

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

Lecture Notes, September 21

## I. Descartes' first two arguments for doubt

### 1. Illusion

We discussed how our senses sometimes deceive us.

But we have other sensory ways of discovering the truth.

For example, while we might see a mirage, we can also approach it, and discover that it is not real.

Illusion may allow us to doubt some specific properties of physical objects, but that's about all.

### 2. Dreaming

We noticed that there was no way to distinguish between dream states and real states.

We might be able to know that some state was a dream, but we can not be sure that our current state, if it has no obvious dream-like qualities, is a waking state.

If we can not be sure that we are not dreaming, then we can not be sure of anything our senses tell us.

If we look at the list, we notice that we can right away doubt, on the basis of the dream argument, items 1-10 and 13.

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 H<sub>2</sub>O.
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.  $1472 - 47 = 1425$ .

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.

These are what Descartes calls simple and universal.

For example: color, shape, quantity, place, time.

Descartes calls these the 'building blocks' of the empirical world.

Applied to our list, dreams do not call items 11, 12 and 14-20 into doubt.

11 and 12 are facts about language, which might seem empirical.

But we have to make a distinction between our language, which is an empirical matter, and the meanings of our terms and sentences, which is not.

Meanings are independent of language.

The same meaning can be expressed in different languages.

## II. The Deceiver: the third argument for doubt

The dream doubt did not eliminate the basic building blocks of our ideas like color, shape, and extension, or mathematics and logic, which deal with these most generally.

But the certainty which convinces us not to doubt these things could itself be implanted by a demon deceiver.

Nothing, it seems, is certain.

There may be no knowledge not liable to doubt.

Each of the three doubts corresponds to a set of beliefs eliminable on the basis of that doubt.

Class I: Beliefs about the sensory nature of specific physical objects, or the existence of distant or ill-perceived objects.

Class II: Beliefs about the existence and nature of specific physical objects, and the physical world generally.

Class III: Beliefs about universals, like color, and shape, the building blocks of physical objects; and about space and time.

Beliefs about numbers, and geometrical entities.

Beliefs about logical and semantic truths.

By the end of the third doubt, we've eliminated pretty much everything.