

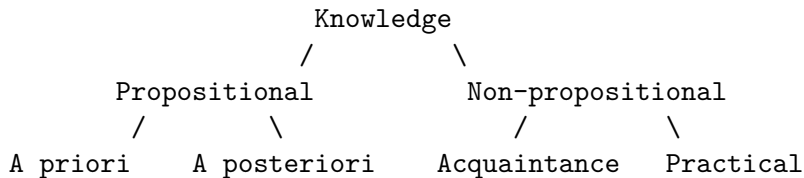
The Problem of Knowledge

What is knowledge? When can we be sure that our beliefs constitute knowledge?

NOTE:

1. There might be different kinds of knowledge.
2. These different forms may—or may not—have some features/aspects which make them all forms of the same thing (i.e., knowledge).

Kinds of Knowledge



- ▶ Propositional: knowledge *that* something is the case
- ▶ Non-propositional: knowledge not about that which is the case

Relations

Propositional knowledge \neq non-propositional knowledge.

1. I could know all true propositions about Jill, but not “know” (acquaintance) Jill.
2. I could know all of the true propositions about playing the violin, but not know (practical) how to play a violin
3. I could know (acquaintance) Jill and how to play a violin (practical) but not know (propositional) very many—if any—true propositions about Jill or violin playing.
4. Propositional knowledge is not the same thing as non-propositional knowledge.

Epistemology: Main Issue

What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for *propositional* knowledge?

- ▶ *necessary*: X is necessary for Y
 - ▶ gasoline is necessary for running a (gasoline) car
- ▶ *sufficient*: X guarantees (or is enough to cause) Y
 - ▶ rain is a sufficient condition for the ground being wet

Conditions for ANY account of knowledge?

Philosophers have traditionally argued that to know something, we must at least:

1. Believe it to be true: subjective requirement.
2. It must really be true: objective requirement.

Idea: (1) and (2) are jointly *necessary conditions* for knowledge (we MUST have them if we are to have knowledge). Are they *sufficient* for knowledge? (Probably not.)

Traditional Proposals for Knowledge

1. Knowledge = Perception (alone)
2. Knowledge = True Belief (TB)
3. Knowledge = TB + logos (an account or explanation)

Idea: These are jointly necessary and sufficient for knowledge.

Plato's allegory of the Cave

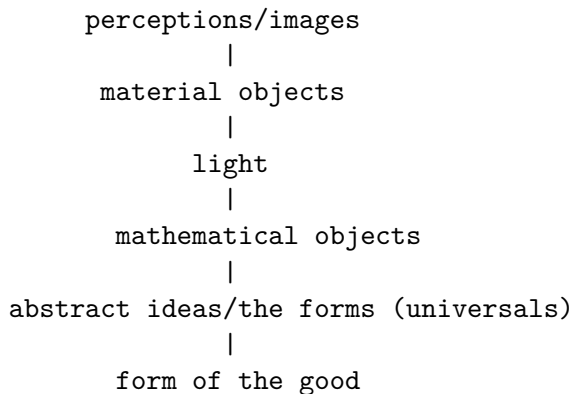


Figure 1: Plato's Cave

Plato's allegory of the Cave

- ▶ knowledge condition of ordinary human beings: mere appearance
- ▶ knowledge acquisition arduous, long process

Plato: Levels of Knowledge



Knowledge and Doubt

- ▶ Common Idea: We cannot know something to be true unless we have sufficiently proven that it cannot be doubted.

Source: René Descartes (1596-1650)

Descartes' Aims in the Mediations

In his "Preface to the Reader" D expresses interest in trying to defend the truth of two propositions:

1. God exists.
 2. The mind (soul) is a distinct substance from the body.
- ▶ PROBLEM: How can he "demonstratively prove" that these beliefs are true?
 - ▶ How can he "prove" that *any* belief is true (or false)?
 - ▶ Must find a *criterion of truth itself*.

Making the Obvious Problematic

Why should he start at such a razed point? His answer:

1. I find some rotten apples in a barrel, and I want to remove all of them to prevent the rot from spreading.
2. How would I proceed?
3. You should remove *all* of the apples, and check each one, and put them back one by one.

Hyperbolic Doubt

D adopts skepticism:

- ▶ provisionally
- ▶ instrumentally

Kinds of Scepticism

- ▶ global vs. local
- ▶ rational vs. attitudinal

Global vs Rational Scepticism

- ▶ **Global scepticism** =df: all possible knowledge claims are indefensible.
- ▶ **Local scepticism**: =df some knowledge claims are indefensible.

Global vs Rational Scepticism

- ▶ **Rational scepticism:** scepticism that is backed up by a reasoned argument.
- ▶ **Attitudinal scepticism:** an attitudinal refusal to believe anything to be true, no matter what arguments are presented.
- ▶ NOTE: Descartes wants to consider only *rational* scepticism.

What can be doubted?

In *Meditation I* Descartes sets out the various kinds of things that are reasonable to doubt:

1. Knowledge based on direct sense-experience.
2. Knowledge of general things derived from sense-experience.
3. Knowledge which is not based on direct sense-experience.

Descartes' Main Arguments for Skepticism

- ▶ The Dreaming Argument
- ▶ The Evil Demon Argument

The Dreaming Argument

1. I (Descartes) see my hand, and I believe that it is real.
2. In the past, I have been deceived; I thought I was experiencing real things when I was only dreaming.
3. I cannot be certain that I am not dreaming right now.
4. Hence, what I am experiencing now may not be as it appears to me.

The Evil Demon Argument

1. If God were supremely good, God would not deceive me.
2. I am deceived on particular occasions.
3. If it were inconsistent with God's goodness that I be deceived globally, it would equally be inconsistent locally.
4. Hence, it really is possible that God is not supremely good.
5. Therefore, it is possible that God (i.e., an evil demon) always deceives me about *everything* that I believe.

The Way Out of Skepticism

What he now needs to show is that:

1. God exists, and
2. God does not deceive us globally.

But how can he show these things when any argument that he might give for them, would seem to be directly refuted by the evil demon supposition.

The Way Out of Skepticism

- ▶ Descartes needs to find one certainty on which all others can be built: A 'criterion of truth.'
- ▶ He will proceed by offering proofs for each of the following:
The Existence of a Finite Self | The Criterion of Truth | The Existence of God | The Existence of the Material World

Descartes' Ground of Certainty

Descartes is in a state of global hyperbolic doubt. He claims that is certain of really only *one thing*:

- ▶ just the single fact that nothing is certain (Meditation 2).

Cogito, Ergo Sum Argument

I noticed that while I was trying to think everything false, it must needs be that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth, I am thinking, therefore I exist (cogito ergo sum) was so solid and secure that the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics could not overthrow it, I judged that I need not scruple to accept it as the first principle of [the] philosophy that I was seeking (from Discourse on the Method).

The Truth of the “Cogito”

- ▶ *Why does he accept the truth of the cogito?* Because it is something that he grasps clearly and distinctly. He cannot doubt it.

*I am certain that I am a thing that thinks. . . . Certainly in this first knowledge there is nothing that assures me of its truth, excepting the clear and distinct perception of that which I state. . . . and accordingly it seems to me that already I can establish as a general rule that all things which I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true.
(Med. III, para. 1)*

The Criterion of Truth

- ▶ D now has now established a general criterion of truth:

X is true iff I clearly and distinctly perceive it to be true.

- ▶ NOTE: This is a *rational* criterion (i.e., it does not come from sense experience).