

Class #2 - Meditation One
Discourse on Method, Parts 1 and 2 (AW 25-33)
Meditations on First Philosophy, through Meditation One (AW 35-42)

0. [Illusions](#)

I. Descartes's Worries

In our first class, I discussed some of the claims (the five dogmas) to which Descartes may have been referring in the First Meditation, when he claims that he accepted falsehoods in his youth.

- D1. The heavens are constant.
- D2. The Earth is at the center of the universe.
- D3. Causes are (partially) explained teleologically, by purposes.
- D4. The heavens contain starry perfect spheres (stars and planets) which revolve in perfect circles around the Earth.
- D5. There are two kinds of motion: linear and circular.

These claims were all undermined by the new science.

In another direction, the sixteenth century saw a variety of criticisms of Church authority from theological sources.

In the prior notes, I mentioned Descartes's discussion of Scriptural circularity.

Descartes defends what seems clearly to be fallacious, circular reasoning.

I plan to take Descartes at his word, rather than interpret him as being insincere.

As we will see next week, Descartes's reasoning in the *Meditations* is often criticized for being circular.

I believe that the Letter of Dedication indicates that Descartes thinks that circular reasoning may not be as fallacious as it seems to us.

In contemporary philosophy, people sometimes distinguish between vicious and virtuous circles.

For example, we accept certain mathematical statements as axioms because they yield the theorems that we want.

But, we accept the theorems because they follow from the axioms.

The axioms and the theorems have to be accepted together, despite the circularity of deriving our beliefs in one from beliefs in the other.

I believe that Descartes understood that circular reasoning is not necessarily fallacious, and that the Letter of Dedication is a hint at his radical, new position.

I have a draft of a paper arguing for this conclusion, which I can send you if you are interested.

Let's move on to the First Meditation.

II. Knowledge and Descartes's Method

In the first paragraph of the *Meditations*, having alluded to the problem of accepting falsehoods, Descartes introduces us to his general method: to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundation.

In the second paragraph, Descartes elaborates on that method, using principles for doubting to call swaths of beliefs into question.

The general method in the *Meditations*, then, is to use doubt in order to achieve knowledge.

More details of Descartes's method are presented in the *Discourse on Method*.

The *Discourse* was the introductory essay for the grand work, *Le Monde*, which Descartes suppressed after Galileo's 1633 trial for heresy by the Inquisition.

Descartes published the *Discourse* in 1637 as part of a smaller, less controversial collection of essays. It was written in French, and intended for popular audiences, in contrast to the *Meditations* (1641), which were written in Latin and intended for the most scholarly readers.

In the *Discourse*, Descartes presents a casual discussion, including four methodological rules:

- R1. Never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such;
- R2. Divide each difficulty into as many parts as possible;
- R3. Conduct my thoughts in an orderly fashion, commencing with the simplest and ascending to the most composite; and
- R4. Everywhere to make complete enumerations (AW 31).

We will focus here on R1, the use of which depends on having a good characterization of knowledge.

As a first step to characterizing knowledge, let's note that there are several different kinds of phenomena that we call knowledge.

We say that we know, say, Joan Stewart or our best friends.

We also say that we know facts, like the Pythagorean theorem.

The latter kind of knowledge is, in some languages, distinguished from the former by the use of a different word.

In Spanish, we use 'conocer' for the former but 'saber' for the latter.

Our interest is mainly in the latter kind of knowledge.

Even among the latter sort of knowledge, we can distinguish between knowledge-how and knowledge-that.

Knowledge-how is epitomized by riding a bicycle or cooking an omelet.

Knowledge-that is exemplified by propositional knowledge, knowledge of facts: that $2 + 2 = 4$, that Barack Obama is the president of the United States, that it is generally cold in Clinton in January.

[Some philosophers](#) argue that all knowledge how is really knowledge that.

We will not decide that question here.

Our focus will be, with Descartes, on knowledge-that, which is often called propositional knowledge.

Propositional knowledge seems to be, in some sense, primary.

Knowledge is a lot like belief.

Both knowledge and belief appear to be relations between persons and propositions, or statements.

I believe that snow is white; I know that snow is white.

Both claims are relations between me and the claim that snow is white.

But, knowledge and belief are also importantly different.

Consider two people in the Middle Ages.

Person A says, "I know that the sun revolves around the earth."

Person B says, "I believe that the sun revolves around the earth."

Imagine that we visit these people in a time machine, and teach them about the heliocentric model of the solar system.

After they learn that the earth revolves around the sun, both A and B deny that the sun revolves around the earth.

But they have strikingly different attitudes toward their original claims.

Person A recants her original claim.

She never knew it, but only thought that she did.

Person B maintains her original claim.

She believed that the sun revolves around the earth, even though that belief was false.

We can summarize the difference between knowledge and belief by saying that knowledge is a success term.

If we know something, it must be true.

We can have false beliefs, but not false knowledge.

Knowledge is more than mere true belief, though.

Consider the belief that there are exactly 6,592,749,256,111 grains of sand on the beaches of the Earth.

Let's imagine that there are, in fact, exactly 6,592,749,256,111 grains of sand on the beaches of the Earth.

Still, no one could be truly said to know this fact.

We need some account, some justification of how we know.

Following Plato's work in *Theaetetus*, philosophers have taken knowledge to be justified true belief (JTB).

There are interesting [difficulties with this characterization](#).

There are some [rare cases](#) of justified true beliefs that are [not knowledge](#).

We will not consider these odd counterexamples here.

A further, and stronger, characterization of knowledge, one which is clearly present in Descartes's R1 and which is more controversial, involves the inability to doubt.

The first [rule] was never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such; that is to say carefully avoid hasty judgment and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to call it in doubt (AW31).

Descartes is claiming that if I know p, I can not doubt it.

This claim is essentially what is known as the KK thesis.

KK. In order to know p, you must know that you know p.

There are good reasons to question the KK thesis.

Consider being asked what the capital of Illinois is.

Imagine that you think that the answer is Springfield.

You believe that you remember learning it in school.

You had a puzzle which showed all the state capitals.

But you are not sure that you remember correctly.

You believe that Springfield is the capital of Illinois, but you are willing to doubt it.

In fact, Springfield is the capital of Illinois.

Additionally, the reasons you thought so were good ones.

This seems to be a case in which you know that p, but you do not know that you know that p.

For now, though, I will put aside worries about the KK thesis.

This characterization, including the KK thesis, helps us to see Descartes's goal.

Descartes is seeking firm and lasting knowledge in the sciences by way of doubt.

He will doubt everything, and then only affirm those beliefs of which he is sure.

The *Meditations* was published along with six (and later seven) sets of objections from various philosophers and theologians, and Descartes's replies.

In the Seventh Replies, Descartes uses an analogy for his method.

Consider a basket of apples, some of which are rotten.

We can dump out the whole basket and put back only the good ones.

So, let's turn to the method of doubt, being careful to distinguish doubt from denial.

Doubt is a withholding of opinion.

Denial is an assertion.

'I doubt that p' means that I do not know whether p is true or false.

'I deny that p' claims that p is false.

Descartes, in the First Meditation, doubts his beliefs.

At the end of the First Meditation, and the beginning of the Second Meditation, Descartes does assert that he will deny all of the claims he formerly believed.

The point of denial here is just as support for the doubt, for truly doubting the claims which are most obviously true so that he does not accidentally fall into old habits.

Descartes provides three arguments for doubt.

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

III. Illusion

Among the most difficult beliefs to abandon are those which we grasp with our senses.

What we see, and even more so what we touch, we take as most real.

In the third paragraph of Meditation One, Descartes says that everything he has taken as most true has come either from the senses or through the senses.

Descartes, who crafted the *Meditations* most carefully, seems to be 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.

Our knowledge of mathematics, for example, may need more than mere sense experience for its justification.

We never sense mathematical objects like circles or numbers.

Also, some sentences, like 'Bachelors are unmarried', do not seem to depend on sense experience.

We need only to know the meanings of the words to know that it is true; we need not see any bachelors.

Some philosophers, like Descartes, believe that some knowledge comes from our ability to reason, independently of the senses.

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 about sentences like the one about the bachelors.

One question which has divided philosophers is whether all knowledge comes from experience.

In the third paragraph, Descartes provides an argument for doubt which immediately calls the view that knowledge depends exclusively on sense experience into question.

Consider [optical](#), or other [sensory](#), [illusions](#), or hallucinations.

Such experiences undermine our sensory beliefs.

They are particularly effective in impugning beliefs about distant or ill-perceived objects, and perhaps

very small ones.

The square building may look round from afar.

But our knowledge of close objects, like our own bodies, resists doubts about illusions.

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

In the fourth and fifth paragraphs of the first Meditation, Descartes develops a stronger argument against the veracity of the senses.

If we are dreaming, all of our beliefs which rely on our senses are called into doubt.

We can dream of things that do not exist, or that things which do exist have different properties than they actually do.

Science fiction books and movies often depend on such premises.

Movies like *Inception* and *The Matrix* rely on similar worries about the reality of experience.

The dream argument elicits three distinct questions.

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?

Regarding 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.

So, the answer to B will be long and detailed.

We can fantasize entirely novel objects, so we can not be sure that the objects in our dreams exist.

There need not even be any Earth, or any people.

We could be sentient machines, dreaming about people, in the way that we, supposing our ordinary views of the world, can dream of sentient machines.

Machines need designers and constructors, of course, but these need not be people.

We can even doubt that any objects exist, since we could be just disembodied minds.

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.

The answer to B leads to a way to approach C.

If we can not be sure that our sense experience is veridical, perhaps there is non-sensory knowledge that resists the dream doubt.

Even if we are dreaming, our beliefs in mathematical claims, like '2+2=4' or 'the tangent to a circle intersects the radius of that circle at right angles' may survive.

Descartes also claims that the universals from which objects are constructed, the properties of objects, remain, as well.

Properties are what he calls simple and universal.

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

Even if no object has these properties, the properties remain, insofar as they are in our minds.

Descartes calls these the 'building blocks' of the empirical world.

“It is from these components, as if from true colors, that all those images of things that are in our thought are fashioned, be they true or false” (AW42).

The idea is not that the objects are made of their properties, in the way that water is made of hydrogen and oxygen.

Rather, many of our ideas are made of particular instances of general images, and those general images can remain impervious to doubt even when we are doubting that they are properties of objects outside of us.

V. The Deceiver

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 our ideas most generally.

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

So, we needed a stronger doubt to finish the job of providing reasons to doubt all of our beliefs.

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

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 an equivalent brain-in-a-vat hypothesis.

The latter hypothesis is to imagine that we have been kidnaped, our brain removed from our body.

Our bodies discarded, our brains have been hooked to computers which simulate the continuation of our lives.

According to the thought experiment, we don't notice the difference.

According to such 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.

In contrast, the deceiver hypothesis is consistent with the non-existence of the physical world.

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

The certainty which convinces us not to doubt those claims that remain under the dream doubt could itself be implanted by a demon deceiver.

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

Nothing, it seems, is certain.

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

VI. Summary

In the first Meditation, Descartes provides three arguments for doubt which call pretty much all of his beliefs into question.

1. Illusion
2. Dream
3. Deceiver

Each of the three doubts 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.