

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, February 7

I. What are some things that you know?

The list will include:

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

(I'll print the exact list in the notes from next class.)

Descartes provides three arguments for doubt.

If they are successful, they will make us doubt, but not deny, everything on the list.

First, a couple of definitions.

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: 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.)

IV. Epistemology

This is the study of how we know what we know.

There are several 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.

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.

V. Dreams: the second argument for doubt

How can we determine if we are dreaming right now?