

Week 5: Cartesian Skepticism I: The external world

“Cartesian” Skepticism a general variety of skepticism that relies on the observation that our judgments about a certain area (the external world, the future, other minds) are underdetermined by what intuitively seems to be our evidence for them (experience, the present, observable behavior) and thus brings to light the possibility that none of our judgments in these areas are justified.

In this case, it can seem that, given that our perceptions would be exactly the same even if we were dreaming, deceived by an evil demon, were a brain in a vat, then our perceptions seem to give us no justification for thinking that we are actually in contact with tables, chairs and an ‘external’ world rather than being in one of these other situations.

Don’t really doubt beliefs about external world etc, but philosophical question of how they can be justified.

Two responses to skepticism about the external world:

1. **Phenomenalism**: ‘reduce’ all statements about external world to statements about appearances, so there isn’t any gap between the evidence and what it is evidence for.

Such theories had, however, problems coming up with the purported reductions of talk about objects to talk about appearances. All complex statements about appearances that were supposed to capture the meaning of object statements turned out to require conditions that themselves referred to objects, which, in turn, would need to be reduced.

2. **‘Causal theories’**: argue that what we are talking about is determined by what causes our ideas and impressions, so it is impossible for our claims to be generally false. If, say, we were dreaming all our lives, then our language would refer to items in the dream world, and thus our claims about ‘the external world’ would turn out to be true after all.

Denies Descartes’ assumption that his thoughts would be exactly the same whether the external world existed or not.

Descartes

Born in 1596, died 1650

Joined the army in Holland and served in Germany.

While in Germany he had a dream that he was to create the unified science of human knowledge. Idea of unified science very unaristotelian

1634: *La Monde* (suppressed it because Galileo had been imprisoned for positing similar Copernican system)

Conciliatory attitude towards authorities (also evident in preface) which has led some to suspect that he was actually an atheist.

1637: *Discourse on Method, Optics and Geometry* (Cartesian coordinates).

1641: *Meditations*

1644: *Principles of philosophy*

1649: Joins court of Queen Christina of Sweden where the harsh weather and schedule (tutorials at 5am in her library) eventually killed him. (*Passions of the Soul* published).

2. Descartes was not a Skeptic

- He actually sees himself as a strong opponent of skepticism
- His strategy is to make as strong a case for skepticism as possible (meditation 1) and then show that even these doubts can be overcome.
- While he doesn't want skepticism, he doesn't want complacency either.
- We don't, in fact, doubt these things, but to really know that there is an external world etc. we have to have a **reason** for believing them, and most reasons we have have to do with our experience, but the relevant experience is always compatible with the alternative hypothesis.
- He is not saying that it turns out we knew everything all along, rather, we really knew nothing until we had gone through the process of the meditations. (see med V 435-6)
- Meditation one leaves one in a position such that, even if your beliefs turn out to be true, you technically do not know (are certain of) anything.
- Unfortunately, people have been more persuaded by the skeptical case of meditation one than they have of Descartes' answers in the next five.

From the Blackwell Companion

“Argument from Illusion” (23-27)

23: Standard argument given against ‘direct realism’

“Phenomenalism” (338-42)

“Problem of the External World” (381-6)

381: “if there is knowledge of the table at all, it is indirect knowledge, secured only if the propositions about the table may be inferred from propositions about the appearances.”

381: “PEW1 Can one have knowledge of propositions about objects and events in the external world based upon propositions which describe how the external world appears, i.e. upon appearances?”

382: “REPRESENTATIVE REALISM ... holds that whenever an object in the external world is perceived, some other object is also perceived, namely a sensum – a phenomenal entity of some sort.”

382: Argument from illusion

383: Analytical Phenomenalism

385: “Certainly we do not think that the proposition expressed by ‘The book appears worn and dusty and more than 200 years old’ entails that the observer directly perceives something that is worn and dusty and more than 200 years old”