Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, September 14

I. Descartes' Goal

Descartes is seeking certainty, by way of doubt.
He will doubt everything, and then only affirm those beliefs of which he is sure.

Be careful to distinguish doubt from denial.
'I doubt that p' means that I do not know whether p is true or false.
'I deny that p' is an assertion of the falsity of p.
That is, it is a claim to know that p is false.
It is therefore another kind of knowledge.

Descartes is only seeking doubt in the first meditation.
If we want to understand how Descartes' process works, it will be helpful to get a list of beliefs that we might think we know, and follow Descartes in eliminating them.

II. Some things that we know

Note that I have re-ordered the list from Wednesday.

Grass is green.
There are four seasons.
The ocean is blue.
There are seven continents.
Cells divide.
There are 53 people in the room.
I need to breathe, or I will die.
People breathe.
People die.
I have subconscious thoughts.
Some terms are ambiguous.
Naming conventions are arbitrary. (It doesn't matter if we call a table a 'table' or a 'chair', as long as communication is successful.)
There are 24 hours in a day.
My thoughts and feelings.
Water is H_2O.
Bachelors are unmarried.
If it is raining, then it is raining.
Squares have four sides.
There is a number 0.
1472 - 47 = 1425.

The list includes:

- the nature of specific physical objects
- colors and other universals
- the existence of physical objects in general
- the existence of our own bodies
- analytic sentences
- logical truths
- mathematical truths

Descartes provides three arguments for doubt.
If they are successful, they will make us doubt, but not deny, everything on the list.

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.)
Why would Descartes, who constructs the Meditations carefully, include both phrases.
Why not just "from the senses"?
He is 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.

IV. Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know. There are at least two 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: we never sense mathematical objects like perfect circles.
Also, some statements like, "Bachelors are unmarried," do not seem to depend on sense experience for their justification.
We need only to know the meanings of the words to know that it is 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.
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.