

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007
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Lecture Notes, September 18

I. Recapitulation

We have characterized Descartes's goal, knowledge.
Also, we looked at characterizations of two kinds of epistemology.
And, we saw Descartes's argument from illusion.

II. Dreams: the second argument for doubt

How can we determine if we are dreaming right now?
If we are dreaming, our beliefs which rely on our senses are called into doubt.
We can dream of things that do not exist.

There are three questions here:

- A. Is there any way of distinguishing waking from dreaming experience?
- B. What beliefs does the possibility of our dreaming eliminate?
- C. Is there anything of which we can be sure, even if we are dreaming?

Question A:

There is no obvious mark to distinguish waking from dreaming.
Anything we can do when we are awake, we can dream we are doing.
We might be able to know that some state was a dream, but we can not be sure that our current state, if it has no obvious dreamlike qualities, is a waking state.
If we can not be sure that we are not dreaming, then we can not be sure of anything our senses tell us.

Question B:

If we are really sentient machines, dreaming about people, there may be no people.
We could have just invented them.
The machines need designers and constructors, of course, but these need not be people.
We can fantasize entirely novel objects, so we can not be sure that the objects in our dreams exist.
One might think that some objects have to exist, but we could be just disembodied minds.

So, let's return to our list of beliefs:

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 does the dream argument eliminate?

It seems to eliminate all beliefs up through 13, about the nature of physical laws.

We discussed a bit the status of semantic facts, like that expressed by belief 14.

I mentioned that the sentence in quotes refers to a proposition, which is language-independent, so it is not eliminated with belief 5.

Question C:

What about mathematical beliefs?

Even if we are dreaming, two plus two still equals four.

The universals from which objects are constructed, the properties of objects, remain, as well.

These are what Descartes calls simple and universal.

For example: color, shape, quantity, place, time.

Descartes calls these the building blocks of the empirical world.

Mathematics and logic, too, deal with objects most generally.

Even if I am dreaming, colors exist, bachelors are unmarried, and $2+2=4$.

III. Necessity and contingency

We noticed earlier that if we know something, it must be true.

Among the true statements, there now seems to be a further distinction.

If a statement could not be false, we call it necessary.

For example, 'Bachelors are unmarried' and ' $2+2=4$ ' seem to be necessary truths.

If a statement can be either true or false, we call it contingent.

For example, 'Today is Tuesday' and 'I am wearing a gray shirt' seem to be contingent truths.

We can easily imagine ways in which a contingent truth could have been false.

We could adopt a different convention for marking time.

I could have put on a different shirt this morning.

The only way to make a necessary sentence false would be to change the meanings of its terms.

But then, we would be saying something different.

If we hold the meanings of the terms constant, then statements such as 'bachelors are unmarried' and ' $2+2=4$ ' express necessary truths.

Thus, the dream argument seems to call into doubt contingent truths, but not necessary ones.

We need a stronger doubt to finish the job of providing reasons to doubt all of our beliefs.

IV. The deceiver

For the third doubt, Descartes wonders about the status of his beliefs if there is a powerful deceiver who can place thoughts directly into Descartes's mind.

We need not worry about whether this deceiver is God, or a demigod, or a demon.

Neither need we assert the existence of a deceiver or a God.

All we need is to imagine the possibility of a deceiver, which is easy enough to do.

Compare the deceiver hypothesis to the *Matrix* or to the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis.

Note that according to those two examples, our thoughts really happen in brains.

But the brains are being fed misleading information.

There is a physical reality, but it is unlike the one we perceive.

On the other hand, the deceiver hypothesis is consistent with the nonexistence of the physical world.

We could be disembodied minds, whose thoughts are directly controlled by an independent source.

When we apply the deceiver hypothesis to our list, we notice that just about all of our beliefs can be called into question.

In terms of the metaphor of the house of knowledge, Descartes has razed (brought down) the house, and now needs to rebuild from new foundations.

V. Three classes of beliefs

Each of the three arguments for doubt corresponds to a set of beliefs eliminable on the basis of that doubt.

Class I: Beliefs about the sensory nature of specific physical objects, or the existence of distant or ill-perceived objects.

Class II: Beliefs about the existence and nature of specific physical objects, and the physical world generally.

Class III: Beliefs about universals, like color, and shape, the building blocks of physical objects; and about space and time.

Beliefs about numbers, and geometrical entities.

Beliefs about logical and semantic truths.

We have dumped out all of the apples.