

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2004
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Lecture Notes, September 29

I. The need for a criterion for knowledge

The goal of the Meditations was to achieve certainty through doubt.
If we want certain knowledge, we have to know that we know what we know.
That is, we need some kind of mark, or rule, which enables us to separate true knowledge from mere belief.
We only know one thing, so far: the Cogito.
So, we have to look at it, to see if we can find such a mark.

II. The criterion: clarity and distinctness

Descartes calls his criteria for knowledge clarity and distinctness, p 35.
What could these terms mean?
Elsewhere, he writes:
“Something is clear when it is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate upon it with sufficient strength” (Descartes, Principles I.45)
Note, that this is a metaphoric use of perception.
We can’t see with our senses clearly and distinctly, but only with the mind.

Later Descartes refers to the light of nature, as the securer of truth, p 38.
This is to be distinguished from instinct, or being taught by nature.

Perhaps the specific formulation isn’t important, but what’s important is that there be some distinguishing mark.
Without such a mark, all searching for certainty is useless.

But there is a problem with any formulation.
Given any mark, or rule, for certainty, how do we know that we have the correct mark?
Appeal to the mark itself is circular.
We can’t say that we clearly and distinctly perceive that clarity and distinctness is the right criterion.
Still, the Cogito does seem to contain some kind of undoubtable truth.

Compare Descartes’ methodology with that of axiomatic sciences, like geometry.
In geometry, we start with two elements:
1) Basic axioms, or undisputable truths; and
2) Rules of inference which allow us to generate further theorems on the basis of already established ones.
With just these, we have a foundational system for geometry.

Similarly, Descartes has a starting point, the Cogito.
And now he has a rule for generating more truths: clarity and distinctness.
Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is necessarily true.

III. Accounting for our false judgments

Before Descartes uses his new tool, his criterion, he tries to account for the false judgments which led him to the Meditations.

According to the discussion of the wax in Meditation Two, we know about objects through the mind alone. The only properties we could ascribe to them were extension, and mutability. That is, they are in space and time, and can take on innumerable forms, more than one can imagine. So, it seems that the source of some of my errors is in believing sensory experience to lead to knowledge.

IV. Resemblance Hypothesis

The resemblance hypothesis says that my ideas of objects resemble those objects. Descartes rejects the Resemblance Hypothesis, p 35.

He provides an argument for the resemblance hypothesis:

- 1) I have ideas about objects involuntarily.
- 2) Involuntary ideas come from outside of me.
- 3) Objects send me their own likeness.

So, my ideas resemble their causes, i.e. physical objects.

Locke defends this thesis.

Berkeley does too, in an unexpected way.

Descartes, in rejecting the resemblance hypothesis, provides arguments against both the second and third premises.

Remember, that when you reject an argument, as Descartes does here, you should determine which premises are false.

V. Descartes' rejection of the resemblance hypothesis

He agrees with premise 1), although says that those ideas can lead one astray.

Against Premise 2), he argues that he may have a heretofore unnoticed ability to create these images. As with dreams, we may create these ideas without realizing that we are doing so.

Against Premise 3), he provides the example of the sun, p 39.

The senses tell us that the sun is very small.

We reason that the sun is very large.

It can't be both.

We decide in favor of reasoning, and against sensation.

Compare with the stars and candle of Meditation Six, pp 82-3.

We've discovered a reason for making errors: reliance on the Resemblance Hypothesis.

Notice that the arguments against the Resemblance Hypothesis are independent of the three doubts.

We would have this problem even if the exaggerated doubts weren't there.

So, let's look at our ideas, and see if we can delete the ones which depended on the Resemblance Hypothesis.

Maybe that will leave us in better shape to conquer the doubts.

VI. Cataloguing Ideas, the contents of the mind, p 37

- 1) Simple ideas
- 2) Emotions, or affects, (idea + feeling)
- 3) Volitions (idea + willing)
- 4) Judgments (E.g. $2+2=4$; that I want or feel x or y; 'snow is white'; that an idea resembles an object)

Ideas of classes 1, 2, and 3 can't be wrong.

If I want something, or feel something, I want it or feel it.

"Ideas can not be false", p 37.

Only judgments can be true or false.

These are called 'propositions', in contemporary philosophy.

VII. The sources of ideas, p 38

This list does not presume that we have any ideas of each type.

It is a list of possible ways of knowing.

1) Innate

These are called 'a priori', nowadays.

These are not instinctive, or intuitive, abilities, except in the sense that the Cogito is a pure intuition.

2) Acquired

These are called 'a posteriori' or 'empirical'.

3) Produced by me

Note that only those of classes 2) and 3) are subject to errors from the Resemblance Hypothesis.

The innate ideas are clean of this infection.

We can see why the light of nature can yield these.

They can be clear and distinct because they aren't affected by the Resemblance Hypothesis.

VIII. Summary

Descartes seems to be in a bit of confusion at p 36.

Knowledge of the Cogito seems to lead us to knowledge of mathematics.

But the possibility of the deceiver led us to reject mathematics.

It seems that to move on, we will have to deal directly with the question of the existence of a deceiver.

Despite rejecting the Resemblance Hypothesis, we will need to prove God's existence.

The proofs of God's existence that Descartes uses are based on our ideas, as that's all we have.

We will skip the one in Meditation Three, looking at the one in Meditation Five, which is based on Anselm's Ontological Argument.

See handout.

Then, we will return to the end of Meditation Three and proceed from there.