

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
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Lecture Notes, September 19

I. More on knowledge and belief

We talked about distinguishing knowledge from belief on the basis of truth.
If we know something, it must be true, but we can have false beliefs.
I also mentioned the characterization of knowledge as justified true belief (JTB).

Some students presented another characterization of knowledge in their quizzes: If I know p, I can not doubt it.

This is equivalent to what is known as the KK thesis: In order to know p, you must know that you know p.

The KK thesis is false, though.

Consider the example of being asked what the capital of Illinois is.

Imagine that you think that the answer is Springfield, but you are not sure.

You decide that you are right, that is you believe it, but are willing to doubt it.

In fact, Springfield is the capital of Illinois.

Additionally, the reasons you thought so were good ones: you learned it in school, you remember a puzzle which taught the state capitals.

But, it's been a while, and you're willing to admit doubt.

This is a case in which you know that p, but you do not know that you know that p.

My poor choice of examples (I started with a mathematical case) led us, usefully, to discuss the difference also between "knowledge-that" which is propositional knowledge, the kind on which we will focus in this course, and "knowledge-how," which are skills like subtracting, or cooking, and which may be reducible to knowledge-that.

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 redux

Descartes' first argument for doubt is based on sensory illusion.

This doubt calls into question our beliefs about distant or ill-perceived objects.

But our knowledge of close objects, like our own bodies remains.

We might extend the doubt based on other kinds of illusions, including ones where our emotions cloud

our judgments.

But Descartes is really focusing on sensory illusion, and we'll go along with him.

So, consider our list of knowledge:

1. Grass is green.
2. There are four seasons.
3. The ocean is blue.
4. There are seven continents.
5. Cells divide.
6. There are 53 people in the room.
7. I need to breathe, or I will die.
8. People breathe.
9. People die.
10. I have subconscious thoughts.
11. Some terms are ambiguous.
12. Naming conventions are arbitrary. (It doesn't matter if we call a table a 'table' or a 'chair', as long as communication is successful.)
13. There are 24 hours in a day.
14. My thoughts and feelings.
15. Water is H₂O.
16. Bachelors are unmarried.
17. If it is raining, then it is raining.
18. Squares have four sides.
19. There is a number 0.
20. $1472 - 47 = 1425$.

Illusion calls into doubt only the first and third items on the list.

If we are going to eliminate more of our beliefs on the basis of systematic doubt, we need a stronger doubt..

IV. Dreams: the second argument for doubt

How can we determine if we are dreaming right now?

If we are dreaming, our empirical beliefs are called into doubt.

We can dream of things that do not exist.

There are three questions here:

- A. Is there any way of distinguishing waking from dreaming experience.
- B. What beliefs does the possibility of our dreaming eliminate?
- C. Is there anything of which we can be sure, even if we are dreaming?

Question A:

There is no obvious mark to distinguish waking from dreaming.

Daniel offered that we can not read in our dreams, since our brain structures prohibit it.

But we already know that we can not really read in our dreams, since we are sleeping.

We can dream that we are reading.

Leora suggested that dreams may not have the connected nature that waking states have.

But we can dream a connected state.

(Leora here anticipates Descartes' Sixth Meditation. We will return to this thought.)

Question B:

Return to the list of our beliefs.

The dream doubt eliminates beliefs 2, 4-10, and 13.

If we are really sentient machines, dreaming about people, there may be no people.

We could have just invented them.

The machines need designers and constructors, of course, but these need not be people.

We can fantasize entirely novel objects, so we can not be sure that the objects in our dreams exist.

One might think that some objects have to exist, but we could be just disembodied minds.

We will return to Question C on Wednesday.