

SESSION THREE

RATIONALISM, DOUBT, AND SOLIPSISM

STUDY EXERCISES

Exercise 1

Consider the following questions:

- a. What is the difference between rationalism and empiricism?
- b. What is the difference between analytic propositions and synthetic propositions?
- c. Explain the distinction between *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge. Is there any other source of knowledge?

Exercise 2

Consider the following questions:

- a. Is Descartes justified in distrusting sense-perception?
- b. What are the aims of Descartes' method, and do you think that it could achieve them?

- c. For Descartes, the self-conscious, rational self is at the heart of his epistemology. Is it not possible that thought and knowledge might depend upon something other than self-consciousness?
- d. Do you think that, in the pursuit of certain knowledge, Descartes ignores the fact that humans are social creatures?
- e. Can we formulate a satisfactory conception of the self without paying attention to the fact that humans are social creatures? Relatedly, is it not possible that the self is at least partly constructed out of the broader aspects of human or what we could call ‘social reality’, and not just out of our isolated self-conscious thought? Are there not reasons for thinking of the self as being dependent upon an intricate web of relationships / social relations which extend beyond the self?

Exercise 3

Consider Nietzsche’s objection:

There are still harmless self-observers who believe that there are “immediate certainties”; for example, “I think”... When I analyze the process that is expressed in the sentence, “I think,” I find a whole series of daring assertions that would be difficult, perhaps impossible to prove; for example, that it is *I* who thinks, that there must necessarily be something that thinks, that thinking is an activity and an operation on the part of a being who is thought of as a cause, that there is an “ego,” and, finally, that it is already determined what is to be

designated by thinking – that I *know* what thinking is... In place of the “immediate certainty” which the people may believe in the case at hand, the philosopher thus finds a series of metaphysical questions presented to him (Fredrick Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 16).

Nietzsche here is raising problems concerning Descartes’ claim that it is impossible to doubt ‘I think’.

Could we doubt the very thing that Descartes said we could be certain of, and which he believed was impossible to doubt?

Exercise 4

This is less of an exercise and more something interesting to think about.

Consider the following (in Shaw’s *Logic and its Limits*, 1997):

Descartes says he will follow his method of doubt even if it leads him to claim that the only thing he can know for certain is that nothing is known for certain.

Let’s think about what this claim (i.e., that *it is known for certain that nothing is known for certain*) would commit us to if we accepted it:

- 'If it is known for certain that nothing is known for certain then it is true that nothing can be known for certain (for whatever is known for certain must be true)'.
- 'If it is known for certain that nothing is known for certain then something is known for certain (it is known for certain that nothing is known for certain)' (Shaw, 1997, p.183).

As Shaw states, 'the assumption leads to the claims that nothing is known for certain and that something is known for certain. It leads to a contradiction' (Shaw, *ibid.*, p.183).

What do you think? Do you think it leads to a contradiction? If it does it should be rejected.

Bibliography

- Nietzsche, Fredrick, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1986).
- Shaw, Patrick, *Logic and its Limits*, second edn. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).