emotions cloud our judgments.

But Descartes is really focusing on sensory illusion, and we will go along with him.

If we are going to eliminate more of our beliefs on the basis of systematic doubt, we need a stronger doubt.