

Week 8 Notes

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Daniel W. Harris

1 The Structure of Our Knowledge

One of the central questions of epistemology deals with the issue of how our knowledge is structured. To ask how our knowledge is structured is to ask which parts of our knowledge depend on which other parts. A complete answer to this question would be like a map or a graph that takes each piece of knowledge and shows how it is justified in terms of the other knowledge and evidence that justifies it.

Let's take as an example my knowledge that I am a professor at Hunter College. How do I know this? What justifies this belief, making it an example of genuine *knowledge* rather than mere *opinion*? The answer is that this belief is justified by a collection of other beliefs and memories that I have. I remember getting the job, and I don't remember being fired. I believe that if I had lost the job, I would remember that. I believe that I have a key to my office in my pocket. I remember teaching at Hunter College just last week. I believe that I wouldn't be writing this right now if I weren't a professor at Hunter College. And so on. I probably have hundreds of beliefs and memories that all lend some support to my belief that I am a professor at Hunter College. Each one of those beliefs and memories is in turn supported by other beliefs and memories, and so on. The connections between a belief and the other beliefs and memories that justify it is what makes the latter count as evidence for the former. And having evidence for a belief is required for it to count as knowledge.

So, here's a big question that epistemologists have spent a lot of time debating: If I were to trace out the entire structure of all of my knowledge in this way, would I eventually arrive at some beliefs that are the most fundamental? In other words, are there some beliefs that can be justified no further—that serve as the foundation for

all of my other beliefs? Someone who answers “yes” is a *foundationalist*. Someone who answers “no” is a *coherentist*.

According to foundationalists, our knowledge has a hierarchical structure. The justification for everything we know can ultimately be traced to our most fundamental pieces of knowledge, which cannot be justified any further. There is a further question about what this fundamental knowledge consists in, of course. A foundationalist is an *empiricist* to the extent that they take our knowledge to rest on a foundation that arises from our sense experience. A foundationalist is a *rationalist* to the extent that they think that our knowledge rests on a foundation that is somehow independent of what we get from the senses. There is a spectrum of foundationalist positions in between, depending on what mixture of sensory and non-sensory knowledge is taken to make up our most basic, foundational knowledge. As we’ll see, Descartes is a foundationalist who occupies a position closer to the rationalist end of the spectrum. He thinks that our most basic knowledge is not sensory knowledge.

According to coherentists, tracing out the structure of knowledge will never lead to a most basic, or most foundational level. Instead, it will lead in circles. Part of what justifies my belief that I am a Hunter College professor is that I believe that I have a key to an office at Hunter College in my pocket, but part of what justifies my belief that I have this key is my belief that I am a Hunter College professor. Neither of these beliefs need be any closer to fundamental than the other. More generally: each of my beliefs may be justified by the fact that it fits in with everything else I believe. Whereas foundationalists think of knowledge as being structured as a hierarchy, coherentists think of knowledge as being structured as a web, with no top and no bottom, but only many connections pointing in all directions, and with each node having connections that eventually leading to most or all of the other nodes. We’ll return to coherentism below.

2 Descartes’ Foundationalist Project

As I have already mentioned, Descartes is a foundationalist. His goal in the *Meditations* is to clear away all of his knowledge (in Meditation One) and then rebuild it from scratch, in order, from the foundations up (in Meditations Two–Six). This was Descartes’ reason for considering skeptical arguments in Meditation One: he wanted to clear away all of his opinion so that he could start rebuilding knowledge from scratch.

Your job this week is to choose one of the three Meditations that are assigned readings, and to reconstruct Descartes' progress in that Meditation. This means that you should pick either Meditation Two, Three, or Four, and do the following three things:

- Clearly state what Descartes takes himself to know at the beginning of the meditation you've chosen.
- Clearly state what Descartes takes himself to have added to his knowledge by the end of the meditation you've chosen.
- Explain the steps in Descartes' reasoning that takes in order to make his way from the former to the latter.

This task requires developing two philosophical skills.

First, you have to read the text very carefully, and recognize which parts of it are most important. This can be more difficult than it sounds, especially with a text as rich as the *Meditations*. Descartes does many things in each meditation. Sometimes he repeats the same point in different ways, sometimes he changes back and forth between different voices in order to argue with himself, and sometimes he throws in rhetorical flourishes that drive his points home, but don't actually advance his argument. You need to recognize these tricks, and learn to pay attention only to the aspects of the text that move the plot forward. Our other reading for this week, by Jim Pryor, gives you some instructions about how to read philosophy carefully.

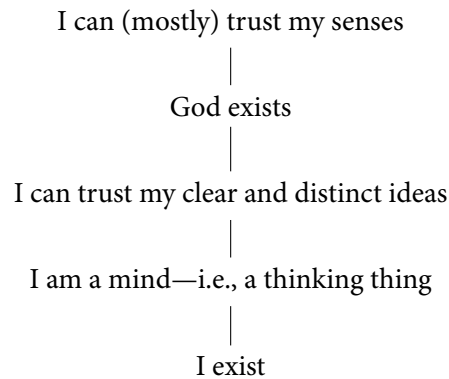
Your second task is to reconstruct Descartes' argument. A reconstruction is a kind of summary that pays special attention to argument structure. So, when summarizing your meditation, you should make sure to explain each central move that Descartes makes toward building up his knowledge, and the reasons he gives for making that move. Your reconstruction should make Descartes' argument seem as reasonable as you can. (In a longer assignment, you might also have to critique an argument, but you always have to reconstruct it in a way that makes it seem as strong as possible first.)

The Second, Third, and Fourth Meditations are incredibly rich texts. It would not be an exaggeration to say that much of the philosophy of the last 376 years can be understood as a series of responses to Descartes' ideas. Even today, it is common for a philosopher to say that they have uncovered some pernicious "Cartesian as-

sumption” in some piece of philosophy that they’re criticizing.¹ Our goal this week is not to dig into every important detail of Descartes text, but to understand its overall structure, and how it exemplifies the idea of foundationalist epistemology. We will return to themes raised by Descartes throughout the rest of the semester.

3 How could a Coherentist Respond to Skepticism?

In the end, Descartes builds up a foundationalist structure that looks (very) roughly like this (though with much more detail):



Here, the claims lower down are more fundamental in the hierarchical structure of Descartes’ knowledge. By the time he reaches the topmost claim, he takes himself to have defeated the most pernicious forms of skepticism. This, in brief, summarizes Descartes’ strategy for defeating the skeptical arguments that he raises in Meditation One.

How might a non-foundationalist—and, in particular, a coherentist—respond to Descartes’ strategy. The following is one possible response.

First, a coherentist might suggest a radically different kind of response to Descartes’ skeptical arguments. Consider, for example, the dream argument, which begins with the following premise:

- (1) I might be dreaming right now

¹“Cartesian” is the adjective derived from “Descartes”. You may have heard it when learning about Cartesian coordinate systems in geometry. Descartes was one of the inventors of these systems. In addition to being a philosopher, he was also an influential mathematician and scientist.

How, the coherentist says, do we know that (1) is true? Well, we take it to be true because of our beliefs about our past experiences. We have had experiences of dreams, and experiences of waking up from dreams, and experiences of realizing that what we dreamt wasn't real, and so on. But each of these experiences was itself a *sensory* experience—an experience in which we got some new information through the senses. So, the very premise that Descartes uses to show that we can't trust anything that we learn from the senses is itself dependent on things that we've learned from our senses. And if we can't trust information from the senses, then we don't really know that there might be such things as dreams at all, since we learned about them from the senses.

The same goes for most other skeptical arguments. The idea that we might be brains in vats and the idea that we might be computer simulations both depend on all sorts of things that we know about brains and computers that we have learned using our senses, at least in part. So if these ideas undermine everything that we've learned from our senses, they also undermine themselves as well. This line of thought fits well with coherentism, because it suggests that there is no single piece of knowledge that we can take away in order to undermine all of the rest of our knowledge. Knowledge is justified, according to the coherentist, by how it fits with everything else we know. And that includes our knowledge about the possibility that we might be dreaming or that we might be living in a computer simulation. If the rest of our knowledge goes, then this knowledge goes with it. This makes skeptical arguments seem self-undermining, or at least paradoxical in some way.

Consider, in a bit more detail, the process by which we usually realize that something we dreamt wasn't real. Most of us have had this experience. You dream that you finally asked your crush out on a date, and wake up feeling great about it, only to realize a half hour later in the shower that this event didn't actually take place. Or you dream about quitting your job in a rage, and wake up feeling stressed out and kicking yourself for acting so rashly, only to realize, with relief, that it was just a dream. These are the kinds of experiences that lead Descartes to conclude that he could be dreaming. So, what is the thought process that leads us to conclude that the thing we dreamt *wasn't* real in these cases?

Usually, what happens is that we realize that the dream memory just doesn't fit in with all of our other beliefs and memories. We think things like "I would never actually do that, would I?" And this thought is itself justified by many of our other experiences about our past behavior. Or we think things like "Wait, when would I have quit my job? It's Monday, and I didn't work yesterday, right?" What we're

noticing in cases like this is that there is a conflict between the dream memory and all of our other beliefs and memories. When we notice that our beliefs conflict in this way, we need to do something to repair the system. This means that we need to find one or more beliefs to get rid of, in order to make the system coherent again. In these cases, the easiest way to do that is to conclude that the dream memory is a fake one, and to get rid of any beliefs that are based on it. And this is what we do.

Notice that this process makes a lot of sense from the point of view of coherentism. According to that theory, what justifies a belief is that it coheres with our other beliefs. So, when we notice that a belief doesn't cohere—that it doesn't make sense alongside the others—we should conclude that it is not justified and get rid of it. And this is what we do!

According to some coherentists, this is likewise what we should do with the idea that we might be dreaming, or with the belief that we could be in a computer simulation. When we put this beliefs alongside our other beliefs, including the belief that we know that we have hands, a body, etc., incoherence ensues. We can't know all of these things. And so we have to get rid of something. Descartes' skeptical arguments suggest that we should get rid of everything but the belief that we might be in a dream or a simulation. But the coherentist could reply: why get rid of all of that when we could make our beliefs coherent just by getting rid of this one, single belief that we might be in a dream or a simulation? In practice, this *is* the belief that we get rid of. And coherentism gives us some reason for thinking that we may be justified in doing so.

This has been nothing more than a brief introduction to the debate between foundationalism and coherentism. This debate has gone on for a long time, and it will continue. (And of course, the debate gets much more nuanced and complex than we can get into in an introductory course.) It represents one of the most basic disagreements about the nature of knowledge, and much else in epistemology is affected by how we resolve it.