Philosophy 203: History of Modern Western Philosophy Hamilton College
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Class 2 - January 21
Meditation One

I. Descartes's Worries

In our first class, I discussed some of the claims (the five dogmas) to which Descartes may have been referring in the First Meditation, when he claims that he accepted falsehoods in his youth.

D1. The heavens are constant.
D2. The Earth is at the center of the universe.
D3. Causes are (partially) explained teleologically, by purposes.
D4. The heavens contain starry perfect spheres (stars and planets) which revolve in perfect circles around the Earth.
D5. There are two kinds of motion: linear and circular.

These claims were all undermined by the new science.
In another direction, I briefly mentioned some of the criticisms of Church authority from theological sources.
Descartes hints at a skeptical worry in his letter of dedication: the problem of Scriptural circularity.

> I have always thought that two issues - namely, God and the soul, are chief among those that ought to be demonstrated with the aid of philosophy rather than theology. For although it suffices for us believes to believe by faith that the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists, certainly no unbelievers seem capable of being persuaded of any religion or even of almost any moral virtue, until these two are first proven to them by natural reason... Granted, it is altogether true that we must believe in God's existence because it is taught in the Holy Scriptures, and, conversely, that we must believe the Holy Scriptures because they have come from God. This is because, of course, since faith is a gift from God, the very same one who gives the grace that is necessary for believing the rest can also give the grace to believe that he exists. Nonetheless, this reasoning cannot be proposed to unbelievers because they would judge it to be circular (AW 35).

The letter of dedication to the *Meditations* is a difficult piece to interpret.
Descartes had cancelled publication of his broad treatise on the new science, *Le Monde*, in response to Galileo's condemnation by the Inquisition.
The letter of dedication is clearly an attempt to appease the Church.
Some take Descartes's claims in the letter, like his claim that circularity is not a problem for believers, to be insincere.
Indeed, there are interpretations of Descartes's *Meditations* which impute insincerity to much of its content.
I will not pursue such interpretations, evaluating the arguments as they are written.

In the first paragraph of the *Meditations*, having alluded to the problem of accepting falsehoods, Descartes introduces us to his general method: to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundation.
In the second paragraph, Descartes elaborates on that method, using principles for doubting to call swaths of beliefs into question.

II. Knowledge and Descartes's Method

The general method in the *Meditations*, then, is to use doubt in order to achieve certain knowledge.
More details of Descartes's method are presented in the *Discourse on Method*.
The *Discourse* was the introductory essay for the grand work, *Le Monde*, which Descartes suppressed after Galileo's 1633 trial for heresy by the Inquisition.
Descartes published the *Discourse* in 1637 as part of a smaller, less controversial collection of essays.
It was written in French, and intended for popular audiences, in contrast to the *Meditations* (1641), which were written in Latin and intended for the most scholarly readers.

In the *Discourse*, Descartes presents a casual discussion, including four methodological rules:

> R1. Never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such;
> R2. Divide each difficulty into as many parts as possible;
> R3. Conduct my thoughts in an orderly fashion, commencing with the simplest and ascending to the most composite; and
> R4. Everywhere to make complete enumerations (AW 31).

We will focus here on R1, the use of which depends having a good characterization of knowledge.

Be careful to distinguish between knowledge and belief.
Consider two people in the Middle Ages.
Person A says, "I know that the sun revolves around the earth."
Person B says, "I believe that the sun revolves around the earth."
Imagine that we visit these people in a time machine, and teach them about the heliocentric model of the solar system.
When they find out that the earth revolves around the sun, both A and B now deny that the sun revolves around the earth.
Notice that they have strikingly different attitudes toward their original claims.
Person A recants his claim.
He never knew it, but only thought that he did.
Person B maintains his claim.
He believed that the sun revolves around the earth, even though it was false.
The point of this discussion is just to illustrate that you can not have false knowledge, but you can have a false belief.
Knowledge is a success term.
If we know something, it must be true.
Traditionally, following Plato's work in *Theaetetus*, philosophers have taken knowledge to be, approximately, justified true belief (JTB).
There are interesting difficulties with this characterization, but we will not consider them here.

Another characterization of knowledge, one which is clearly present in Descartes's R1 and which is more controversial, involves the inability to doubt.

> The first [rule] was never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such; that is to say carefully avoid hasty judgment and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to call it in doubt (AW31).

Thus, Descartes is claiming that if I know p, I can not doubt it.
This claim is essentially what is known as the KK thesis.

KK. In order to know p, you must know that you know p.

There are good reasons to question the KK thesis, 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 has been a while, and you are willing to admit doubt.
This seems to be a case in which you know that p, but you do not know that you know that p.
For now, though, I will put aside worries about the KK thesis.

Descartes is seeking firm and lasting knowledge in the sciences by way of doubt.
He will doubt everything, and then only affirm those beliefs of which he is sure.
The *Meditations* was published along with six (and later seven) sets of objections from various philosophers and theologians, and Descartes's replies.
In the Seventh Replies, Descartes uses an analogy for his method of a basket of rotten apples: we dump out the whole basket and put back only the good ones.

Be careful to distinguish doubt from denial.
'I doubt that p' means that I do not know whether p is true or false.
'I deny that p' is an assertion of the falsity of p.
That is, it is a claim to know that p is false.
It is therefore another kind of knowledge.
At the end of the first Meditation, and the beginning of the second, Descartes does assert that he will deny all of the claims he formerly believed.
The point of denial here is just as support for the doubt, for truly doubting the claims which are most obviously true so that he does not accidentally fall into old habits.

Descartes provides three arguments for doubt.
If they are successful, they will make us doubt, but not deny, everything on the list.

III. Illusion

Among the most difficult beliefs to abandon are those which we grasp with our senses.
What we see, and even more so what we touch, we take as most real.
In the third paragraph of Meditation One, Descartes says that everything he has taken as most true has come either from the senses or through the senses.
Descartes, who crafted the Meditations most carefully, seems to be making a distinction between knowledge which comes directly from experience, like knowing that it is hot outside, and knowledge which requires reasoning in addition to sense experience.
Very roughly, as I mentioned, we can distinguish two epistemological positions based on whether one accepts that we have abilities to acquire knowledge that extend beyond our sense perception.

The empiricist claims that all knowledge is a posteriori, derivative from sense experience.
Empiricism is difficult to reconcile with our knowledge of mathematics, since we never sense mathematical objects like circles or numbers.
Also, some sentences, 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.

In contrast, the rationalist believes that some knowledge comes from our ability to reason, independently of the senses.
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, Spinoza, and Leibniz all held varieties of rationalism.

The question which divides the empiricist from the rationalist is whether all knowledge comes from experience.
In the third paragraph, Descartes provides an argument for doubt which immediately calls empiricism into question.
Consider optical, or other sensory, illusions, or hallucinations.
Such experiences undermine our sensory beliefs.
They are particularly effective in impugning beliefs about distant or ill-perceived objects, and perhaps very small ones.
The square building may look round from afar.
But our knowledge of close objects, like our own bodies, resists doubts about illusions.

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.
If we are to dump all the apples from the cart, we must have stronger doubts.

Illusion does not call much into doubt, despite Descartes's claim that we should not doubt our senses.
If we are going to eliminate more of our beliefs on the basis of systematic doubt, we need a stronger doubt.

IV. Dreams

In the fourth and fifth paragraphs of the first Meditation, Descartes develops the stronger argument against the veracity of the senses.
If we are dreaming, all of our beliefs which rely on our senses are called into doubt.
We can dream of things that do not exist, or that things which do exist have different properties than they actually do.

The dream argument elicits three distinct questions.

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?

Regarding A, there is no obvious mark to distinguish waking from dreaming.
Anything we can do when we are awake, we can dream we are doing.
So, the answer to B will be long and detailed.
We can fantasize entirely novel objects, so we can not be sure that the objects in our dreams exist.
There need not even be any Earth, or any people.
We could be sentient machines, dreaming about people, in the way that we, supposing our ordinary views of the world, can dream of sentient machines.
Machines need designers and constructors, of course, but these need not be people.
We can even doubt that any objects exist, since we could be just disembodied minds.

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.

The answer to B leads to a way to approach C.
If we can not be sure that our sense experience is veridical, perhaps there is non-sensory knowledge that resists the dream doubt.
Even if we are dreaming, our beliefs in mathematical claims, like '2+2=4' or 'the tangent to a circle intersects the radius of that circle at right angles' may survive.
Descartes also claims that the universals from which objects are constructed, the properties of objects, remain, as well.
Properties are what he calls simple and universal.
For example, consider color, shape, quantity, place, time.
Even if no object has these properties, the properties remain, insofar as they are in our minds.
Descartes calls these the 'building blocks' of the empirical world.

> "It is from these components, as if from true colors, that all those images of things that are in our thought are fashioned, be they true or false" (AW42).

The idea is not that the objects are made of their properties, in the way that water is made of hydrogen and oxygen.
Rather, our ideas are made of general images, and those general images can remain impervious to doubt even when we are doubting that they are properties of objects outside of us.

V. The Deceiver

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.
Some beliefs resist doubt on the basis of illusion and dreams.
Even if I am dreaming, colors exist, bachelors are unmarried, and 2+2=4.
So, we needed a stronger doubt to finish the job of providing reasons to doubt all of our beliefs.

For the third doubt, Descartes wonders about the status of his beliefs if there is a powerful deceiver who can place thoughts directly into Descartes's mind.
We need not worry about whether this deceiver is God, or a demigod, or a demon.
Neither need we assert the existence of a deceiver or a God.
All we need is to imagine the possibility of a deceiver, which is easy enough to do.

Compare the deceiver hypothesis to the *Matrix* or to an equivalent brain-in-a-vat hypothesis.
The latter hypothesis is to imagine that we have been kidnapped, our brain removed from our body.
Our bodies discarded, our brains have been hooked to computers which simulate the continuation of our lives.
According to the thought experiment, we don't notice the difference.
According to such examples, our thoughts really happen in brains.
But the brains are being fed misleading information.
There is a physical reality, but it is unlike the one we perceive.

In contrast, the deceiver hypothesis is consistent with the non-existence of the physical world.
We could be disembodied minds, whose thoughts are directly controlled by an independent source.
The certainty which convinces us not to doubt those claims that remain under the dream doubt could itself be implanted by a demon deceiver.
When we apply the deceiver hypothesis to our beliefs, we notice that just about all of them can be called into question.
Nothing, it seems, is certain.
In terms of the metaphor of the house of knowledge, Descartes has razed the house, and now needs to rebuild from new foundations.

VI. Summary

In the first Meditation, Descartes provides three arguments for doubt which call pretty much all of his beliefs into question.

1. Illusion
2. Dream
3. Deceiver

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.