

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, February 9

I. Our list of knowledge:

1. The blackboard is green.
2. Light/Chalk/Clocks exist.
3. Snow is white.
4. People catch colds in winter.
5. Whales are mammals.
6. I am alive.
7. Space-time is constant.
8. What goes up must come down.
9. $2+2=4$.
10. Bachelors are unmarried.
11. If p then p.
12. Cats are animals.
13. Life ends at death.
14. Something red/blue/green... exists.

(I accidentally left the list at school; I hope I didn't leave anything important off.)

Descartes is trying to find ways to doubt (not deny) each item on this list, which is really infinitely long.

II. The first arguments for doubt: Illusion

Illusion calls into doubt only the first item on the list.

Descartes is really only considering sensory illusions, as opposed to hallucinations.

III. Dreams: the second argument for doubt

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

We can dream of things that do not exist.

What could you know if you were dreaming?

What would not be called into doubt?

Do the objects in your dream exist?

You can fantasize entirely novel objects.

Don't some objects have to exist?

But we could be just disembodied minds.

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 call items 2-8 into doubt, but not 9-14.

What do you know most surely?
Could anything make this false?

IV. 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.

V. Conclusion from Meditation I

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.