



Knowledge Sources I

Dr. Josh Redstone

PHIL 1301B

17 March, 2020

The Issue Defined

- For much of this course we've focused on:
 - ***Metaphysics***: what exists, and what is it like?
 - ***Ontology***: The study of Being.
- Now we turn toward ***epistemology***:
 - The study of knowledge.
 - What is knowledge, and how do we acquire it?

The Issue Defined

- We've encountered *some* epistemological issues:
 - Plato's theory of knowledge, the Allegory of the Cave, etc.
 - We cannot answer metaphysical questions without dealing with epistemological issues.
- More generally, we can ask how we can contend with the ***Egocentric Predicament***:
 - We're "stuck" inside of our own egocentric, individual selves. We're unable to leave these bounds to see what things are *really* like versus how *they seem* to us.
 - This issue will be a recurrent theme as we discuss epistemology!

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- Descartes used a method of systematic doubt in order to establish *what he could know with certainty*.
- He uses this approach in the *Discourses on the Method*, and in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*.
 - He began by noting that much of his knowledge came from authority, e.g. religious authority, etc.
 - He found that he had no support, besides appeal to authority, for many of his beliefs.

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- Cont'd...
 - Next, Descartes began to question knowledge he gained from his senses.
 - He uses the example of beeswax in a solid state versus a liquid state.
 - If he were to rely solely on his senses, he would have to conclude that molten wax and solid wax were different substances.
 - He relied on his *understanding*, not his senses, to conclude the wax was of the same substance (in different form).

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- Cont'd...
 - Next, he turned toward his ordinary perception of the world – could he trust his perceptions?
 - He compares waking reality to dreaming.
 - One cannot usually tell when they are dreaming. Descartes reasoned that for all he knew, he might be dreaming as he sat by the fire and wrote the meditations!
 - *Can you tell for certain whether you're dreaming or awake right now?*

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- Cont'd...
 - Next, Descartes turned toward the certainty of mathematics.
 - Certainly, $2 + 2$ must always equal 4?
 - Certainly, the angles of a triangle must always add up to 180 degrees?
 - **No**, says Descartes. An “evil genius” could confuse us into thinking that $2 + 2 = 5$, for example, and we would have no way of knowing this was the case!
 - Therefore, even the certainty of mathematics can be doubted.

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- Cont'd...
 - Even if such an evil genius existed and was tricking us about everything – the nature of reality or the certainty of mathematics – there was one thing Descartes could be sure about.
 - As long as Descartes continues to doubt, or as long as he is being tricked by some evil genius, he can be certain that *he* exists.
 - "...I must finally conclude and maintain that this proposition: *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true every time I pronounce it or conceive of it in my mind."
 - *Cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am."
 - This dictum has become known as the ***Cogito***.

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- Cont'd...
 - Thus Descartes had arrived at knowledge that he thought he could be certain of: "I am, I exist."
 - But this knowledge is very limited!
 - Moreover, it introduces a few problems, one being *solipsism*.
 - *Solipsism* is the belief that one's own mind, and the contents of one's own mind, are the only things that can be known to exist.
 - Descartes needed to reason his way out of solipsism, so that he could be certain about more than just the *Cogito*.
 - Let's explore how he did so...

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- Beyond Solipsism:
 - Descartes argued for the existence of a benevolent God, one who would not deceive him like his so-called evil genius.
 - He uses several arguments, like the *Ontological Argument*.
 - Similar to St. Anselm's ontological argument.
 - He also argues that *clear and distinct ideas* are the only ideas upon which a thinking person should rely.
 - Since Descartes had a clear and distinct idea of God, he reasoned that the subject of this clear and distinct idea must really exist.
 - Clear and distinct ideas that exist in the understanding are reliable.
 - He further argues that as a finite, imperfect being, he couldn't have conceived of the concept of God, an infinite being, by himself.
 - The clear and distinct idea of God must come from God himself.

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- Beyond Solipsism:
 - Descartes argued that such ideas must have been present since birth, i.e. they are *innate*.
 - Innate knowledge is one of the key ideas that differentiates Rationalism from Empiricism.
 - On Empiricism, all knowledge comes from the senses.
 - However, Descartes is using circular reasoning here, i.e. he is begging the question:
 - He knows God exists because he has a clear and distinct idea of God.
 - God is the guarantor of the accuracy and trustworthiness of his clear and distinct ideas.
 - This is called the *Cartesian Circle*.

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- Free Will in a Clockwork Universe:
 - Descartes defined two different kinds of ***substance***:
 - ***Res Extensa***, i.e. extended substance (matter).
 - ***Res Cogitans***, i.e. thinking substance (mind).
 - Descartes was able to preserve Freedom of the Will because although extended substance was subject to the mechanical, deterministic laws of nature, thinking substance was not.
 - Thinking substance was, for Descartes, the immaterial, immortal soul created by God.
 - But in solving one problem, Descartes introduced another...

The Rationalist Approach of René Descartes

- ***The Mind-Body Problem:***

- Descartes had solved his epistemological problem: how could he be certain of his knowledge? What knowledge was reliable and what wasn't?
- But he introduced a metaphysical problem: how do mind (thinking, unextended substance) and matter (non-thinking, extended substance) interact?
 - In other words, how does the mind control the body? And, how does the body affect the mind?
- Descartes proposed the interaction took place in the Pineal Gland. However, he never explains how this interaction is supposed to work...
- We still grapple with this problem today (e.g., the Hard Problem of consciousness).

Responses to the Mind-Body Problem

- Our textbook mentions a few different responses to the *Mind-Body Problem*.
- We'll focus on two of them:
 - Baruch Spinoza's response.
 - Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's response.

Responses to the Mind-Body Problem

- Baruch Spinoza:
 - Recall: Spinoza was a pantheist.
 - Mind and matter are not two different substances.
 - Instead, thinking and extension are *two different **attributes** of the same substance*, i.e. God.
 - Indeed, according to Spinoza God is a single substance with infinite attributes.
 - Minds are finite modifications of God under the attribute of thought.
 - Bodies are finite modifications of God under the attribute of extension.

Responses to the Mind-Body Problem

- Baruch Spinoza:
 - Needless to say, many people found this problematic.
 - This implies God has a body, which was considered heresy.
 - Like his contemporary Descartes, Spinoza was labelled a heretic.
 - Descartes would complete much of his major works in the Netherlands, then Sweden. His works were banned by the Catholic church.
 - Likewise, Spinoza was excommunicated by his Jewish community. He was expelled from Amsterdam and finally settled in Den Hague.

Responses to the Mind-Body Problem

- Gottfried Leibniz:
 - Leibniz also reduced everything to a single substance: the *monad*.
 - Unextended, active, teleological substances that make up everything.
 - The Mind is a monad.
 - The body is a collection of monads.
 - God is the “monad of monads.”
 - Unlike the atoms of Democritus, monads are not points of matter. They are more like “zones of force,” or perhaps virtual particles from quantum mechanics.

Responses to the Mind-Body Problem

- Gottfried Leibniz:
 - Moreover, although monads are intrinsically related to one another, they don't really interact with one another in terms of direct cause and effect.
 - Rather, they merely appear to interact directly because of the ***preestablished harmony***, which Leibniz thinks was set up by God at the time of creation.
 - Imagine a game of billiards – can you explain the motion of the billiard balls using the idea of preestablished harmony?
 - This may seem strange. But Leibniz thought it addressed the mind-body problem, because there is no problem of explaining how the mind and body interact if there is no interaction!

British Empiricism

- Following Descartes, natural philosophers began to investigate the natural world using empirical means:
 - Culminated with the work of Isaac Newton and his *Principia Mathematica*.
 - This influenced a new movement in philosophy called **empiricism**.
 - Rather than focusing on ideas, or what is in the mind, as philosophers had done from the time of Plato and Aristotle up until Descartes and the Rationalists, empiricists focused on the world itself, as Newton had done.
 - We'll discuss John Locke and George Berkeley today.
 - Next time we'll focus on David Hume.

British Empiricism

- John Locke:
 - Began by clearing away the “rubbish” of rationalist innate ideas.
 - Two such ideas: principle of identity and the principle of non-contradiction.
 - If these ideas are innate, everyone should assent to them, even the very young or unintelligent. They should have ***universal assent***.
 - But Locke says, “...all children and idiots have not the least apprehension or thought of them.” No ***universal assent*** here...

British Empiricism

- John Locke:
 - No innate ideas. The mind is a *tabula rasa* at birth, i.e. a “blank slate” or “blank tablet.”
 - All ideas come from experience!
 - Locke also distinguishes between ideas of primary and secondary qualities, and thereby provided a bridge between our ideas about the the world and the world itself.
 - Recall Descartes and the beeswax: even though its form can change, the essence of the wax – whatever characteristic makes it wax – remains the same.
 - Locke called such characteristics *primary qualities*.

British Empiricism

- John Locke:
 - **Primary qualities** exist in objects themselves.
 - We can have **ideas of primary qualities**, and these ideas are close enough to the actual primary qualities that they provide an accurate representation of the world.
 - Primary qualities include:
 - Solidity (size)
 - Extension (takes up space)
 - Figure (shape)
 - Mobility (is it in motion or at rest?)
 - Number (quantity)

British Empiricism

- John Locke:
 - ***Secondary qualities*** do not exist in objects themselves but occur in the mind of the perceiver.
 - Secondary qualities can be thought of as subjective rather than objective.
 - Secondary qualities include:
 - Texture
 - Colour
 - Taste
 - Sound
 - Smell

British Empiricism

- George Berkeley:
 - Locke thought primary qualities existed in the world.
 - But Berkeley thought that if secondary qualities existed only in the mind, primary qualities must also exist only in the mind!
 - Where Locke was a *realist*, Berkeley was an *idealist*.
 - Things can only correspond to things like themselves. Thus, ideas can only correspond to other ideas, not to things in the world.

British Empiricism

- George Berkeley:
 - What is *really real* are ideas.
 - “To be is to be perceived,” and “not to be perceived is not to be.”
 - Then, how do things continue to exist in the absence of a perceiver?
 - I leave my car parked in a secluded area. No one else passes that way all day. When I return, the car still exists – but how?
 - The answer is the Author of Nature and Nature’s laws, i.e. God.

British Empiricism

- George Berkeley:
 - Posits that God, who is omnipresent and omnipotent, is always perceiving everything, everywhere, all the time.
 - Therefore it seems like there is an external world. But really, it's all just in the mind of God.
 - But Berkeley has broken the rules!
 - He did not arrive at this conclusion using the principles of empiricism!
 - He doesn't rely on knowledge from his senses to motivate his argument.
 - Instead his argument is deductive, like Descartes.
 - Is Berkeley really an empiricist, or a rationalist in disguise? What do *you* think?

Next Time...

- Next time, I'll discuss the final Empiricist, David Hume.
 - We'll discuss Hume's radical skepticism and its influence on Immanuel Kant and his "Copernican Revolution in Metaphysics."
 - Stay tuned for further updates about your essays and the final exam!