

Philosophy: God and knowledge

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Chapter 1

Introductory class

The difference between mathematical truths and factual truths.

1.1 The problem of psychologism

Even though mathematics seems objective, we still filter mathematics through our psychology, so it might not be as objective as we want it to be.

Chapter 2

Descartes: Meditations, Doubt and Belief

He begins with *methodic doubt*, where we do not question each and every particular belief. Rather, we question the source of knowledge of our beliefs. If this source of knowledge is open to even the least doubt, then we reject all beliefs which arise from this knowledge.

We start with perception, the most obvious source of knowledge. We know that our perception can easily deceive us — for example, madmen are clearly deceived by their perceptions. We do not need to presuppose such an extreme position, however. Dreams are another example where our perceptions deceive us. Yet another example is that of temperature: We can change our perception of hot or cold, by dipping our hands into a jug of hot or cold water.

As an aside, “neurotics” have some connection with reality, “psychotics” have a clean break with reality. So “madmen” can be subdivided into these two classes, by Freud’s classification. Freud says that normal dreams are wish fulfilment. That is, you are able to fulfil your wishes that have been repressed. Also, nightmares are your subconscious trying to work through some form of trauma. It is the subconscious trying to take trauma and rework it into a manageable form. They had a patient who had a recurrent nightmare of being shot in the head. Clearly, this is not “wish fulfilment”. He creates the explanation that we constantly relive a bad experience to learn how to manage it.

Now, Descartes makes a decisive move — Even if we are dreaming, the *content* of our dreams as mental images are *embedded in reality*. For example, think of an imaginary/fictitious object, such as a unicorn or a fantastic alien, or an orientable mobius strip. Even so, there would be elements which are recognizable.

At the level of mental images, the images cannot be doubted, though what they are images *of* may not exist. The content of the images in terms of shape, figure, and color must exist in our head, for them to *be images*. Hence, we cannot reject the existence of figure and color.

We are also unable to reject time. Dreams can *distort* time, but we can still feel the passage of time in a dream. We are trying to move from something that is mental, to something that is more than our thought process.

Subjective idealism says that it is just my flow of consciousness, and everything is confined to *my* consciousness.

Objective idealism says that to even possess consciousness, we need abstract entities that transcend just our consciousness — for example, time.

Since time is required to be able to dream, time cannot be reduced to dreaming. This is called as **Transcendental philosophy**. “Transcendental” since we find that at the very moment we turn inwards, a different reality. We find a transcendence in imminence (imminence = the inner). That is, me observing myself internally causes me to come across certain structures that I cannot reduce to myself. For example, that of temporality.

Hence, he believes that mathematics contains some measure of certainty. The natural sciences have an element of empiricism mixed into them. They presuppose things existing in the external world. This presupposition is open to doubt. On the other hand, arithmetic does not need to hypothesize the existence of physical numbers. The ideal entity of numbers (in the sense of Plato’s forms) is something which is independent of our subjective experience.

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Chapter 3

Lecture 4

Descartes is not happy with saying that this is how we are physically constituted. So he's looking for this absolute, indubitable ground. Therefore, he has to actually prove that there is some transcendent source which guarantees your perception. "clear and distinct perception" is what we require, but this is hard to get to.

"Doubt has taken the ground beneath my feet" — At the same time, I can no longer remain on the surface. So far, I had been on the surface and it was not a problem for me since I had never doubted. Once I began this quest, I do not find any absolutely certain ground. I cannot forget about this shaky ground and continue to live there.

He asks what he can be certain of, given hyperbolic doubt — perception, memory, body, figure, extension and movement are all fiction. He asks whether his *very existence*, his notion of I is in itself something real. The act of thinking is the conformation of my existence as a thinking being. As long as I am doubting, I exist as a doubting being. As long as I am being deceived, I exist as a being who is deceived, and so on.

I think *therefore* I am — the *therefore* is one of assenting thinking and being equal / identity. It is **not** inference.

3.0.1 The problem of personal identity

Descartes walks into a bar. The bartender asks, "what will it be?" Descartes responds, "I think not", and he promptly disappears.

Memory constitutes a large fragment of our personal identity. On Descartes' theory, there is no reference to the past. We can only affirm our existence in the now.

3.0.2 Solipsism: The sole I

How does one get out of one's mind, to access the rest of the physical realm? Currently, I only know my own mental appearances. Everything else is an illusion.

Descartes wishes to reject this branch of thought. For example, he questions whether he stops existing when we sleep. He wishes to come up with an explanation for our sense of continuity.

After introducing "I think therefore I am", he continues saying "I do not know very clearly what I am, except for the fact that I am".

Imagination is imagistic, and images have already been rejected, insofar as they refer to the external world. However, imagination which refers to the internal world is indubitable.

The only proof certificate of existence we have found so far is that of thinking.^h

At some point, Descartes' defines the body as that which cannot be self-moved. This is different from Aristotelian physics, where everything is self-moved according to its telos. Descartes has broken tradition from the Aristotelian model, to somewhat arrive at the notion of inertia. (Newton, a century later formalizes this).

Descartes rejects the reality of his perception, but marvels at the richness of his perception. A mirage does not truly exist, but it exists *for me*. This brings out a gap between the external world and the internal world. Yet, we believe that we know the external world better than the internal world.

The wax example

Descartes takes something we are absolutely sure of: For example, a piece of wax. He waxes poetic about this piece of wax, its physical characteristics (sound, color, smell). When we begin to melt the wax, it heats up, loses color and smell, becomes liquid. He then asks: "does the same wax remain after this change?" We must confess that it does remain, no one would say otherwise. However, by what criterion are we judging that it is the same? All of its pyhsical characteristics have been altered!

He wishes to retain physical objects. But by his standards for indubitable knowledge, he is forced to recourse to God.

3.0.3 Why does modern science reject teleology?

Teleology presupposes what is to be explained. If we say that something moves because it is supposed to move, this is not an explanation.

3.1 Lecture 5

Empericism is not the annihilation of reason. Rather, it is a viewpoint on where reason lies: Does it lie in the mind, or does it lie within nature? That is, are all our ideas and connections between ideas are "out there", and we are passively listening to these. We are discovering the laws of nature, not inventing them.

Descartes with "cogito ergo sum" is closing the gap between subject and object. He is saying: "only that really exists for sure, which I can subjectively grasp". The usual way of looking at things would be to say that a table exists, and I am *able to* perceive it. Descartes' view of this is that I can be aware of the existence of the table *since* I am perceiving it.

Principle of coherence: My beliefs are true if all my beliefs are coherent.

He decides to abstract from everything that is unnecessary from the piece of wax to define the piece of wax. It's not the form, since the form changes. The extension changes.

So, we need the notion of a god to protect us from a demon who might hinder our clear and distinct perception. There is a circularity in his logic, where he starts out by assuming that we need a clear and distinct perception, and therefore we need a God. He then continues to use God to make whatever we see through clear and distinct perception to be true.

3.2 Lecture 6

The intuition that Descartes has is referred to as "clear and distinct perception", "natural light of reason" — This is used to describe "self-evident" objects for Descartes. For Descartes, rationality is equivalent to self-evidence. However, he still believes that it is possible to be deceived by clear and distinct perception due to his standards of truth.

3.2.1 The circularity of the argument

- Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.
- I clearly and distinctly perceive that God is not a deceiver.
- Therefore, God has created me in such a way that everything I clearly and distinctly see is true
- I can be certain that whatever I can see clearly and distinctly is if God exists
- I can know and be certain that God exists and is not a deceiver only if I know that whatever I see clearly and distinctly is true

3.2.2 Ideas involved in the arguments

- *Formal reality*: Any idea as a mental object has formal reality. Even if we are hallucinating, the hallucination has a formal reality, as per the experience of the observer.
- *Objective reality*: Idea insofar as it represents something outside itself. That is, the thought represents an object.

Formal reality cannot be false, due to "cogito ergo sum". There are all true as figments of imagination, and therefore possess formal reality.

3.2.3 Tangent

Words like "this", "that", "now" and so on in modern philosophy are called "indexicals". These words are somewhat special in language, since their meaning is tied to the context of their utterance. When we say "this", we are stepping out of language, into reality. Philosophers have argued that even "this" is a concept which has a kind of universality to it. We can understand the word "this" even if we do not know what specific "this" it refers to. Descartes was the first to elucidate this with the wax example.

Wittgenstein argues against ostensive definitions (definitions which involve pointing) — ostensive definitions imply that meaning can be found in the thing we are pointing to. Alternatively, ostensive definitions imply that language gets its meaning from reality.

Let us say we say the sentence "this is a table", by pointing at a table. However, the child who we are teaching about "table" needs to realise that "table" does not refer to, say, the wood, or the color of the table.

Wittgenstein calls this as "playing the language game".

3.2.4 Formal versus Objective reality

- There is as much reality in the effect as there is in the cause.
- something cannot arise from nothing.
- something more perfect cannot arise from nothing.
- all ideas have formal reality.
- objective mode of being belongs to ideas, formal modes of being is available to all causes of ideas.
- god is infinite.
- Therefore I could not have generated the idea.
- hence god must exist to affirm god.
- now, god has a formal reality. However, we still need to be able to pull god out into an objective reality.

The cause must have as much reality as its effect. From this it follows,

- something cannot proceed from nothing
- what has more reality within itself cannot proceed from something with less reality. If not, this too opens up a gap of reality

There is a formal reality to all ideas, but some have greater objective reality.

I have many ideas in my head, all of which have formal reality. We wish to judge its objective reality. For example, let us pick the idea of "substance". The "substance" is a formal reality which has an "effect". For many of these ideas like "motion", since I can think that I am moving, I can get the idea of "motion" myself, from the fact that I think I can move myself. So these ideas of the physical world, I can access insofar as I can experience them.

However, there is only one idea that is so perfect, that I cannot derive from myself since I am an imperfect being. Being finite, I cannot derive the idea of the infinite. Being an imperfect being, I cannot derive the idea of the perfect God.

The idea of God, insofar as it is a formal reality in my head, carries all of these attributes.

Now, every idea as an effect requires a cause, since nothing can come from nothing. The only idea I can clearly and distinctly see, but cannot produce is that of God. This depends on the principle that the cause (the ideas that lead to the new idea) has to have at least as much reality as the effect (the new idea that is generated). If this were not the case, then this too opens up a gap, where there is a gap of reality between the cause and the effect.

Unfortunately for us, he does not believe that mathematics is perfect since he believes in psychologism.

However, the question is now whether God can also be attributed to psychologism. He believes that God is infinite, and therefore he cannot access God. He also believes that he cannot get to the infinite by negating the finite. In some sense, he's an intuitionist, in the mathematical sense of the word. Therefore, he claims that we need the capacity to negate a fact to be able to negate it.

3.3 Lecture 7

The correspondence theory of truth — my ideas have to correspond to the world outside.

If we have a physical object that we are viewing, then let us assume that the object we are viewing has formal reality. Our thoughts naturally have a formal reality (by definition). We now need to link the objective reality of the object to the formal reality of the object.

In modern science, we do not have correspondence — we do not need to see atoms in order to posit atoms. What we see is indeed not what we get. The modern scientific epistemology has broken with the idea that our ideas need to correspond with reality in an immediate way.

The idea that what we see has to directly correspond with what we see is known as naive realism — naive as opposed to scientific realism, which explains what we see in terms of complex structures.

There is another problem that occurs at the mathematical level. The correspondence does not imply existence. For example, there is mathematical correspondence between reality and our mathematical ideas, but they (need not) correlate to reality.

An example from aristotelian logic would be to say "all men are mortal" — what we are saying is that if there was such a thing as a man, then they would be mortal. ($\text{forall } m \text{ in men, mortal}(m)$). Hence, there is a gap between truth and validity.

An objection to descartes is that the ideas we have are in contradiction to the *formal* idea of God. Hence, we need some way to transport a formal god into an objective god.

Now, he needs an argument called as the "ontological argument" which argues that perfection *must* exist. That is, something that is perfect must exist. This is extremely suspect.

- As formal reality, all ideas that we have in our head have the same level of existence. Ideas might have different contents, or objective referents.
- This difference in content must have been generated from somewhere. If I am simply hallucinating, then I should not be able to create distinctions in my head. There are specific differences in our ideas, which cannot simply be explained by formal existence. One can say that this come from other formal ideas. However, this would lead to some kind of infinite regress.

How are we guaranteed continuity of existence? Indeed, the great mystery of time is that it is continuous (the existence of the passage of time or the arrow of time). At the same time, it is discrete, in that it is broken up into instants. As we speak, it becomes the past. We cannot point to the present. If time were discrete, what connects the I across two instants? If time were truly continuous, then it would be eternal, without change.

If we take time to be discrete, Descartes argues that at each instant of time, we have a cause that produces the I in each moment.

Buddhists don't believe in a soul. They believe that each preceding moment generates the succeeding moment out of itself. There is causality operating at the level of our soul. The soul is nothing but causality occurring over the string of moments. This is called the "theory of dependent origination". A cool quote by heidigger: "In passing, time remains". Hereclitis said "you cannot step into the same river twice".

3.4 Escaping the vicious circle of God — The trademark argument

The cartesian god is a replacement for the problem of infinite regress when it comes to describing the flow of time. If we have to postulate an I, then this I needs to be "outside" / "transcendental" of time.

God as a creator left a trademark in my mind, through which I am capable of conceiving god. That is, there are innate ideas in my head. Since I am imperfect, I could not have gotten the idea of perfection from myself.

Why should the pythagorean theorem hold? There is some objectivity to the truth that is outside of my mental performance. However, I do need my mental performance to make it explicit to me. Similarly, there is an innate notion of God. But it is only when I exercise this capacity that I can fully form this idea of God through the clear and distinct perception.

So, God has given us the clear and distinct perception. He then uses the *clear and distinct perception* to access the notion of God.

If we had separated clear and distinct perception as something that *humans* possess, then we get a vicious cycle. However, if we say that clear and distinct perception was *given my God*, but we need to *exercise* this clear and distinct perception.

For example, all of math is tautological. So in some sense, the entire information content is zero. However, every time we prove a theorem, we have gained some knowledge. So, Descartes' notion of knowledge is about making these concepts explicit, like that of mathematics, or clear and distinct perception. $a = a$ is a trivial truth. However, a derivation $a \rightarrow b \rightarrow \dots z$ is still tautological, but is more useful, since it makes explicit that a implies z .

3.5 Kant's theory of morality

God has the power to deceive us, but the desire to deceive us is a lack. Hence, God will choose not to deceive us.

If we are infinitely rational, we cannot but be moral, according to Kant. Kant is a perfectly secular rationalist, and therefore provides more accessible arguments to many of Descartes' claims.

If God cannot deceive us, how are we deceived? The example of temperature as felt by the hand, for example. Why did God not make me perfect? Why is there evil in the world — why did God allow me to be evil? If I am capable of rational thought, how is it that I can perform evil, which is irrational (Kant)?

Kant says that there are no actual moral values with content. There is no God to guarantee morality. Why should we be moral?

Take any subjective maxim. The test for whether it is moral is whether it is universalizable. What would happen to such a society? If society breaks down, then this is immoral.

For example, consider the notion of a promise. If I believe "I ought to break a promise whenever it is convenient to me". However, if I universalize this, I will get "Everyone ought to break a promise whenever it is convenient for anyone" — this leads to a break down of society.

In general, for us to break a social norm, we both need the social norm or law to exist, so that we are able to break the law. So, in some sense, we want both A (for the law to exist) and $\neg A$ (for us to be able to break the law).

Going back to the promise example, we would require the institution of promises to exist for us to gain something by breaking it, so we have *Promise*. We also need to be able to break a promise, so we are arguing for \neg *Promise*.

For Kant, there is no cultural relativism. So, there is a best morality that is accessible through rationality.

3.6 Pulling back Kant to Descartes

Descartes says that as long as we see something clearly and distinctly and we are absolutely sure of its truth, we cannot be mistaken.

He creates a distinction between *understanding* and *judging* something. In logic, this is the difference as introduced by Frege between the content stroke $[-A]$ (assume A is true) and the judgement stroke $[\text{turnstile } A]$ (A is the case).

We are temporal beings, so we can lose our clear and distinct perception — for example, we can forget the proof of a theorem which we had studied.

Our conception of the will: The will is infinite, and is what allows us to conceive of God. This goes back to the negativity of thought: we are able to suspend a thought, doubt it, and take a step back. The freedom of the will is the only mark of infinity that we have. Therefore, we are able to conceive of notions of infinity, which we cannot see clearly and distinctly, but we can still conceive it. Therefore, free will is the mark of perfection that we possess.

However, since this is freedom, we can use this freedom to make mistakes. He makes an interesting observation that this kind of freedom is not merely indifference between two equal possibilities (freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose). However, for Descartes, freedom is the ability to gravitate towards truths that are self-evident is a rationally determined will. Contrast this to the rebellious will of a teenager.

3.7 A review of Descartes

Logical truth does not provide us with proof of existence. For example, the nature of the triangle is such that even if there are no physical triangles. However, Descartes is trying to derive existence from the conceivability of something.

After Descartes, rationalism takes a different turn — it grants that we cannot actually say anything factual about the world. So, "phenomenology" decides to talk about phenomena, *as phenomena* — we don't care if phenomena refer to something beyond themselves.

Whatever I see clearly and distinctly, I cannot but help agreeing to it. For example, the truths of mathematics. The reason for error is that my freedom of will is much greater than my comprehension. If I actually see things clearly and distinctly, I cannot be open to error anymore, because of the existence of a non-deceiving god.