

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, February 8

I. Quiz: Describe the problem of scriptural circularity.

II. Characterizing knowledge

Descartes's goal is knowledge.

We talked about distinguishing knowledge from belief on the basis of truth.

If we know something, it must be true, but we can have false beliefs.

Traditionally, philosophers have taken knowledge to be, approximately, justified true belief (JTB).

Another characterization of knowledge which is more controversial, involves the inability to doubt.

That is, If I know p, I can not doubt it.

This is close to what is known as the KK thesis: In order to know p, you must know that you know p.

The KK thesis is false, though.

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, and you are willing to admit doubt.

This is a case in which you know that p, but you do not know that you know that p.

III. Necessity and contingency

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

Among the true things, there is a further distinction.

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

For example, "Bachelors are unmarried."

Or "2+2=4."

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

For example, "Today is Wednesday."

Or, "I am wearing an orange shirt."

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 such statements are necessary.

IV. Some things you know

Despite Descartes' focus on knowledge, he only seeks doubt in the First Meditation.

Here, he is just dumping out the apples.

If we want to understand how Descartes's process works, it will be helpful to get a list of beliefs, and follow Descartes in eliminating them.

Descartes provides three arguments for doubt.

If they are successful, they will make us doubt, but not deny, everything on the list.

The list:

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. $2+2=4$.

V. Illusion: the first argument for doubt

Consider optical, or other sensory, illusions, or hallucinations.

These 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.

Read MI through "from the senses or through the senses," pp 17-18

[Note that page numbers for Descartes refer to the Adam and Tannery numbers, found in the margins of the text.]

Why would Descartes, who constructs the Meditations carefully, include both phrases?

We will return to this question next Wednesday.

For now, how does Descartes' first argument for doubt affect our list?

This doubt is based on sensory illusion.

This doubt calls into question our beliefs about distant or ill-perceived objects.

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

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.

Illusion does not call much into doubt, despite Descartes' claim that we should not doubt our senses.

Perhaps it calls into doubt the first item on the list.

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