

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007  
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Lecture Notes, September 25

## I. Recapitulation

We ran through a lot of material last time:

Descartes's foundationalism, and the structure of foundational systems

The cogito, and the rule of clarity and distinctness

Descartes's argument that knowledge of the world comes from understanding alone, not from the senses

Today, we will look at Chisholm's worries about foundationalism.

Then, there is one last topic to tease out of the *Meditations*.

Lastly, we will start to look at Locke's response to Descartes.

## II. Chisholm's problem of the criterion

We discussed Descartes's foundationalism, and his need for a rule to distinguish the good apples from the bad ones.

Chisholm calls the need for a rule the problem of the criterion.

We need to separate the good beliefs/apples, from the bad beliefs/apples.

But, to separate the good ones from the bad ones, we need a method.

And, methods themselves can be good or bad.

So, the method would have to apply to itself.

Applied to Descartes, I called this the problem of the Cartesian circle.

Chisholm proposes three criteria for good methods, borrowed from Mercier:

1. The method for distinguishing good from bad beliefs, for anointing a belief as knowledge, should be internal.
2. The method should be objective.
3. The method should be immediate.

These criteria all seem justifiable.

For a method to be internal just means that we should be able to use it ourselves.

We are not relying on any one else's judgment.

We might defer to authorities, but only if we are convinced that they have such an internal method.

For a method to be objective is for it not to be merely a feeling.

For a method to be immediate, it has to present as self-evident.

But, these criteria seem to beg the question.

Descartes provided a couple of vague terms.

Chisholm has specified the criteria in more detail.

Furthermore, he has indicated that they apply both to memory and perception, p 159.

But, Chisholm's criteria are no different in kind from those Descartes provided.

So, how can Chisholm take himself as having solved the problem?

### III. Particularists, methodists, and skeptics

Chisholm sort of presumes that you have already read the history of philosophy.  
This is the problem with reading 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy in introductory courses.  
But, Chisholm's main point is accessible, anyway.  
He contrasts particularists, methodists, and skeptics.  
A methodist starts by specifying criteria, and then applies it to determine what we know.  
A particularist starts by figuring out what we know, and derives a criterion from that.  
A skeptic denies that we have any knowledge.

By having read only the first two and a half meditations, we have seen only Descartes's skeptical side.  
Chisholm's argument against the skeptic is quite good.  
He pairs it with an argument against the dogmatist, who claims to know more than he/she does, pp 152-3.  
Chisholm's point, then, against the Cartesian skeptic is that his/her doubts are exaggerated.  
Skepticism is in fact self-defeating.  
We know some things; science is successful.  
Truth must have some explanatory value.  
The real Descartes, the Descartes of all the meditations, is no skeptic, and agrees with Chisholm.  
In fact, Descartes may have erred on the other side.

But, dismissing skepticism does not solve the problem of the criterion.  
It just means that we need a solution to the problem of the criterion.  
To attack the problem, Chisholm contrasts methodists and particularists.

Chisholm calls Locke, indeed any empiricist, a methodist.  
Descartes, too, is most aptly classified as a methodist.  
For Descartes, the method is clarity and distinctness.  
For Locke, it is that everything we know must have its roots in sense experience.  
Berkeley will also be a methodist, as will Hume.  
In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the logical positivists pursue the same project, though in a slightly more sophisticated way.  
We will read more of the methodists, but you should have enough now to understand the position.

Chisholm mentions two particularists: Reid and Moore.  
We will not read Reid, but we will read Moore.  
For now, look at the quote from Reid, p 156.  
The particularist idea is that we have some knowledge, and we must figure out the best account of it.

Observe that Descartes is sort of a particularist, at the beginning of the second meditation.  
For, the cogito precedes the method of clarity and distinctness.  
But, at that point, the method becomes primary.

#### IV. How Chisholm breaks out of the Cartesian circle

We have seen that Chisholm's solution to the problem of the criterion seems to beg the same question that Descartes begged.

But, Chisholm has actually changed the question.

For, by adopting particularism, he denies the whole foundationalist framework.

We need not start, says Chisholm, with a method.

We start with the recognition that we in fact know how to separate the good apples from the bad apples.

We can describe that method.

We can refine the method.

But, we need not presume that the method itself must pass some test before we can use it.

#### V. Descartes, Locke and Berkeley

Chisholm categorized Locke as a methodist.

Berkeley, too, is a methodist.

Locke and Berkeley share their empiricism, their belief that all knowledge must ultimately come from the senses.

While both Locke and Berkeley thus disagree with Descartes about the role of the senses, Locke argues directly against Descartes, while Berkeley's concern is mainly with Locke's arguments.

We will proceed to explore Locke's empiricism, and Berkeley's criticism.

But, we need to tease just a bit more out of Descartes, first.

The point of contention between Locke and Berkeley concerns the nature of the external world.

We should be clear about Descartes's understanding of the world.

#### VI. The nature of physical objects

According to the new science, the wax is just a body which can take various manifestations, hot or cold, sweet or tasteless, etc., but is identified with none of these particular sensory qualities, p 107.

That is, it is essentially something which can have sensory qualities, but which need not have any particular ones.

The wax is only extended, flexible, and movable, p 107.

The same is true of all other physical objects.

The same object may have many different appearances.

This is the position of Boyle, Galileo, Newton, and Locke, as well as of Descartes.

Berkeley disagrees.

One central question for us is: What is essential to the objects we perceive?

That is, what properties do objects really have, and are not merely appearances?

The other central question is how we know about such objects.

Descartes's answer to this second question is that if we want to discover what the wax truly is, we have to judge with our minds.

There is too much confusion in our senses.

## VII. The resemblance hypothesis

According to the discussion of the wax in the second meditation, we know about objects through the mind alone.

The only properties we could ascribe to them were extension, and movability, or mutability.

That is, they are in space and time, and can take on more forms than one can imagine.

It seems that the source of some of my errors is in believing that sensory experience leads to knowledge.

The resemblance hypothesis says that my ideas of objects resemble those objects.

Descartes rejects the resemblance hypothesis, p 109.

Locke defends the resemblance hypothesis.

Berkeley does too, in an unexpected way.

It is natural to take our ideas of objects, and the world in general, as resembling, as being like, the world as it is in itself.

But, the ideas which really tell us about the nature of the world are the ones which are not directly derived from sensory experience.

Against the resemblance hypothesis, Descartes provides the example of the sun, not reprinted in Cahn.

I find in my mind two distinct ideas of the sun. One, by which it appears to me extremely small, draws its origin from the senses... The other, by which it seems to be many times larger than the whole earth, is... elicited from certain notions born with me, or is fashioned by myself in some other manner. These two ideas cannot both resemble the same sun; and reason teaches me that the one which seems to have immediately emanated from the sun itself is the one that least resembles the sun. (AT 39)

We have discovered a reason for making errors: reliance on the resemblance hypothesis.

Notice that the argument against the resemblance hypothesis are independent of the three doubts.

We would have this problem even if the exaggerated doubts were absent.

## VIII. Solipsism

Descartes is confused at the end of our selection.

He has arrived at a solipsistic barrier.

Solipsism is the thesis that only I exist.

Knowledge of the cogito seems to lead us to knowledge of mathematics.

But the possibility of the deceiver led us to reject mathematics.

We saw that Descartes cited the resemblance hypothesis as a source of his errors.

So, now we have reasons to keep the rotten apples out of the basket: the three doubts.

We have criteria for putting good apples back into the basket: the criterion for certainty, clear and distinct perception.

And we also have a criterion for recognizing bad apples: reliance on the resemblance hypothesis.

Instead of relying on our senses, we should rely on our innate ideas.

All, but only, the Class III beliefs are innate.

Beliefs of Classes I and II are infected with problems of the resemblance hypothesis.

## IX. The epistemological landscape

Locke's work comes in large part as a response to Descartes.

Descartes was, epistemologically, a rationalist, since he believed that there was knowledge which did not depend on experience.

For Descartes, we had innate ideas.

Locke and Berkeley will deny that we have innate ideas, and try to provide a foundation for all knowledge in our sense experience.

There are problems about what the terms actually mean, and whether they apply exactly to Locke and Descartes.

We will ignore these worries, in this introductory class, and adopt the traditional reading.

## X. The metaphysical landscape

There are three metaphysical positions we will consider:

1. Materialism: All reality is material.

The material world would have to include ideas.

Thus, a materialist might say that the mind is the brain.

Most philosophers, today, believe that minds are, in some sense, just brains and their properties.

Hobbes was really a materialist, though Locke was not.

2. Dualism: Some reality is mental, some is physical.

Descartes and Locke are both dualists, though we read Locke as a materialist.

Note that God is taken as a mental object, an infinite thinker.

Locke is clearly a dualist, but we will not examine any elements of that dualism.

3. Idealism: All reality is mental

The idealist believes that there is no material world, just a world of thinkers and thoughts.

Berkeley holds this view.

We will start by looking at two criticisms of Descartes, by Locke.

These are not in the text, but they are important for understanding the reading.

I have put a link to Locke's *Essay* on the website.

For the objections I will talk about, see Book I, Chapter I (the introduction), especially Paragraph 5; and Book I, Chapters II-IV; also see Book II, Chapter I.

These objections should make it clear why Locke is generally called an empiricist and Descartes is called a rationalist.

## XI. Criticism #1: Descartes's standard for knowledge is too high.

For Descartes, our knowledge of everything except the cogito depends on God.

Indeed, without arguing for the existence of God, Descartes seemed stuck.

In contrast, we seem to be able to know about the world around us, without knowing about God.

Descartes is driven to his position by his claim that we must be certain of something beyond any doubt if we are to know it.

Unless we defeat the deceiver, we know almost nothing.  
Maybe Descartes has too high a standard for knowledge.  
Locke thinks that we can relax this a bit.  
What do we really require in order to know something?  
Even if knowledge does not require certainty, it does require justification, and truth.  
That is, if we know that p, p must be true, and we must have good reasons to believe that p.  
But, it does not seem to follow that I must not be able to doubt that p.  
Locke does not worry about defeating a deceiver.  
He just worries about having good justifications for the beliefs he will count as knowledge.

## XII. Criticism #2: There are no innate ideas.

Descartes defended the new science of the 17th century, and its method of experimentation.  
Locke defends modern science as well.  
The new science posits a world of material objects.  
But what are these objects like?  
We think of these objects through use of the imagination.  
For Descartes, though, these images are confused.  
They are subject to the errors of the resemblance hypothesis.  
The only real properties are those we can understand by pure reason, through innate ideas.  
Consider Goldbach's conjecture, that every even number can be written as the sum of two odd primes.  
Even the best mathematicians do not know if Goldbach's conjecture is true.  
Descartes says that we use reason to discover the truth or falsity of mathematical claims.  
Today, we might say that a priori ideas are justified independently of experience.  
Even our knowledge of the physical world is supposed to be innate, according to Descartes.  
Recall the story of the wax, in Meditation Two.  
Descartes says that the information we get from the senses is just not good enough to support clear and distinct judgments about the physical world.  
We must rely on our reasoning.

Neither Descartes nor Locke questions whether experience is necessary for us to have knowledge.  
The question is whether experience is sufficient to account for what we know.  
Locke says that experience alone is sufficient: all knowledge derives from experience.  
This is the definition of empiricism.  
Locke believes that the mind begins as a blank slate:

All ideas come from sensation or reflection. Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas: "How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring. (Locke's *Essay*, Book II, Chapter 1, Paragraph 2.)