

Reading Guide #2 - Epistemology

These questions are provided to assist you in your reading. I encourage you first to read the material through, then go back to answer the questions. You are not expected to hand in written answers. You are expected to have responses ready for class discussion. References refer to pages in Steven M. Cahn, ed., *Philosophy for the 21st Century*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," pp 101-9.

Meditation I

1. What does Descartes want to raze to the ground? What is his goal?
2. How does Descartes proceed to reject his opinions?
3. "It is wiser not to trust entirely to any thing by which we have once been deceived" (102). How is Descartes being deceived?
4. How does Descartes come to doubt all of what his senses tell him?
5. How are general things less doubtful than particulars?
6. Of what does Descartes think might be certain even if he is dreaming?
7. What makes Descartes doubt the truth of mathematics?
8. "But at the end I feel constrained to confess that there is nothing in all that I formerly believed to be true, of which I cannot in some measure doubt, and that not merely through want of thought or through levity, but for reasons which are very powerful and maturely considered" (103). Explain what these three reasons are.
9. How is it difficult to maintain the doubts?

Meditation II

10. What is the first thing that Descartes claims he can not doubt? Why can't he doubt it?
11. How does Descartes proceed to determine what is essential to himself?
12. What were Descartes's previous thoughts about bodies and souls? Which did he think he knew better?
13. Does Descartes's argument that he exists prove the existence of his body? Explain.
14. What is imagining? Why is it irrelevant to our knowledge of ourselves?
15. According to Descartes, what is the self? Describe the self and its faculties, especially sensing.
16. What is the difference between seeming to sense and sensing?
17. Why can't we learn about physical objects like the wax on the basis of their sensory features? How do we learn about them?
18. What properties do physical objects such as the wax really have?
19. How do we really perceive the wax?
20. How does ordinary language mislead us about our knowledge of physical objects?
21. How does any knowledge of physical objects reinforce our knowledge of ourselves?

Meditation III

22. What general rule does Descartes accept as a criterion of truth?
23. "I affirmed... that there were objects outside of me from which these ideas proceeded, and to which they were entirely similar (109)". Explain.
24. Why does Descartes turn to the question of whether God exists?

John Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," pp 110-5.

1. How are the ideas of a person and of a shadow distinct? How are they similar?
 2. "It will be convenient to distinguish them as they are *ideas* or perceptions in our minds; and as they are modifications of matter in the bodies that cause such perceptions in us..." (§7). What does this mean? Why does Locke think that this distinction is important?
 3. How does Locke distinguish ideas from qualities?
 4. What are the primary qualities? (Provide a description and a list.)
 5. What are the secondary qualities? (Provide a description and a list.)
 6. How do ideas of external objects get into our minds, according to Locke?
 7. How do we get ideas of secondary qualities?
 8. "The ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves, but the ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities have no resemblance of them at all" (§15). Explain.
 9. Do we think that the warmth is in the fire? What does this show?
 10. "Take away the sensation of them; let not the eyes see light or colors, nor the ears hear sounds; let the palate not taste, nor the nose smell, and all colours, tastes, odours, and sounds, as they are such particular ideas, vanish and cease, and are reduced to their causes, i.e. bulk, figure, and motion of parts" (§17). Explain.
 11. How does the example of the porphyry support the primary/secondary distinction?
 12. How does Locke's discussion of the water support his primary/secondary distinction?
 13. How does Locke demonstrate that figure is a primary quality?
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George Berkeley "Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous," pp 115-137.

The First Dialogue

1. What does Philonous claim does not exist?
2. How does Hylas first define 'skeptical'? Why does Philonous claim to be no skeptic?
3. How do Hylas and Philonous define 'sensible things'? How are they different from their causes?
4. How is material substance senseless? Why can't pain be a property of material substance?
5. How does Philonous argue that heat and cold can not be properties of a material substance?
6. What, according to Philonous, does the hot/lukewarm/cold water example show?
7. Explain Hylas's distinction between qualities as they appear to us and qualities as they exist in external objects. Why does Philonous reply, "I say it is nothing to the purpose" (120)?
8. What are Hylas's two senses of 'sound'. Why does Philonous respond that real sounds are never heard?
9. How does a microscope help Philonous show that colors are not in external objects?
10. "Colors, sounds, tastes, in a word, all those termed 'secondary qualities,' have certainly no existence without the mind. But by this acknowledgment I must not be supposed to derogate anything from the reality of matter or external objects..." (Hylas, 124). Explain.
11. How does Philonous plan to argue against the primary qualities?
12. How does the example of the mite show the relativity of extension?
13. What happens as we approach or recede from an object? What does this show, for Philonous?
14. How does a microscope serve to show that the appearance of figure can change?
15. What is the relation between motion and time? How is time measured? What does this mean for motion?
16. How does Philonous argue for the relativity of solidity?
17. Why does Philonous suppose that it is harder to believe that the primary qualities lack real existence?
18. What is an abstract idea? Why does Philonous agree to concede to Hylas if we can form abstract ideas?
19. How does Philonous argue that the abstract notions of mathematics are not real ideas?

George Berkeley “Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous,” pp 115-137 (continued).

20. “Consequently, the very same arguments which you admitted as conclusive against the secondary qualities are... against the primary, too” (Philonous, 127). Explain.
21. Explain Hylas’s distinction between object and sensation? How does Philonous show that Hylas’s notion of a sensation is incoherent?
22. What does Hylas mean by ‘material substratum’? Why does he conclude that it exists?
23. What is wrong with supposing that corporeal substance is the substratum of extension? (Consider the spreading argument.)
24. “My arguments... nowhere tended to prove that the secondary qualities did not subsist each alone by itself, but that they were not *at all* without the mind” (Philonous, 130). Explain.
25. How does Philonous convince Hylas that he can not conceive of a tree existing without any minds?
26. How does Philonous show that distance is not suggested by sight?
27. Explain Hylas’s Julius Caesar example. How does Philonous account for the difference between someone who knows Caesar and someone who does not?
28. “The coach is not then properly perceived by sense, but suggested from experience” (Philonous, 133). What is the difference?
29. Why, according to Philonous, is it implausible that our ideas could be resemblances of stable, permanent external objects?
30. “Upon inquiry I find it is impossible for me to conceive or understand how anything but an idea can be like an idea” (Hylas, 134). Explain.

The Second Dialogue

31. How does Philonous argue that the brain can not be the cause, or occasion, of our ideas?
 32. “Men commonly believe that all things are known or perceived by God, because they believe the being of a God; whereas I, on the other side, immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God, because all sensible things must be perceived by him” (Philonous, 136). Explain.
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G. E. Moore, “Proof of an External World,” pp 137-9.

1. How does Moore prove the existence of the external world? Why does he call his proof “perfectly rigorous” (137)?
2. How can we prove that external objects have existed in the past? Does such an argument prove that the external world exists now?
3. Why might someone want proof of Moore’s premises? How does Moore respond?
4. “I have conclusive evidence that I am awake: but that is a very different thing from being able to prove it” (139). Explain.
5. Why does Kant think that some philosophers take the existence of an external world on faith? Does Moore agree?

Ludwig Wittgenstein, "On Certainty," pp 140-51.

1. How does whether a proposition can turn out to be false depend on what we take as evidence for the proposition?
2. Can we infer p from 'I know that p'? Can we infer p from 'She knows that p'? Explain.
3. Could the discovery of a planet prove the existence of the external world? Explain.
4. How does Moore's view overlook statements like, "I thought I knew"?
5. "My believing the trustworthy man stems from my admitting that it is possible for him to make sure" (§23). Explain. How does this assertion relate to the question of the existence of the material world?
6. Are the moves in a language game determined by strict rules? Explain.
7. Given that 'There are physical objects' is senseless, how can we use such sentences?
8. According to Wittgenstein, can we understand the difference between knowledge and belief in terms of corresponding mental states?
9. How is 'I know that...' a logical insight?
10. How is 'I know that...' supposed to express a relation?
11. In what way does Moore lack the grounds for his claims?
12. Explain Wittgenstein's river bed analogy. To what do the river and the river bed correspond?
13. Why might Wittgenstein's system be open to the criticism that it denigrates objective truth? (See §108.) How does Wittgenstein respond?
14. How does the game of doubting presuppose certainty?
15. Why is experience a cause, but not a ground, of our experience?
16. "When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition" (§141). Explain.
17. Why do testing and justification come to an end?

Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Problem of the Criterion," pp 152-160.

1. What is the problem of the criterion?
2. How do the skeptic and the dogmatist both miss the truth?
3. How should a solution to the problem of the criterion be internal?
4. How should a solution to the problem of the criterion be objective?
5. How should a solution to the problem of the criterion be immediate?
6. Explain Descartes's apple-cart metaphor.
7. Can we solve the problem of the criterion by distinguishing between good and bad methods for distinguishing good and bad beliefs? Explain.
8. What problem arises from the method of relying on science to distinguish good and bad beliefs?
9. How does the problem of the criterion relate to the problem of determining the extent of our knowledge? Distinguish methodists from particularists.
10. How are empiricism and methodism in general arbitrary?
11. How does empiricism throw out good apples?
12. How are Reid and Moore particularists?
13. How does Chisholm propose to solve the problem of the criterion? How does he handle illusions and hallucinations?
14. What is epistemic preference? When is a proposition evident for a person? When is a proposition acceptable or unacceptable for a person?
15. What are Leibniz's two kinds of immediately evident propositions? What is a self-presenting mental state?
16. How does Chisholm characterize a priori propositions? Why are they certain?
17. What are the purposes of Chisholm's principles M and P? How should they be used?
18. How are Chisholm's principles M and P internal, objective, and immediate?