

Philosophy 101

Skepticism about Knowledge

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Knowledge of the External World

Descartes's Project

- What, if anything, is certain?

I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.

Descartes's Project

- Our knowledge consists of propositions
 - 'The last day of class is the 1st of May'
 - ' $2 + 2 = 4$ '
 - 'The person reading this sentence is not dreaming right now'

Descartes's Project

- We can 'know' these propositions with a greater or lesser degree of certainty
 - Restrict use of 'know' only for those propositions of whose truth we are certain — 'scientific knowledge' (*scientia*)
 - Logic
 - Mathematics
 - What else?

Epistemic Foundationalism

Epistemic Foundationalism: the structure of our knowledge is like a building—what we know can be divided into a foundation and a superstructure, the latter resting upon the former. Knowledge belonging to the foundation is basic. Knowledge belonging to the superstructure is nonbasic and depends on the foundation

Epistemic Foundationalism

- Some our knowledge is privileged or basic
- Our ability to know other things depend on this privileged and basic knowledge

Knowing the World

- We typically take ourselves as knowing a great number of things about the world
 - practical considerations *require* that we take ourselves to know a great number of things if we are to successfully engage with the world

Knowing the World

- Descartes's interest is not practical engagement with the world, but with whether we can be *really certain* concerning any of our beliefs about the world

The Method of Doubt

[To accomplish the goal of determining which of my judgments are absolutely certain] Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt (12)

The Method of Doubt

Three Kinds of Doxastic Attitude

We can take one of three different attitudes towards a proposition:

- ① Accept the proposition — Belief
- ② Deny the proposition — Disbelief
- ③ Suspend judgment — Neither believe nor disbelieve

The Method of Doubt

Three Kinds of Doxastic Attitude

- "God exists"
- ① Believe that God exists — theism
 - ② Deny that God exists — atheism
 - ③ Suspend judgment on God's existence — agnosticism

The Method of Doubt

DOUBT: We must suspend judgment concerning any proposition whose truth is not known with absolute certainty

The Method of Doubt

And to do this I will not need to run through [my beliefs] all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested (12)

The Method of Doubt

- ① Assume foundationalism about knowledge
- ② Apply DOUBT to the foundations of knowledge
- ③ See if any of the propositions constituting those foundations pass DOUBT

The Stages of Doubt

- ① Sense-Perception
- ② Dreams
- ③ An all-powerful deceiver

The Problem with Perception

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once (12)

The Problem with Perception

- The *possibility* of deception is enough to force us to suspend judgment concerning the truth of many claims made on the basis of sense-perception

The Problem with Perception

But what about the very best of perceptual conditions?

there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses — for example, that I am here sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on (13)

Dreams

- Even seemingly favorable perceptual cases must be doubted because we cannot prove that we aren't dreaming
 - there is no totally trustworthy criterion that can tell us we're awake rather than asleep

Dreams

Two Objections

- ① When we dream, our dreams consist of various imaginary things/events. But these images must be based on something, otherwise how could we imagine them?
- ② Wouldn't I still know basic logical & mathematical truths while asleep (e.g. ' $A=A$ '; ' $2+2=4$ ')?

The Evil Demon Argument

I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement (15).

The Evil Demon Argument

- ① I can sometimes be certain that I am perceiving a material object M only if I can sometimes be certain that M is causing my perceptual experience
- ② I can sometimes be certain that M is causing my experience only if it is not the case that any (every) perceptual experience caused by M could be caused in some other manner
- ③ Any (every) perceptual experience caused by M could be caused in some other manner (e.g. by an evil demon)
- ④ \therefore I can never be certain that I perceive M

The Cogito Argument

- If the possibility of massive deception by an evil demon means that I must deny the certainty that there is even a material world, is there anything of which I can be certain? Is it possible that even I don't exist?
 - No: "cogito ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I exist"
 - The cogito argument is immune to radical doubt
 - We can substitute anything for "think" — e.g. "doubt", "believe", "judge", etc.

The Cogito Argument

- Privileges first-person knowledge
- Privileges first-person access

The Cartesian Problem

- We can be sure of our *own* existence but can we be sure of the existence of anything else?
- Do we know what we're thinking better than we know anything in the objective world?
- How do we build out from the certainty of our own existence to the certainty of the existence of anything else, either other minds or other physical objects?