

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007
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Lecture Notes, September 20

I. Recapitulation

On Tuesday, we finally finished the second meditation.
We saw the three arguments for doubt, and how they eliminated just about all of our beliefs.
But, one belief resists doubt.

II. The cogito

In order to rebuild his beliefs, Descartes seeks a single starting point.
Like Archimedes and the lever, p 104.

It turns out that one belief resists doubt.
I am, I exist must be true whenever I am thinking.
We must be careful with the cogito, pp 104-5.
The cogito argument can not be:

1. Whatever thinks, exists.
2. I think.
So, I exist.

This representation, as a logical deduction, would require previous knowledge of the two premises.
Also, it would require previous knowledge that the conclusion follows from the premises.
But we eliminated logical knowledge on the basis of the deceiver doubt.
Thus, the cogito must be more of a pure intuition.
It establishes the existence of a thinker, as long as the thinker thinks.
I am a thinking thing, a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses.

Note that the cogito is not original with Descartes.
The following is from St. Augustine, 354-430 C.E.

I am not at all afraid of the arguments of the Academicians, who say, What if you are deceived?
For if I am deceived, I am. For he who is not, cannot be deceived; and if I am deceived, by this same token I am. And since I am if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? for it is certain that I am if I am deceived. Since, therefore, I, the person deceived, should be, even if I were deceived, certainly I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am. And, consequently, neither am I deceived in knowing that I know. For, as I know that I am, so I know this also, that I know. (*City of God*, Book XI, Chapter 27)

III. After the cogito

Descartes concludes that he is a thinking thing.

What can he learn from these thoughts?

These thoughts may not tell him anything true about the world outside of him.

But even if the thoughts are false, they still appear to Descartes.

Even if there is no table, we still seem to sense the table, in a privileged and infeasible way.

Note the distinction between sensing and seeming to sense.

Ideas can not be false, considered only as images in our minds.

We can get certainty about our beliefs, but only inside our minds, and not of the outside world.

Descartes has started to rebuild his knowledge, but he is stuck with just the cogito.

The cogito only tells him that he is a thinking thing, a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses.

Thus, Descartes in the second meditation, looks a lot like the skeptic he is trying to defeat.

IV. Foundationalism

Let us take a moment to look more carefully at Descartes's method.

Compare his method to the methods used in axiomatic sciences, like geometry.

In geometry, we start with two elements:

1. Basic axioms, or undisputable truths; and
2. Rules of inference which allow us to generate further theorems on the basis of already established ones.

With just these, we have a foundational system for geometry.

Your experience with foundational systems may be limited to some insights into the structure of Euclidean geometry.

But, we can make much simpler systems.

These systems may be formalized, in which case they have a restricted, specialized language.

Consider the following formal system, found in *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, by Douglas Hofstadter.

V. The MIU system

We start by specifying the language: any string of Ms Is and Us is a string of the MIU system.

So: MIU, UMI, and MMMUMUUUMUMMU are all strings.

Similarly, any declarative sentence in English corresponds to the strings of a formal system.

But, we are only interested in the true sentences.

In the MIU system, we will only be interested in theorems.

A theorem is any string which is either an axiom, or follows from the axioms by using some combination of the rules of inference.

The MIU system takes only one axiom: MI.

This means that MI is our foundational truth, as the cogito is the foundation for Descartes's epistemology.

We will take four rules of inference:

R1. If a string ends in I you can add U.

R2. From Mx, you can infer Mxx.

That is, you can repeat whatever follows an M.

R3. If III appears in that order, then you can replace the three Is with a U

R4. UU can be dropped from any theorem.

So, starting with MI, we can derive various theorems:

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Justification</u>
1. MI	Axiom
2. MIU	From Step 1 and R1
3. MII	1, R2
4. MIII	3, R2
5. MIU	4, R3
6. MUI	4, R3
7. MIIIIIIII	4, R2
8. MIUUI	7, R3
9. MII	8, R4
etc.	

Try one: derive MIIII (five I's) (Good job, Chris!)

Here is a real challenge: Derive MU.

For help, see Hofstadter's book, pp 259-261.

Do not spend much time on this puzzle without consulting Hofstadter, who provides hints and a solution!

VI. Descartes's rule

The goal of the Meditations was to achieve certainty through doubt.

If we want certain knowledge, we have to know that we know what we know.

We need some kind of mark, or rule, which enables us to separate true knowledge from mere belief.

Such a rule will serve the same purposes as a rule of inference in a formal system.

It will allow us to proceed.

We only know one thing, so far: the cogito.

Descartes discovers his rule by examining his first piece of knowledge, the cogito.

He calls his criteria for knowledge clarity and distinctness, p 109.

Elsewhere, he writes:

Something is clear when it is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate upon it with sufficient strength (Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, AT VIII:21-22).

Note Descartes's metaphoric use of perception.

We can not see with our senses clearly and distinctly, but only with the mind.

The specific formulation of Descartes's rule is not important.

What is important is that there be some distinguishing mark.

Without such a mark, all searching for certainty is useless.

Unfortunately, there is a problem with any such rule.

Given any mark, or rule, for certainty, how do we know that we have the correct mark?

How do we know that the beliefs we think are clear and distinct really are clear and distinct?

Appeal to the mark itself is circular.

We can not say that we clearly and distinctly perceive that clarity and distinctness is the right criterion.

Descartes's approach involves appealing to God as a protector of the criterion.

It seems that Descartes has replaced the problem of scriptural circularity with a new problem of Cartesian circularity.

While the cogito does seem to contain some kind of undoubtable truth, it is unclear how we can adapt that mark to serve as a rule.

We will return to this problem of establishing foundations with Moore.

For now, there is one more topic in Descartes's work to cover, his account of his errors.

VII. Descartes and the wax

In the middle of the second meditation, Descartes realizes that in order to separate the true beliefs from the false ones, it will help to have a good idea of the origins of false beliefs.

He starts by considering the physical objects he does not yet know exist.

How did we think we knew about physical objects?

Obviously, through our senses.

But Descartes realizes that this is an error.

See p 108, the end of the Second Meditation.

This is the conclusion of a discussion about a ball of wax.

Consider a ball of wax in two distinct states.

First, when it is cold, hard, yellow, honey-flavored, and flower-scented.

Then, bring it near a flame.

The wax now becomes hot and liquid, and loses its color, taste (although it now will burn your tongue), and odor.

We have images of the wax, in several incompatible states.

The imagination is our capacity for sensory images.

Distinguish this from another mental capacity, that of judging.

And we can distinguish these from other capacities of the mind, such as willing and refusing, and emotions, like happiness.

But we do not have an image of the essence of the wax, or of wax in general.

The argument that knowledge of physical objects comes from the mind alone:

1. Knowledge must be certain (firm and lasting).
2. What we get from the senses is uncertain.
3. So our senses do not give us knowledge.
4. We do have knowledge about the wax.

So, our knowledge of physical objects must come from the mind alone.

VIII. An aside on Heraclitus

Descartes claims that we have knowledge of one object, the wax, in two different forms.

“Does the same wax remain after this change? We must confess that it remains; none would judge otherwise” (107).

Descartes here omits a view on which any change in the properties of an object entail a change in the object.

This view may not be right, but it has defenders.

Heraclitus said that one can never step in the same river twice.

By extension, since our constitution is always changing, we are different people at different times.

And the wax is different before and after.

This view, though, will not get Descartes any firm and lasting knowledge.

Another way to state Descartes’s position is that we do not have an image of the essence of the wax, or of wax in general.

We only have images of its different forms, or appearances.

Our knowledge of something must be distinct from our sensory images of it.

IX. Strong and weak claims about the role of the senses in knowledge

[Note: I ran through this last section at the end of class; we can talk about it, if you wish, on Tuesday.]

Descartes’s claim that knowledge of the world, if there is any, must come from the mind alone seems ambiguous between two positions.

There is a weak claim, that the senses are insufficient for knowledge.

On the weak claim, we use the senses to gather information, and in conjunction with reasoning, which is purely mental, we arrive at knowledge.

The weak claim is fairly uncontroversial.

We seem to have some ability beyond the senses which helps us know about the wax.

Descartes asserts a stronger claim, that the senses are irrelevant to knowledge.

He says that knowledge of physical objects comes from the intellect (or mind) alone.

While the weaker claim is more plausible, Descartes’s point is that any information we get from the senses does not rise to the level of knowledge.

We can believe that the chair is blue, but we can never know this, since this is a sensory belief.

Further, we know that the wax can take more forms than we could possibly imagine: more shapes, more sizes, etc.

So, this knowledge must go beyond anything that could come from the senses.

We seem to have two different types of beliefs about the wax.

First, that it has a particular shape.

This first idea is sensory.

But it is not knowledge.

The second belief is that it can take on innumerable many different forms.

This is not a sensory belief.

And it is knowledge.

It is what Descartes calls innate.

Descartes truly holds the stronger claim.