

Notes on Descartes reconstructions

PHIL 13195

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September 4, 2007

Abbreviations on papers:

- WC: You presented an argument for the wrong conclusion.
- IV: Your argument is invalid.
- XP: Your argument contains extra premises, which are playing no role in the argument.

A few thoughts about common problems:

1. Your premises should be claims that you think Descartes thinks are true. So, for example, you should not have a premise which says "An evil demon is deceiving us" unless you think that Descartes believes that an evil demon is deceiving him. (He didn't.)
2. The point of writing an argument in premise/conclusion form is to separate the different assumptions at work in the argument. So, if you have one premise which makes three or four different points, it would be better to separate it into several premises.
3. It is rare to have an argument with, say, four or more premises which combine to yield a conclusion without first yielding certain intermediate conclusions. So, if you have a longish argument, probably some of what you are calling premises are in fact conclusions drawn from previous premises. In that case, you should try to indicate this (as we discussed last time) via numbers at the end of the intermediate conclusions, saying which premises led to them.

Some sample student arguments:

1. Our knowledge of corporeal bodies stems from our sense perceptions.
2. The dream state produces false perceptions of the senses that we may confuse with our perceptions in the waking state.
3. If we cannot distinguish with certainty between our dreams and sense perceptions, then we cannot trust sense perception as a basis for knowledge.
4. No definite signs distinguish our dreams from our sense perceptions.
5. We cannot trust sense perception as a basis for knowledge. (3,4)
6. If we cannot trust sense perception as a basis for knowledge, then we do not know anything about that which relies on our sense perception.

C. We do not know anything about corporeal bodies. (1,5,6)

1. My understanding of reality is based on that which I perceive through my senses.
2. If my senses are deceived, I cannot know anything about the world around me.
3. For my senses to be deceived is for them to send me false information without me knowing it.
4. When I dream, my senses send me information that is false.
5. When I am awake, I perceive myself as awake.
6. When I am asleep, I still perceive myself as awake.
7. I cannot know whether I am awake or asleep. (5,6)
8. I cannot know whether the information my senses send me is false. (4,7)
9. My senses are deceived. (3,8)

C. I cannot know anything about the world around me. (2,9)