

INTRODUCTION TO MODERN PHILOSOPHY

PHIL 126, YALE UNIVERSITY, SPRING 2019

These are lecture notes for PHIL 126b, “Introduction to Modern Philosophy,” taught by Michael Della Rocca at Yale University during the spring of 2019. These notes are not official, and have not been proofread by the instructor for the course. They live in my lecture notes repository at

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1 Monday, January 14

“Do you know what Pop-tarts are?”

Michael Della Rocca

1.1 Lecture Outline

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|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. 10 Philosophers | 11. Metaphysics & Epistemology |
| 2. Our Problems | 12. PSR & The Finest Hour |
| 3. Dialogue | 13. My Motto |
| 4. Mind-Body Problems | 14. Copernicus |
| 5. Naturalism | 15. Mechanism |
| 6. Freedom | 16. Old Science |
| 7. Causation | (a) Final Causes |
| 8. Skepticism | (b) Substantial Forms |
| 9. Idealism | (c) Trust the senses |
| 10. God | |

This class will cover 17th and 18th century philosophers, including René Descartes, Nicolas Malebranch, Benedict de Spinoza, Anne Conway, Gottfried Leibniz, Emilie du Châtelet, John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. These philosophers defined the themes and methods of modern philosophy today. They tried to understand what the world is like and what our place in it is.

Philosophy is not teleological; older philosophers may have a *better understanding* of some ideas than contemporary philosophers do — this is one reason why we study older ideas. There is also a rich tradition of dialogue with older philosophers. Much of philosopher is thinkers responding to and criticizing older philosophers.

Problem 1.1 (The Mind-Body Problem). What is the relation, if any, between the physical body and the mind? How do mental states relate to bodily states? Are the two distinct or the same? Is the mind destroyed if the body is destroyed? Are we the same person we were in previous years? How to the mind and body interact?

Definition (Naturalism). The belief that everything plays by the same rules, and that the laws of nature apply to everything (including immaterial things, like the mind). Advocated by Spinoza and Hume.

Naturalism

Problem 1.2 (Freedom). Does free will exist? Are we ever truly free? How are our choices actually made? How should we be held responsible for our actions? If determinism is true, how can we be free in any sense?

Definition (Determinism). Everything that takes place now was determined in the past by earlier events. Past states necessitate the current state of the world. If you know a given state and all the natural laws, you can predict with certainty how the system will progress.

Determinism

Problem 1.3 (Causation). What does it mean for one thing to determine another thing? How does one billiard ball cause another to move when they strike one another? When a rock breaks a window, does the rock cause the breakage, or does God?

Problem 1.4 (Skepticism). Do we really know that things exist or the state of things? What does knowing something actually mean? How do we know that we aren't all dreaming? Is there a deceiving God which invents a false reality for use to perceive? Do we really know future events, like the sun will rise tomorrow or if the eraser is let go then it will fall to the ground?

Definition (Idealism). Physical objects which exist in the world (objective things) are dependent on the mind, and the perception of these objects by the mind is what instantiates them.

Idealism

Problem 1.5 (God). Does God exist? How do we know? Can we prove it? Is God beholden to natural laws? Is God nature itself?

Definition (Metaphysics). The study of what exists.

Metaphysics

Definition (Epistemology). The study of how do we know that something exists.

Epistemology

Definition (Principle of Sufficient Reason). The claim that for everything that exists and every occurrence, there is an explanation for it. There is always a way to understand something even if we don't understand it yet. Invoked in a philosophers' *Finest Hour*.

Principle of Sufficient Reason

2 Wednesday, January 16

cc-by

Michael Della Rocca

2.1 Lecture Outline

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|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Copernicus | 8. Philosophical Implications |
| 2. Mechanism | 9. Descartes 1596–1650 |
| 3. Old Science | 10. 3 Main Aims |
| (a) Final Causes | (a) Existence of God |
| (b) Substantial Forms | (b) Mind/body distinctions |
| (c) Trust the senses | (c) New Science |
| 4. Circular Explanations | 11. Skepticism & the 3 aims |
| 5. Dormitive Virtues | 12. Reasons for doubt |
| 6. Matter and motion | 13. Principles |
| 7. Other Qualities | 14. A piece of paper |

This was a time of great upheaval in science and reasoning. Aristotelian science was being replaced with a new mechanistic science. The 16th century was coming out of the Renaissance, and Copernicus introduced the heliocentric model in 1543. Galileo Galilei also got in trouble with the Church and was placed under house arrest in 1632, when Descartes was 36 years old. He came out with his own heliocentric model in *Le Monde*, but he chose not to publish out of fear of retribution. Other changes were going on as well; natural philosophy was embracing *mechanism* as a means to explain the natural world.

2.2 Old Science & Critiques

1. **Appeals to final causes** — God created the Earth in order to create a place where beings could worship God. Perhaps hurricanes exist to punish humans. Generally, any action which takes place *must have a purpose*. Rocks are heavy and their purpose it to seek the center of the earth. Dogs bark because *it is their nature to do so*. Humans are rational, and their final cause is to reason.
2. **Appeals to substantial forms** — All rocks are heavy; all humans can reason, so that is their form; a dog's form is to bark. Generally, every *substance* has a *form*. A pan

becomes hot when it is put on a stove because the fire has a certain quality has the form of heat and the pan acquires that form. If you paint a wall red, it acquires the form of redness from the paint. When we see the wall, our eyes and soul acquire the form of redness, so forms can be acquired without a transfer of matter.

3. **Trusting the senses** — we perceive things as they actually are. Senses give an accurate description of reality without deception.

Mechanists critique these ideas based on circular reasoning; they feel that saying “the pan becomes hot because it acquires heat” is a tautology. Likewise with “walls become red when they acquire redness.” These justifications are not illuminating. Molière mocked this by saying sleeping pills work because they have *dormitive virtues*, which is circular. Without identifying *how* these process work, no insight is gained. Modern philosophers reject these ideas because they don’t explain anything: for something to exist, it must do explanatory work. Instead of forms, modern philosophers appealed to matter in motion: pans become hot when the kinetic energy of their molecules increases. This also explains what coldness is.

The relevant characteristics of particles are their size, shape, movement, and so on. Things seem red only because they reflect light at certain wavelengths. Color, taste, sound, smell, all of these were explained by size and shape and motion. The fundamental characteristics are all easily measured, allowing mathematics to be introduced to natural philosophy. There are many implications of this. *Skepticism* was introduced (or rejuvenated) on account of the lack of trust which was placed in our senses. Another implication is that perception doesn’t involve mind or soul becoming like the things it perceives. This means that the soul no longer has any characteristics (size, shape, color) while the body does, meaning that the two *must* be distinct. Free will also became an acute worry on account of the rather deterministic account of the mechanistic world-view. Finally, this new science introduced new methodology to philosophy itself, axiomatizing philosophical discussions. Spinoza adopts these tools, but Descartes and Leibniz also used it. Philosophy becomes modeled on science and mathematics, adopting the same laws as these disciplines. This partly led to *Naturalism* where people seek to discover the laws of man, trying to emulate Newton and other scientists.

2.3 *Descartes*

Came from a well-off family. Mother died while young, educated thoroughly at a Jesuit school in the old, Aristotelian science. He wanted to be a mathematician (and he succeeded) and he wanted to apply mathematical methods to nature. In 1610 he had a series of dreams which inspired this quest. By the late 1620s he had begun considering metaphysics.

The *Meditations* are modeled after religious meditations in which he gradually comes to certain realizations. He starts at the beginning with a common sense interpretation of the world and works to embrace a new, metaphysical view of the world. Before they were published, the *Meditations* were circulated by his agent to leading philosophers and in turn Descartes published his replies. This makes the *Meditations* more of a back-and-forth dialog between Descartes and many leading thinkers. Descartes wrote in Latin first, and then in French.

Descartes corresponded with Princess Elisabeth and many other philosophers through letters (the blogs and Facebook posts of the day). He died in 1650

2.4 *The 3 Main Aims of Meditations*

In *Meditations* Descartes set out to do the following.

1. Prove the Existence of God;
2. Prove that the Mind and Body are Distinct; and
3. Establish the New Science. This one was subtle and more implicit; he wanted to destroy the Aristotelian science by inculcating in people and acceptance of his principles before they realized it overturned Aristotle.

Notably absent from this list is raising up Skepticism, which is one of the main motifs of the work.

3 Friday, January 18

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|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Reasons for doubt | 8. Make my day |
| 2. Principles | 9. Coming and going |
| 3. Piece of paper | 10. Rock bottom |
| 4. Dream argument | 11. Archimedes |
| 5. Coherence | 12. <i>Sum</i> |
| 6. Beliefs left standing | 13. <i>Cogito ergo sum</i> |
| 7. The big guns | |

Descartes arrives at a radical skepticism, through which he attempts to further his three main aims. He wants to get rid of the skeptical doubts by the end of his meditations. Some original beliefs come back, but his (old Aristotelian) views on physical objects do not. He doesn't want to doubt for the sake of doubt, but wants to have *reasons* for doubt. He also knows he has infinitely many beliefs, so instead of going through each he goes after the "fundamental principles" of his beliefs. In particular, he scrutinizes beliefs which arise from his senses. Our eyes can be tricked (oasis, liquid on a hot road, square tower in the distance may look round, Dick Cheney thinking his friend's face was a bird). However, this isn't a general reason to doubt the senses since there are always specific nonoptimal situations which give rise to the doubt, but under optimal circumstances we have no reason for doubt; for example, being here sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in my hand. To doubt this would make one insane. HOWEVER, what if I were dreaming? This does give rise to a valid reason for doubt.

Definition (Valid Argument). A argument in which the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises.

Valid Argument

Definition (Sound Argument). A valid argument in which the premises are true.

Sound Argument

Premise 1 In order to be certain that I'm sitting, I must *first* be certain that I'm not dreaming.

Premise 2 I can't be certain that I'm not dreaming.

Conclusion I can't be certain that I'm sitting.

This calls into doubt Physics, Astronomy, Medicine, and Empirical Science. Mathematics and Logic, however, he feels are safe from this doubt. This is a valid argument since **Premise 1** and **Premise 2** necessarily imply **Conclusion**. Descartes will eventually argue that it isn't sound though since it would imply that God is a deceiver, a premise which he later refutes in *Meditations 3 & 4*.

4 Wednesday, January 13

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|---------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Cogito ergo sum | 7. The essence of the mind |
| 2. Ambulo ergo sum | 8. Truth rule |
| 3. Transparency | 9. Ugly head |
| 4. Cogitatur | 10. The great chain of being |
| 5. Quid igitur sum? | 11. Degrees of reality |
| 6. Sum res cogitant | |

Doubt presupposes existence, so the existence of doubt is an argument for the existence of 'I.' Something like *walking* wouldn't work since we can only be certain that we *think* that we're walking, but we can be sure that we are thinking. In this way, Descartes believes that he is certain of the content of his own mind. This certainty opens a gap between the mind and the world, everything the mind perceives. The mind is transparent to itself, however.

Problem 4.1. How can Descartes be sure that the 'I' which thinks is preserved between thoughts? Likewise, how can't we really only be sure that thought is going on?

thinking exists \Rightarrow there is a thinking thing \Rightarrow I am that thinking thing

Descartes first argues that thought must have a bearer in some substance, and then argues that there is an inherent quality of self about thoughts (you can't be aware of other people's thoughts, so any thoughts one perceive must be one's own).

How does Descartes address the idea that the I which thinks each thought might be different each time, just with different false memories of other beings? Kant considers this, but Descartes likely views this as an implicit part of a thinking substance.

Descartes makes some claims about the nature of a thinking mind. Here are some possible claims one could make about the essence of the mind/self: The first two claims are addressed in the second meditation, the third is addressed in the sixth meditation.

1. I am essentially (necessarily) a thinking thing; Descartes said "A thought alone is not separable from me."
2. I am not essentially (necessarily) extended;
3. I am not an extended thing;
4. I am not identical to my body;

What exactly does extended mean?

4.1 *The Truth Rule*

Descartes reflects on his certainty that he is a thinking thing, and seeks to extrapolate to understand what is a sufficient condition for being sure of something. He ends up with *whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true*. What constitutes clarity and distinctness is not really something Descartes addresses. Descartes also worries that a deceiving god could construct a clear and distinct argument which is actually false, and we could not be sure that we do not fall victim to our own assumptions about this claim. Thus Descartes seeks to first establish that God exists and that God is not a deceiver, and then the truth rule can necessarily follow. If he cannot then even the *cogito ergo sum* argument is called into doubt once again. The proof Descartes proposed is almost universally taken to be wrong (but that doesn't mean that it's not valuable or not worth studying).

4.2 *Descartes' Proof of God's Existence*

There are many different possible kinds of beings which exist in the world, and they have different degrees of reality. All beings are made of substance, meaning that they have properties but are not themselves properties of anything else. Furthermore, substances have a greater degree of reality than their properties, states, or modes. This is because the properties of a substance depend on the substance yet the substance doesn't depend on the properties: You can have a table which isn't rectangular, but you can't just have 'rectangular' without it being a rectangular *something*. The highest degree of being would be an infinite substance since it would be independent of anything else, uncreated and permanent. Below this are created, finite substances like a table or a mind. Below even this are the properties of finite substances. Since God is superlative, if God exists then he must be an infinite substance. The kind of reality which substances have is called *formal reality*, reality by the virtue of existence. This is contrasted with objective reality.

Need substances be material? Is the mind a substance?

5 Monday, January 28

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|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. Degrees of Reality; | 6. D.'s finest hour; |
| 2. Formal Reality & Objective Reality; | 7. Not a deceiver; |
| 3. Mister Ed; | 8. Cartesian Circle; |
| 4. Two causal principles & and the PSR; | 9. Intellectual Problem of Evil; |
| 5. Whodunit; | 10. Belief & the Will. |

5.1 *Degrees of Reality*

Descartes' proof of God's existence hinges on different degrees of reality, which in some sense is a measure of independence; in Descartes' view, God (an infinite substance) ought to be independent on anything else while everything else ought to be dependent on God. Finite and/or extended substances (table, mind, Mr. Ed, etc.) all depend on God, and in turn the shape of a table depends on the table itself.

Definition (Formal Reality). The reality something has by virtue of its existence. Usually a measure of how independent a thing is. Often also derives from the complexity of the thing; a machine would have more formal reality than a rock.

Formal Reality

Definition (Objective Reality). The objective reality of an idea is equal to the formal reality of the object of the idea has, or would have if it existed. Only ideas can have objective reality.

Objective Reality

Example 5.1. Consider the idea of Mr. Ed. This has relatively low formal reality since it's just a thought in a mind, but has relatively high objective reality since Mr. Ed himself has a relatively high formal reality. The idea of God has infinite objective reality.

5.2 *Two Causal Principles*

Proposition 5.1. *The formal reality of a cause is greater than or equal to the formal reality of the effect.*

Proposition 5.2. *The formal reality of the cause is greater than or equal to the objective reality of the effect.*

From this, God asks "What causes my idea of God?"

6 Wednesday, January 30

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| 1. Getting out of the circle; | 7. Leibniz's Law |
| 2. Intellectual Problem of evil; | 8. Mind-body problem |
| 3. Belief & the Will; | 9. Elisabeth (1618–1680) |
| 4. Do bodies exist? | 10. E's finest hour and D's darkest hour |
| 5. Whodunit again? | 11. Mind-body union |
| 6. The Real distinction | |

6.1 *Theodicy and Free Will*

It sure seems like Descartes' thinking involves circular reasoning, so much so that there's a name for it: 'The Cartesian Circle.' Do try and get out of this, he somewhat restricts the scope of his doubt to no longer be skeptical of his current clear and distinct ideas.

Problem 6.1. Why can't God deceive our current clear and distinct ideas? Descartes doesn't really have an answer for that.

Problem 6.2. Why should a good God allow me to make any mistakes at all?

Answering these problems is a form of *Theodicy* — trying to get God off the hook for the problems in the world. Descartes does this by saying that the problems are our fault entirely. Being mistaken is a function of a disconnect between the *intellect* and the *will*. When the will supercedes the intellect and makes judgements for which it has no justification then we get a false belief. But we shouldn't fault God for giving us extra will, so he is therefore off the hook for the problems of our intellectual errors.

Problem 6.3. I can't assent to the idea that I can fly.

Response. Descartes says that you freely don't assent to this idea. You could if you want to, but you choose to weigh your past experiences against your current beliefs. The only things the will doesn't have control over are clear

and distinct ideas, like $2 + 2 = 4$. Descartes ardently defends the freedom of will in almost all circumstances. ■

6.2 *The Nature of Bodies (Meditation 5)*

A body is something which is extended — it exists in three dimensions — and has size, shape, and motion. We don't have a clear and distinct idea about the existence of bodies, so we cannot use this to prove their existence. Descartes does argue that the mind must be distinct from the body, if we are to have a body in the first place. However, the fact that we have ideas of anything means that they must be caused by something. Furthermore, our sensory ideas of bodies come to us against our will so they cannot originate in the mind. They can't come from God since this would mean that God is a deceiver for two reasons: first, if God does this we have no recourse to figure out the truth against our will, and this is a deception. Second, God has given us a propensity to believe our senses, and if these were fully false then God would be saddling us with a mistake which we have no means of correcting and a great propensity to give our assent to these ideas. This is not the action of a good and undeceptive God. Thus the only remaining possibility is that the cause of our sensory ideas of bodies must be the bodies themselves.

6.3 *Mind-Body Distinction*

Descartes' strategy for the distinguishing the mind and the body is extremely influential, and is still used by contemporary philosophers today. In Aristotelian tradition, the mind and body were intimately related; the mind was just the form of the body. For Descartes, they are very distinct things. Descartes argues that

1. The mind is essentially thinking; one cannot separate thoughts from the mind itself.
2. The mind is not essentially extended; we don't need a physical conception of the mind to understand its function and for it to do its job.
3. Unlike the mind, the body must be extended.
4. The body is not essentially thinking; there are many kinds of bodies which have no thoughts.

This argument relies on something which will come to be called *Leibniz's Law*.

Theorem 6.1 (Leibniz's Law). *If A and B have different properties then A and B are not identical.*

7 Monday, February 4

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|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Mind-Body Interaction | 8. Malebranche 1638–1715 |
| 2. Pineal gland | 9. What's the occasion? |
| 3. Intelligibility | 10. Not just mind-body, but body-body too |
| 4. Princess E. 1618–1680 | 11. No substantial forms |
| 5. Bohemian Rhapsody | 12. Causation + conceptual connection |
| 6. E.'s Finest Hour | 13. M.'s finest hour |
| 7. Mind-Body Union | 14. Spinoza 1632–1677 |

7.1 *Bohemian Rhapsody*

Descartes was also a scientist in his day, and he conjectured about the physical relation between the mind and the body. He thought that the *pineal gland* was the locus of this interaction. Elisabeth of Bohemia doubted Descartes account of the mind interacts with the body; in particular she wondered how a nonphysical, nonextended thing like the mind could cause interactions with a physical, extended thing like the body. She thought that contact and extension were necessary to induce movement or feeling in a body. Descartes' response was to doubt that these were actually necessary for interaction. He thinks that two things of different natures can interact. This ability is attributed to God, ever the helpful fellow that he is. These causal connections are in our interest, and so that is the reason for their existence. Elisabeth doubts this, and Descartes comes back to say "Don't think about it too much, it wouldn't make sense for use to have a good idea of the connection anyways." Descartes calls this a *primitive notion* which seems like a way for Descartes explain away the flaws in his reason.

Problem 7.1. How does this not violate the principle of sufficient reason?

Descartes's Response. Yeah, it does. Oops. But I only use the PSR to justify God, not to justify anything else. ■

7.2 *Malebranche (1638–1715)*

Malebranche was a Cartesian philosopher who came a bit after Descartes. He was mainly concerned with Theodicy. He believed in the Mind-Body distinction but he had a hard

time accepting Descartes' account for how the two interact. Malebranche supposes that, on the occasion of physical interaction with our bodies, a feeling appears in our mind due to God. When we intend to move our body, God moves our body in response to this intention. This divine intervention occurs in a regular fashion. For Malebranche, this is a general theory that also explains body-body interaction; all interactions are resultant from God's will. This theory of intervention by God when certain things happen is called *occasionalism*.

Problem 7.2. Doesn't this just mean that God is the ultimate cause of all suffering and pain?

Malebranche's Response. God is only acting on our intentions; they are the ultimate cause of these things. The only causal power finite objects have is the will to accept the good which God presents to us or to turn away from it. ■

Problem 7.3. What about the phantom limb problem?

Malebranche's Response. God set up the system in the simplest way possible. Extra checks to ensure that the effects are valid are superfluous to the ultimate design of the system. ■

Malebranche, like Descartes, wants to get rid of the substantial forms of Plato. To do this, they stripped bodies of all causal power and delegate causal power to God, or maybe to the mind in the case of will. For Malebranche, a cause is something which by its nature is connected to the effect.