

SESSION THREE

RATIONALISM, DOUBT, AND SOLIPSISM

Introduction to empiricism and rationalism

The distinction between appearance and reality is one that has concerned philosophers throughout the history of Western philosophy. In the previous lecture, we saw how Plato made such a distinction. In the realm of sensory experience, all we can obtain are beliefs that are in a sense correct because they reflect what appears to be the case. However, Plato rejected sensory experience as being inadequate for the acquisition of knowledge because beliefs acquired through such experience involve just an appearance of reality. By contrast, complete knowledge would entitle us to say that what we believe truly is the case. Plato believed that knowledge is acquired through the operations of the faculty of reason.

Questions concerning how we acquire knowledge, the nature of knowledge, how beliefs are justified, and the limits to our knowledge have played a dominant role within epistemology (epistemology being the branch of philosophy devoted to theorising about knowledge). In the history of philosophy, most notably the Early Modern period (usually thought to be the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; an extraordinary period of intellectual thought), we distinctly see two opposing positions within epistemology: rationalism and empiricism.

‘Rationalism’ designates a certain kind of theory of knowledge, according to which pure reason (reason independent of our experience) is the source of all genuine knowledge. (Knowledge is a priori if it is independent of experience.) ‘Empiricism’ designates a very different theory of knowledge. According to empiricism, all genuine knowledge is based on or derived from experience. (Knowledge a posteriori is based on experience. We will talk more about a priori and a posteriori knowledge below).

A priori / a posteriori, and analytic / synthetic

We should note that in our discussions of knowledge the type of knowledge we will be concerning ourselves with is propositional knowledge, that is, with what it is to know some proposition (some ‘p’), where if you know that p, then p must be true.

And in relation to propositions, we should be aware of the difference between analytic and synthetic propositions. A proposition is analytic if it is true or false by virtue of its meaning. Examples of analytic propositions include ‘All triangles have three sides’ and ‘All wives are

married'. These examples are true by definition. Their truth-value can be determined by examining the meaning of the words.

A proposition is synthetic if it is true or false not by virtue of its meaning, but by virtue of how that proposition relates to the way the world is. Examples of synthetic propositions include 'All men are unhappy', 'The Prime Minister is dishonest', and 'Roses are red'. The truth-value of these propositions cannot be determined by examining the meaning of the words. We have to look to the world itself to determine whether they are true.

In epistemology, a further contrast is made between a priori knowledge and a posteriori knowledge. Where our knowledge of the truth or falsity of a proposition does not depend on experience, that knowledge is said to be a priori. Take, for example, the proposition 'All triangles have three sides'. We know that this is true independent of experience. One of the characteristic features of such knowledge is necessity. Where, however, our knowledge of the truth or falsity of a proposition is dependent on experience, that knowledge is said to be a posteriori. Take, for example, the proposition 'All swans are white'. The truth or falsity of this proposition can only be established through experience (through which we would discover that the proposition is in fact false).

Applying the distinctions

In the light of the above distinctions, let us now return to empiricism and rationalism. We may think that the above distinctions map onto one another, so that a priori knowledge is always knowledge of analytic propositions, and a posteriori knowledge is always knowledge of synthetic propositions. But although all analytic statements are known a priori, it is far from clear, according to rationalists, that all synthetic statements are known a posteriori.

It is worth noting that Immanuel Kant, a philosopher who was dissatisfied with the method of both the rationalists and the empiricists, held that some beliefs are synthetic a priori – meaning that they are known without reference to experience even though they are not true purely by virtue of the meaning of the terms involved. Kant's best known example of a synthetic a priori proposition is ' $7 + 5 = 12$ '. He says that although we know this to be true in advance of experience, it is not analytic because the idea of '12' does not 'contain' the ideas of '5' and '7'. Put differently, our concept of '12' does not incorporate the concepts of '5' and '7' in the same way that the concept of 'wife' incorporates the concepts of 'female human being' and 'being married'. (But, for Kant, while we can make synthetic a priori claims, 'these claims are not about reality per se, but only about reality as it is experienced by beings such as ourselves. It is only because we can possess certain cognitive principles enabling us to experience the world that we can make certain claims a priori about the world as it appears' (Kuehn, 1999).)

Empiricists would deny this and would say that in order to determine whether a synthetic proposition is true, we have to rely on sense experience. It is important to be aware that most empiricists do not deny all a priori knowledge, for the truth of, for example, the proposition 'All wives are married' is known by virtue of the meaning of the words themselves (part of the meaning of 'wives' is that they are married). For empiricists that do not deny all a priori knowledge, all such knowledge would be knowledge of analytic, necessary statements (Law, 2007, p.70).

Hume, for example, was an empiricist who did not deny all a priori knowledge. For Hume, such knowledge would include knowledge of mathematics and of logical propositions because we do not need experience to determine truths in maths and logic. Indeed, in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) he distinguishes 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact', claiming '[Relations of Ideas] are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is any where existent in the universe' (Sec. 4, Part 1). By contrast, propositions concerning matters of fact (that is, contingent propositions about the world) are knowable a posteriori. Indeed, for Hume, as for other empiricists, where the truth of p is known by virtue of the way the world is then knowledge of p is derived through sense experience.

Descartes, scepticism, and foundations for knowledge

We saw in Plato's work that what counts as knowledge must be unchanging and stable. In the Early Modern period of philosophy, this idea was taken up most notably by Rene Descartes (1596-1650); a philosophy who is firmly in the rationalist camp and has been described as the 'Father of Modern Philosophy'. For Descartes, knowledge must be 'unshakeably certain' (Newman, 2010), and entails certainty of belief. In his *Discourse on the Method* (1637), he rejects the scholasticism that had dominated philosophy in the middle ages, but which he believed generated no agreement or certainty, and he suggests that it could be seen to lead to scepticism (for present purposes, a sceptic may be defined as someone who holds that nothing can be known for certain). He is also critical of the sciences, claiming that they do not rest on 'solid foundations' (*Discourse*, Part 1). However, he is inspired by mathematics 'because of the certainty of its demonstrations and the evidence of its reasoning' (*Discourse*, Part 1). Descartes aims to refute scepticism and to seek firm foundations for science (*Discourse*, Part 2). His metaphysics grounds his physics (and his other work in the natural sciences – see, for example, *Traite Du Monde*, 1633); philosophy is like a tree, with metaphysics as its roots, physics as its trunk, and medicine, mechanics and morals as its branches ('Letter Preface', in *Principles of Philosophy*, 1644). His *Discourse* is intended as the methodological preface to a set of scientific essays ('Of the Dioptric' (i.e., optics), 'Of Meteors' (i.e., meteorology), and 'Of Geometry').

Descartes constructs his own method for acquiring knowledge; this method is a sceptical one, which involves doubting everything that it is possible to doubt. Only when this has been done will it be possible, Descartes argues, to elucidate the foundations of knowledge, and thereby secure a structure upon which to build a stable and lasting knowledge. In the *Discourse* he

offers four methodological rules: (1) 'accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognise to be so'; (2) 'divide up each of the difficulties which I examined into as many parts as possible'; (3) 'carry on my reflections in due order, commencing with objects that were the most simple and easy to understand'; (4) 'make enumerations so complete and reviews so general that I should be certain of having omitted nothing' (Part 2). In employing this methodology Descartes aims to show that there is at least one piece of knowledge we are safely in possession of and cannot doubt.

Descartes' method of doubt

In his philosophical masterpiece, the *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (1641), and in reply to the writings of contemporary sceptics, such as the essayist Michel de Montaigne (who questions whether we can have certain knowledge and whose motto was 'Que sais-je?' ('What can I know?')), Descartes begins his project to construct a foundation for knowledge and to show that there is at least one piece of knowledge which is beyond doubt. In the 'First Meditation', he starts by claiming that he has been struck by the large number of false beliefs he has accepted since he was a child, and resolves to 'demolish' all his beliefs, and afterward to construct the foundations of knowledge for a stable and lasting science.

In order to do this, Descartes states that it would be rather impractical to go through all of one's beliefs and show each of them to be false. Rather, it is sufficient to bring into question those beliefs that form the 'foundation' for all the rest and show that they are not certain, rather than that they are false: 'Once the foundations of the 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' (Meditation 1). Attacking such basic principles means casting doubt on the evidence of the senses. The senses can deceive us, and as such many of the beliefs derived from them can be doubted. Doubt, he says, can be cast on other beliefs too, such as the belief that he is sitting by the fire in his dressing-gown — initially, he finds such a belief difficult to doubt, but after further reflection claims that it is possible that he is actually dreaming that he is sitting by the fire in his dressing-gown, when in fact he is in bed, asleep: 'there are many... 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... How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events — that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire — when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!' (Meditation 1). If we cannot always distinguish being awake from being asleep, then many of our beliefs can be thrown into doubt, even beliefs about our own bodies. Having sensations could be a product of our imagination, and even the sensation of having a body may be the product of our dream. We can also question our belief in 'corporeal nature in general': notions of extension, quantity, shape, size, etc.

Descartes goes on to distinguish between the physical sciences (physics, astronomy, etc.), which depend on composite notions (they conceive of objects as having specific sizes, shapes, etc.), and mathematics and logic (which do not depend on such notions). Knowledge

obtained from the physical sciences is doubtful because it depends on the study of things which can only be known via our perceptions. Mathematical knowledge is deemed superior because it is certain knowledge. This is because it is known a priori and does not depend upon the physical existence of the items mentioned in mathematical propositions. For example, even if I am asleep, two and two added together equals four, and a square always has four sides. Descartes is then very much committed to the mathematical over the physical sciences as certain sources of knowledge, and advocates doubting all things the existence of which cannot be demonstrated. Certain simple, abstract universal things, he argues, must be real; these are things through which our knowledge is not based on sense experience, but is based on reason alone (Meditation 1).

The evil demon argument

It would seem then, at this point in his Meditations, that Descartes has arrived at something that can be known for certain. However, he goes on to question whether even the abstract ‘truths’ of mathematics are really certain and can really be called ‘truths’. Imagine a scenario, says Descartes, in which there is an ‘all powerful God’. How could we tell that such a God has not deceived us into believing that the evidence of our senses is true? Likewise, how could we tell that we were not being deceived into believing what we take to be mathematical truths? Someone might argue that the existence of an omnipotent God guarantees that these beliefs are true, because ‘God has not desired that I should be thus deceived, for He is said to be supremely Good’ (Meditation 1). But suppose that ‘I am so imperfect as to deceive myself ever’. At this stage in the Meditations, Descartes is ‘constrained to confess that there is nothing in all that I formerly believed to be true, of which I cannot in some measure doubt, and that not merely through want of thought or through levity, but for reasons which are very powerful and maturely considered’ (Meditation 1). And even if we grant that an omnipotent God guarantees that my beliefs are true, suppose that ‘not God... but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed all his... energies in deceiving me’ (Meditation 1). I might then think that two and two added together equals four, but I am being fooled. We could further imagine that this evil genius or malicious demon is deceiving our senses so that we experience a world that does not exist.

The subjective self

In all of this, one thing remains certain. Even if Descartes is being deceived, he is still thinking. From the very existence of his ability to doubt, he deduces that his own conscious self must exist — in other words, in order to doubt, he must exist. For Descartes, the one thing he can be certain of is knowledge of his conscious self. He concludes, ‘So... after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it’ (Meditation 2). This is famously expressed in his Discourse (Part 4) as ‘I think, therefore I am’ (‘cogito, ergo sum’ (in Latin)). This is perceived clearly and distinctly (*Discourse*, Part 4), and anything that I perceive clearly and distinctly is true (Meditation 3).

What then, we may ask, is this 'I' that thinks? Descartes attempts to answer this in his 'Second Meditation'. On the one hand, we see ourselves as having certain bodily properties. The properties of the body are physical: it can be seen, touched, occupies a particular space, etc. But, on the other hand, there are also various activities in which humans engage, such as movement, willing, thinking, and so on. These latter actions he attributes to mind. Now, given the presence of the malicious demon, the body can be doubted. But the mind that thinks cannot be doubted, for it is what is doing the doubting. Continuing with his method of doubt, Descartes states, 'I do not now admit anything which is not necessarily true: to speak accurately I am not more than a thing that thinks, that is to say a mind or soul, or an understanding, or a reason' (Meditation 2). He thus holds that he is a mind, not that 'collection of members which we call the human body' (Meditation 2). Note that what is usually referred to as Descartes' 'mind-body dualism' (or Cartesian dualism) is thereby set firmly in place. He is, he claims, a mind, not a body: what is essential about him is that he is a thinking thing, and mind is a substance that is essentially different from body. This forms the basis for Descartes' view of knowledge. Certain knowledge derives from the 'I think'; that is, from a conception of the self as a mental substance that is different in kind from matter.

What is distinctive about mind is its ability to reason. We are first and foremost rational beings. Importantly, we use reason to gain knowledge of the world. Reason is the tool that can serve us in our search for certain knowledge. Of course, Descartes has established the Cogito as the foundation of his epistemology purely on the basis of introspection. Thus he holds that by contemplating what he is in isolation from the world he inhabits he can uncover a secure foundation for what can be known. He has placed the subjective self, or the 'I' that thinks, at the heart of his epistemology. What counts as knowledge comes from the certainty that the subjective self can attain through the act of introspection. This view implies a form of individualism with regard to knowledge and raises a number of important and problematic questions that will form the basis for the study exercises (see 'Study Exercises' attachment).

The problem of solipsism

Even if we go along with Descartes thus far, we still have to consider the problem of the external world, the existence of which Descartes has thrown into doubt. In light of the evil demon scenario, how is it possible for me to be certain of a world outside of my own mind? In order to answer this question, Descartes invokes the existence of God as the sole guarantor of the existence of the external world. His chief argument for the existence of God is the ontological argument. Descartes argues that he has, in his mind, a clear and distinct idea of God as a supreme and perfect being. Since Descartes himself is finite, he cannot himself be the origin of such an idea, so it must have come from somewhere else (Meditation 3). He further claims that existence is an attribute of God's perfection, since it is more perfect to exist than not to exist (Meditation 5). Therefore, God must exist. Since an essential component of God's perfection is that he is truthful, His existence enables Descartes to argue for knowledge of an external world. Since God is truthful, it follows that he would not allow us to be deceived with regard to the perceptions that we have by way of our senses. God's existence thereby serves to ensure that our perceptions of the external world are accurate.

We can raise a number of objections to Descartes' arguments here. Even if it is the case that in order for something to be perfect it must exist, it does not follow that there is something that exists which is perfect. Besides this, we could say that although perfection may be a special kind of property, like goodness, existence itself is not a property at all. But what is most problematic for Descartes' arguments is that if we can find convincing reasons for doubting that God's existence can be proven by rational argument, then we are not going to be convinced that He can serve as the foundational principle for our knowledge of the external world. This is a serious problem: since proof of God's existence is needed to establish the reality of something outside the self and His existence is the foundation for any attempt to do so, if this proof fails then Descartes' hopes for knowledge are seriously curtailed. We then become unable to be certain of anything more than our own existence as a thinking thing.

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