

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006  
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Lecture Notes, February 15

I. Quiz: Distinguish knowledge from belief.

II. Epistemology

In Meditation I, Descartes says that everything he has taken as most true as come either from the senses or through the senses, pp 18.

Why not just “from the senses”?

He is 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:

1) From the senses only.

This is called ‘empiricism’, and sensory knowledge is sometimes called ‘a posteriori’ knowledge.

It’s intuitively very plausible.

But empiricism is difficult to reconcile with out 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.

2) From reason, in addition to the senses.

This is called ‘rationalism’, and knowledge based on reason is sometimes called ‘a priori’ knowledge.

Logical and mathematical beliefs are often taken to be acquired a priori.

So are our beliefs in sentences, like the one about the bachelors.

Descartes, Anselm, Spinoza, and Leibniz all held varieties of rationalism.

One of Descartes’ premier achievements is to cleave thought from sensation, clearing the way for an account of non-empirical knowledge.

III. Illusion redux

Last week we compiled a list of our beliefs:

1. I am wearing an orange shirt.
2. We breathe air.
3. Too much candy is unhealthy.
4. The chair is blue.
5. Our bodies are made of cells.
6. The soul is eternal.
7. The universe is infinite.

8. Ray Charles is not God.
9. God exists.
10. Science progresses.
11. Time moves forward.
12. I know something.
13. I exist.
14. Colors exist.
15. Bachelors are unmarried.
16.  $2+2=4$ .

Then, we looked at Descartes's first doubt, illusion.

We noticed that it did not call too many beliefs into doubt.

As a color blind person, it makes me doubt the first belief, and the fourth.

Our senses sometimes deceive us.

But we have other sensory ways of discovering the truth.

For example, 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.

If we are to dump all the apples from the cart, we must have stronger doubts.

#### IV. Dreams: the second argument for doubt

Read MI, p 19.

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 dream-like 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:

Return to the list of our beliefs.

The dream doubt eliminates beliefs 2, 4-10, and 13.

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.

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.  
Applied to our list, dreams do not call items 14-16 into doubt.

15 is a fact about language, which might seem to rely on the senses.  
But we have to make a distinction between our language, which is an empirical matter, and the meanings of our terms and sentences, which is not.  
Meanings are independent of language.  
The same meaning can be expressed in different languages.

#### V. The Deceiver: the third argument for doubt

The dream doubt did not eliminate the basic building blocks of our ideas like color, shape, and extension, or mathematics and logic, which deal with these most generally.  
But the certainty which convinces us not to doubt these things could itself be implanted by a demon deceiver.  
Nothing, it seems, is certain.