 KNOWLEDGE: Descartes’ Reply
Lecture 10

Phil 1000, Fall 2008
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Questions

• Are you dreaming right now?
• Do you exist?
• How do you know?

Quick Review

• Epistemology
  – “Knowledge” denotes a privileged epistemic state, associated with
    certainty or indubitability.
  – Traditional account of knowledge: JTB

• Skeptic’s Challenge
  – Faulty senses – Appearance vs. Reality
  – Problem of the criterion – infinite regress
  – Anti-dogmatism – can never be absolutely certain (Unger)

• Descartes’ Reply to the Skeptical Challenge

Rene Descartes

• Born in France (1596-1650): “Father of Modern Philosophy”
  – Rationalism/Foundationalism
  – Mind/Body dualism, mechanical world

• Scientists-Mathematician
  – Cartesian coordinates
  – Analytic geometry

• “The book of nature is written in the language of
  mathematics” (Galileo Galilee)
  – Knowledge should be modeled on mathematics
  – Certain & axiomatic (built from simple axioms to complex
    propositions)

Method of Doubt

Descartes adopts a method that meets skeptical standards: he
will reject any item or source of knowledge if it is even
possible to doubt it (aka: hyperbolic doubt).

• Senses
  – Senses have deceived before

• Dreaming Conjecture
  – Might be dreaming, but mathematics is reliable

• Malicious Demon Conjecture
  – Any thought I have can be doubted because malicious demon

Cogito ergo sum

• According to Descartes, there is one thing that cannot be
doubted: his own existence.

• Cogito Argument:
  – Can’t be deceived about thinking I exist, because whenever I doubt or
    am deceived I exist
  – “I am, I exist is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or
    conceived in my mind.”

• Cannot doubt that I am thinking, even though I can doubt the
  content of my thinking.
  – Compare thinking “I am skiing” with “I exist”
Problems with the Cogito Argument

What is the “I” that exists?
Descartes: I exist only so long as I think, and I can doubt that I am a body; so I am essentially a thing that thinks: a thinking thing (substance).

• I exist only so long as I think?
  — No persistent “I”: problem for knowledge?

• A “thinking thing”?
  — Can only show there is thinking going on now, not that there is a thing that is thinking.

Foundationalism & Rationalism

• Foundationalism (Method of Doubt):
  — Knowledge must start with something certain, rest on a secure foundation.

• Rationalism (Wax Example):
  — Don’t know wax through sensible qualities, only through intelligible (rational) qualities: extension, malleability, etc.
  — “Clear and distinct ideas”, not sensory experience, gives certainty.

Two Cartesian Problems

• Solipsism
  — Problems with knowing that anyone/thing else exists.

• External World
  — Problems with knowing anything about the world.

Descartes’ Answer

• Resolve the Demon conjecture, the dreaming conjecture, and sensory illusions problems. How?

• God
  — I have this idea of a perfect being
  — The effect is at least as powerful as the cause
  — I’m imperfect...
  — God must exist, as a perfect being

• God and “clear and distinct ideas”
  — Deception is an imperfection... God is not deceiving me about my senses...
  — So long as I attend to “clear and distinct ideas”... I’m secure in trusting senses.

Where does this leave us?

• What kind of knowledge does Descartes leave us with?

• What about inductive-type of knowledge?

Summary

• Skeptical Challenge
• Descartes’ Reply
• Method of Doubt
• Cogito Argument
• Foundationalism and Rationalism
• Two Cartesian Problems

Next time: The Problem of Induction (Hume)
Think about this: how can you trust knowledge derived from empirical generalizations? From science?