

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
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Lecture Notes, October 24

I. Avoiding Error

Descartes argues that the way to always avoid error is to avoid judging unless you have a clear and distinct understanding.

If I clearly and distinctly understand P then I know P.

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.

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

Descartes' account of error thus allows small mistakes, but prevents systematic deception or misunderstanding.

I can be wrong about minor particular claims, but not about profound ones, like the existence of a physical world.

Now, we shall begin to reclaim that world.

II. What kinds of knowledge are clear and distinct?

The deceiver eliminated beliefs about mathematics and of universals, all Class III beliefs.

I also included logic and analytic truths (truths of language) as part of Class III

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.

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III. Blocking the dream argument

Meditation VI, pp 89-90.

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

Now, Descartes has a way of reclaiming items of Class II.
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 (false) resemblance hypothesis.

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.

What are these objects like?

Only their mathematical properties are clear and distinct.

This is primarily their extension, p 80.

Their sensory properties are in doubt.

That is, we never defeat the illusion doubt, in the way that we reject the other two arguments for doubt.

The Resemblance Hypothesis is our major source of error.

So what good are the senses, then?

VI. The role of the senses

The senses provide natural protection of our bodies, p 81.

This is just the best structure for humans.

VII. Topics for review

1) Three doubts:

 Illusion

 Dream

 Deceiver

2) Rationalism

- 3) Empiricism
- 4) Skepticism
- 5) A priori, or innate, knowledge
- 6) A posteriori, or empirical, knowledge
- 7) Clarity and Distinctness as criteria for knowledge
- 8) Resemblance hypothesis
- 9) Ontological argument for God's existence
- 10) The problem of error and Descartes' account of error
- 11) The role of our senses
- 12) The possibility and existence of physical objects
- 13) The mind/body thesis