

The Cartesian Background

PHIL 971 Kant Seminar

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1 *The Problem of Self-Knowledge*

1. How is self-knowledge achieved?
 - Is self-knowledge acquired via perception or via some other means?
2. Is self-knowledge distinctive, and if so, how?
 - Epistemically
 - Methodologically
 - Agency
 - Authority
3. Is self-knowledge in some way prior to other kinds of knowledge, and if so, how?
4. Does acquisition of self-knowledge require some sort of exercise of agency?

2 *A Framework for Self-Knowledge*

2.1 *Empiricist vs. Rationalist*¹

Empiricism: the epistemic basis of self-knowledge is empirical justification or warrant (e.g. a reliable process; empirical evidence gained via perception)

Rationalism: the epistemic basis of self-knowledge at least in part depends on either on conceptual conditions that are at least partially constitutive of the possession of beliefs, or on our status as rational beings more generally

Agentalism: the epistemic basis of self-knowledge at least in part depends on the rational capacity for doxastic attitude formation (e.g. making up one's mind concerning what to believe)

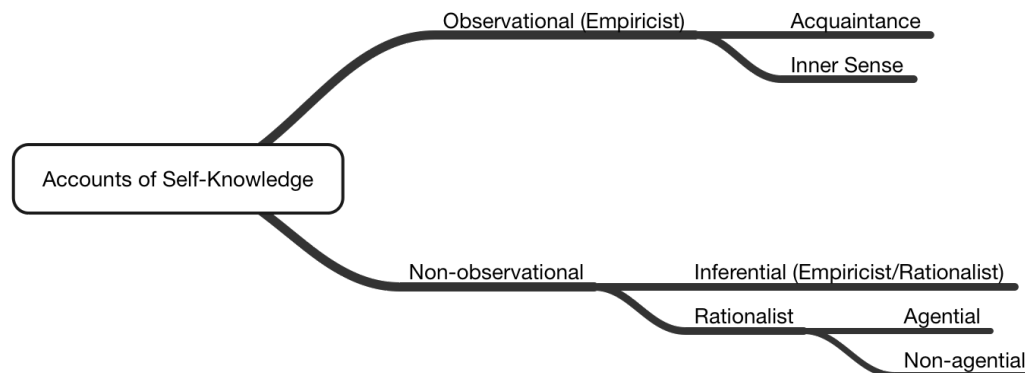
2.2 *Observational vs. Non-observational*

Observationalism: the epistemic basis of self-knowledge is an empirical justification or warrant understood specifically in terms of phenomenal evidence

Non-observationalism: the epistemic basis of self-knowledge is a form of justification or warrant other than phenomenal evidence (e.g. a rule; an inference; an exercises of one's agency)

¹ The dispute between empiricism and [rationalism] about self-knowledge is, at its core, a dispute about the epistemic basis for knowledge of one's own attitudes. For empiricists, the epistemic basis for self-knowledge is empirical justification or warrant. Depending on the particular empiricist account at issue, one's grasp of one's own attitude constitutes self-knowledge insofar as it is based in appropriate evidence or reasons; or the result of a reliable or properly functioning belief-forming process; or generated by the exercise of an epistemic virtue; or couldn't easily have been false; etc. [Rationalists] maintain that the epistemic basis for paradigm instances of self-knowledge is not (primarily) empirical justification or warrant. (Gertler 2016, 4)

2.3 A Tree of (Accounts of) Self-Knowledge



3 Descartes's Focus on Self-Knowledge

- Why is self-knowledge important for Descartes's project?²
 - Provides knowledge that is *certain*
- Why is certainty important?
 1. Foundationalism: what is certain is a 'first principle' from which we derive other knowledge
 2. Systematicity: what is certain is systematically connected with other knowledge
 3. Methodology: what is certain reveal a method for deriving other (certain) knowledge

² Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable. (AT 7:24)

4 The Cogito Argument

I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (AT 7:25; Descartes 1984, 1:17)

4.1 Features of the Cogito

- The 'cogito' argument is Descartes's proposed archimedean point

- Certainty of one's existence in the cogito is not inferential³
- Two conclusions of the cogito argument
 1. At least some cases of self-knowledge are absolutely indubitable/certain
 - Some thoughts are 'self-verifying'⁴
 - Are all cases of self-knowledge cases of having self-verifying thoughts?
 2. At least some indubitable self-knowledge includes knowledge of one's own nature as a thinker⁵

5 Questions for Descartes

1. Does Descartes think that self-knowledge is gained via a special method?
2. Is self-knowledge gained via sensory/perceptual means?
3. Is self-knowledge especially epistemically secure?
4. Is self-awareness higher-order or reflexive?
5. Is self-knowledge higher-order or reflexive?

References & Further Reading

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³ When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premiss 'Everything which thinks is, or exists'; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing. It is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones. (Reply to Second Set of Objections AT 7:140-1; Descartes 1984, 1:100)

⁴ Descartes's paradigm for this sort of knowledge was the cogito. The paradigm includes not only this famous thought, but fuller versions of it—not merely 'I am now thinking', but 'I think (with this very thought) that writing requires concentration' and 'I judge (or doubt) that water is more common than mercury'. ... It is certainly plausible that these sorts of judgments or thoughts constitute knowledge, that they are not products of ordinary empirical investigation, and that they are peculiarly direct and authoritative. Indeed, these sorts of judgments are self-verifying in an obvious way: making these judgments itself makes them true. For mnemonic purposes, I shall call such judgments *basic self-knowledge*. (Burge 1988, 649)

⁵ what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions. ... Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist... The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer. (AT 7:28-9; Descartes 1984, 1:19)

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