L12: Cartesian Skepticism

Clifford on the ethics of belief

Clifford: "It is wrong, always and everywhere, to believe without evidence"
- Believing something without sufficient evidence is **always morally wrong**.
- It doesn't matter how **practically important** the belief in question is.

A worry

Won't refusing to believe anything without sufficient evidence lead us to **doubt everything**, and so be **completely paralyzed**?

> "Are we then to become universal skeptics, doubting everything, afraid always to put one foot before the other until we have personally tested the firmness of the road? Are we to deprive ourselves of the help and guidance of that vast body of knowledge which is daily growing upon the world, because neither we nor any one person can possibly test a hundredth part of it by immediate experiment or observation?"

The problem

Only a small percentage of our beliefs are based on **direct observation**. Many of them are based on:
- **Testimony** that we have not investigated independently.
- **Assumptions** about what nature is like.

Cartesian skepticism

René Descartes

17th century French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher

- "Father of modern neurology"
- "Father of algebraic geometry"
- Cartesian skepticism
- Argued that the mind is distinct from the body

Activity 1: What do we know?

In small groups, come up with a list of five things that you know, and add them to the shared google doc:

   https://docs.google.com/document/d/1t4smZYtN7wxmFSKYiQuLXJtneFJcvFEL-5Jmtz2zat4/edit?usp=sharing

Activity 2: Debate

You will have 10 minutes to prepare.

- You will be divided into two teams: the skeptics and the nonskeptics.
- Nonskeptics are responsible for proving that HYPOTHESIS is true.
- Skeptics are responsible for proving that HYPOTHESIS is false.
- Team captains will give short opening statements (1-2 minutes).
- Teams will alternative responding to each other's arguments.
- You can only contribute once until everyone has contributed.
- I may call on you randomly if there are no volunteers, so please be ready to participate.
- I will give you a link to a google doc for your group so that you can take notes.

The BIV argument

1. You don't know that you're not a handless brain in a vat.
2. If you don't know that you're not a handless brain in a vat, then you don't know that you have hands.
3. Therefore, you don't know that you have hands (1, 2).

Questions:

1. What reason do we have to accept P1?
2. What reason do we have to accept P2?
3. What is the best response to this argument?

Alternative hypotheses:

   E: It appears to me that I have hands
   H1: I have hands
   H2: I am a handless brain in a vat

The closure principle for knowledge

   If P entails Q, then if you know P, you also know Q

Closure principle for justification:

   If P entails Q, then if you are justified in believing P, you are also justified in believing Q