

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2004
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Lecture Notes, October 13

I. Getting Rid of the Deceiver, and the problem of error

Once we have a criterion, and God to ensure that it holds, everything else follows.
A perfect God is all good.
The deceiver is not.

Descartes problem of Error, Meditation IV, pp 53-4

- 1) God exists and is perfectly good.
 - 2) God creates and preserves me.
 - 3) My faculty of judgment therefore comes from God.
- So, my judgments never err.

Uh-oh.

Since I do err, there must be a problem with this argument.
Perhaps God is really the deceiver after all!

But, God is no deceiver, p 54:

- 1) Deception is a defect.
 - 2) God has no defects.
 - 3) So God is no deceiver.
 - 4) God created and preserves me.
- So, I am not deceived by God.

Given these two arguments, there is a puzzle about how I could err.

Since the conclusion of the first argument is false, one of the premises must be false, or the conclusion doesn't follow from the premises.

Descartes is committed to all three premises.

So, his solution is to deny that the argument is valid.

That is, the conclusion doesn't follow from the premises.

Still, we need an explanation of how we can err.

Descartes distinguishes between the will and the understanding.

Our power of willing is infinite, pp 56-7.

Our power of understanding is finite, p 57.

So we err when we apply our will (and judge) outside our understanding.

The way to always avoid error, then, is to avoid judging unless you have a clear and distinct understanding.

Remember, clarity and distinctness, as a criterion, is ensured only by the presence of God.

This, and the goodness of God, ensures that there is no deceiver, no systematic deception.

I am the source of my error, and if I am careful not to judge hastily, I can be sure to never judge falsely.

Now, we shall begin to reclaim the world.

II. What kinds of knowledge are clear and distinct?

The deceiver eliminated knowledge of math and of universals, all Class III knowledge, as we called it.
Now, we can reclaim them.

See Meditation V, pp 64-5.

We can be sure of mathematical truths themselves, and mathematical properties of objects (e.g. length, shape, and anything describable using mathematics).

This leads to Descartes' second argument for the existence of God, the ontological proof, pp 65-6.

These objects are known by proof, and are not sensory.

They are a priori, or, 'innate', as Descartes calls them.

Sensory information is still in doubt, since the dream argument lingers, even with the defeat of the deceiver.

The problems of the resemblance hypothesis have not been resolved.

Mathematical knowledge remains, even in dreams, pp 70-71.

III. Blocking the dream argument

Meditation VI, pp 89-90.

Waking experience is connected in the way that dreams are not.

Now, I have a way of reclaiming items of Class II.

That is, the physical world was brought into doubt by the dream argument.

I now see a way of judging clearly and distinctly whether I am dreaming.

So, I can reclaim the objects brought into doubt by the dream argument.

Still, I must be careful not to be misled by the resemblance hypothesis, which is false.

IV. Knowledge that physical objects *can* exist

Meditation VI, p 71.

God is omnipotent.

So, he can create anything that I can perceive.

In fact, he can create anything that does not create a contradiction.

He may not be able to create a round square, or a sphere that's both blue and red all over.

Still, the question remains whether he did in fact create these things.

V. Knowledge that physical objects *do* exist

(Be careful to distinguish this argument from the one above.)

See pp 79-80.

1) I seem to sense objects.

2) If I seem to sense objects, while there are none, then God is a deceiver.

3) God is no deceiver.

So, Physical objects exist.