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

I. What are some things that you know?

The list will include:
- specific physical objects
- physical objects in general
- our own bodies
- colors and other universals
- analytic sentences
- logical truths
- mathematical truths

II. Necessity and contingency

If a statement could not be false, we call it 'necessary'.
If a statement can be either true or false, we call it 'contingent'.
Consider: 'Bachelors are unmarried.'
This could be false, but only if the words had different meanings.
If we hold the meanings of the terms constant, then the statement is a necessary truth.

III. 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.)

IV. Epistemology

This is the study of how we know what we know.
There are several 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.
Also, some statements like 'bachelors are unmarried', don't seem to depend on sense experience for their justification.
We need only to know the meanings of the words to know that it's 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.
These statements may be called ‘analytic’, since we merely have to analyze the terms to see the truth of the statement.
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.

V. Dreams: the second argument for doubt
If we are dreaming, our empirical beliefs are called into doubt.
We can dream of things that do not exist.
What could you know if you were dreaming?
I.e. what would not be called into doubt?
Do the objects in your dream exist?
But you can fantasize entirely novel objects.
Don’t 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.
For example: color, shape, quantity, place, time.
Descartes calls these the ‘building blocks’ of the empirical world.

Could anything call into doubt these most securely held beliefs?