Epistemology

Theory of Knowledge
Epistemological Questions

• What is knowledge?
• What is the structure of knowledge?
• What particular things *can* I know?
• What particular things *do* I know?
  – Do I know x?
What does it mean to “know” something?

- Suppose I have a dream about 6 numbers, and in my dream these numbers are the winning lottery ticket numbers.
- Suppose that I wake up and believe that they will be the winning lottery numbers.
- Suppose that later that day, the winning numbers are announced on tv, and the winning numbers just happen to be the same numbers that were in my dream?
- Did I know that they were the correct numbers all along?
Classical Conception of Knowledge

• Knowledge = BTJ
• B = Belief
• T = True
• J = Justified

–I.e., I believe X because Y.
John Pollock

John Pollock gives an account of a man receiving a phone call from a friend's distressed wife, saying he was taken away by a strange group of men.

Eventually, the protagonist of the story discovers that a group of men have taken his friend and removed his brain, putting it into a vat and artificially stimulating it to give the illusion of actual experience. He is then told the same procedure was performed on him three months ago!
Are you a brain in a vat?
“Normal Sense Perception”
Brain in a vat perception
What am I *really* seeing?

- If you walk outside and see something, what are you seeing? (e.g. a tree)
Skepticism

• The view that genuine knowledge of the external world is not possible.
Rene Descartes

- 17\textsuperscript{th} century philosopher, mathematician, and scientist.
- Discovered/invented the “Cartesian Coordinate” system.
- Wanted to find a secure foundation for all of science.
- Decided to use skepticism as a way of eliminating dubious beliefs.
Meditations on First Philosophy: The First Meditation

Some years ago I was struck by how many false things I had believed, and by how doubtful was the structure of beliefs that I had based on them. I realized that if I wanted to establish anything in the sciences that was stable and likely to last, I needed—just once in my life—to demolish everything completely and start again from the foundations. ....

[T]oday .... I will devote myself, sincerely and without holding back, to demolishing my opinions. (-example tree)
What is “First Philosophy?”

• This is the name that the early modern philosophers gave for the most fundamental starting point for philosophical inquiry.
• It is the “starting point” from which all else follows.
• What discipline can be rightly called “First Philosophy?”
• Ancient & Medieval Philosophy:
  – Metaphysics.
• Modern Philosophy:
  – Epistemology.

  – Whatever the final questions (Y) happen to be, and whatever the final answers (Z) are, they will be of an EPISTEMOLOGICAL nature.
But How do I find the foundations of knowledge?

• Descartes’ Answer: Methodological Skepticism (In other words, methodological doubt).
  
  – Methodological Skepticism is a method which utilizes extreme forms of doubt so as to eliminate all of one’s false beliefs until the only beliefs that remain are undoubtable truths.
  
  – Skepticism is a philosophy which states that genuine knowledge is impossible.
  
  – Thus, Descartes seeks to defeat skepticism by using it as a tool to find the foundations of knowledge, and rebuild a new edifice of knowledge founded on the most certain of truths.
Sources of Error: Preconceived Childhood Beliefs

- Eating ice cream gives you nightmares.
- If you keep making funny faces, your face will stay like that permanently.
- It is bad luck to spill salt.

- We get so used to our preconceived notions, that believing and holding on to them becomes second nature.
Sources of Error: Pragmatic Concerns

• Our day to day lives require many practical considerations.
  – So many, that it becomes difficult to sustain abstract thinking for long periods of time.
Sources of Error: Sloppy Word & Concept Usage

• Our everyday common language contains imprecise words which attach to fuzzy concepts.
• Whenever the “average Joe” tries to talk about reality, he typically only does so in a surface level manner.
  – Examples:
    – Time
    – Matter
First Skeptical scenario: The dream argument

- This argument seeks to undermine all of our *particular* empirical beliefs.
- At the moment, we believe all kinds of particular things: E.g., I am sitting in an auditorium; I am listening to a philosophy lecture etc…
  - These particular beliefs are based on a series of perceptual images and sensations.
- But then again, I could have *the exact same* series of perceptual images and sensations if I were dreaming!
- Descartes *does* say however, that these kinds of skeptical scenarios cannot undermine our beliefs in things like shapes and colors (because even these things would be in a dream).
Second Skeptical scenario: The “God Argument”

• 1) Either my creator is, or is not, an all powerful God.
• 2) If He is all powerful, He could make me so that I (mistakenly) think I see material objects, even though no material objects exist.
• 3) If He is not all powerful, He might have created me incorrectly, so that I think I see material objects, even though none exist.
• 4) So, if there is or isn’t, an all powerful God, I should not trust my senses.
The difference between the first and second skeptical scenarios

- Notice that the first skeptical scenario (the “dream argument”) only seeks to undermine particular beliefs based on sense experience.

- The second scenario (the “God argument”), however, seeks to undermine our perceptual faculties as a whole!

- Note that we can be wrong about particular empirical beliefs (where we are, what time of day it is etc…) but still have reliable perceptual faculties as a whole.
  - The second argument goes one step further and attacks our perceptual faculties that produce our particular empirical beliefs.
A Different Version of the second skeptical scenario.

• But what if it doesn’t make sense to say that God would be actively deceiving us? He is omnibenevolent after all.

• Descartes says: that’s ok! Think of a similar yet different scenario where it isn’t God who is deceiving you, but an immensely powerful demon.

• Suppose that this demon has made it his soul purpose to thoroughly deceive us. Thus this modified version of the second argument ensures that the argument still goes through: we cannot trust our experiential faculties.
third skeptical scenario: Self-deception

• Why appeal to the possibility of other deceivers like mad scientists, demons, etc…?
• I could be just the kind of being who is constantly deceiving myself. Perhaps I am just a madman who is (unbeknownst to me) deceiving myself!
Rationalism vs Empiricism

- Rationalism: *Not all* knowledge ultimately rests on sense experience.
- At least some (maybe even all) knowledge claims can be justified independently of sense experience. (2+2=4 for example)

- Empiricism: All knowledge ultimately rests on sense experience.
- Our justification for claiming that we know something must *always* end with some kind of appeal to sense experience.
But what do empiricists/rationalists say about...

- **Mathematics?**
  - Empiricists: Because of its conceptual nature, mathematics can scarcely be said to be genuine knowledge of anything or Mathematics is actually justified through induction.
  - Rationalists: Mathematical truths are known 'innately' or through deduction.

- **Metaphysics? (What there is)**
  - Empiricists: Metaphysical knowledge must be restricted to the domain of the senses and nothing beyond.
  - Rationalists: Through reason alone, we can have knowledge of answers to metaphysical questions concerning freedom of the will, God's existence, and the relationship between mind and body.
Continued…

- **External World**
  - **Empiricists:** Experience (namely sense experience) is necessary for any sort of knowledge of the external world.
  - **Rationalists:** There are at least some truths about the world itself we may know through reason alone.