

PHL 370 - Metaphysics

Notes on VanCleve's "Conceivability and the Cartesian Argument for Dualism"

D's argument for dualism is "more cogent than is commonly supposed".

A reconstruction of the *Meditations* argument:

- 1) It is conceivable for me that (I think and nothing is extended) (Premiss)
- 2) Whatever is conceivable for me is possible (Premiss)
- 3) It is possible that (I think and nothing is extended) (1,2)
- 4) It is necessary that (If I think, then I exist) (Premiss)
- 5) It is possible that (I exist and I am unextended) (3, 4)
- 6) If x is essentially F, then it is not possible that (x exists and x is not F) (Premiss)
- 7) I am not essentially extended (5, 6)
- 8) All extended things are essentially extended (Premiss)
- 9) I am not an extended thing (7, 8)

Only premisses 1) and 2) are potentially subject to serious dispute because of what they say about conceivability and possibility.

Common theme in 17th & 18th century Philosophy: Whatever is conceivable is possible. But could something humanly conceivable be impossible? Depends on how “conceivable” is defined.

- a) entertainable
- b) believable
- c) imaginable (form an accurate picture of?) - Vague.

Is imagining C without E just imagining C without imagining E?

A general objection to conceivability as the measure of possibility:

Let G stand for “Every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two primes”

Either necessarily G or necessarily not-G. Some say G is conceivable. Others say not-G is conceivable. One of the alternatives is impossible. So, for some people, an impossible proposition is conceivable (and therefore is “possible”).

Is there a sense of “conceivable” on which it is false that both G and not-G are conceivable?

Consider: “just seeing” that-p. For example, just seeing that $2+3=5$.

This is what many philosophers have called an act of (intellectual) intuition.

Given this concept, one may also consider “just seeing” that (p is possible).

Let seeing that p is possible = p’s being conceivable . Two kinds of conceivability can then be distinguished.

1) P is strongly conceivable for S iff S sees that p is possible

The right side of 1) does not analytically entail that p is possible. But might not seeing that p is possible constitute good evidence for, or guarantee, that p is possible?

In this sense of “possible” no one really sees that G is possible or that not-G is possible. What is really going on in that case is that they do not see that G is impossible or they do not see that not-G is impossible

2) if P is a proposition that S is considering, then P is weakly conceivable for S iff S does not see that p is impossible.

The Goldbach example destroys weak conceivability as a mark of possibility but does not challenge the credentials of strong conceivability. Still, there are examples that do show that what is strongly conceivable for one person may be shown false or impossible by another.

Cantor's "axiom": For any predicate P, there is a set whose members are just those things that satisfy P.

According to Georg Cantor, this principle is both possible and true.

Russell showed that it leads to a contradiction and, so, that it is impossible.

Is there a grade of intuition that is entirely reliable whereas other grades of intuition are not entirely reliable? How is one to know that he/she is having an intuition of the kind that is entirely reliable? Van Cleve thinks this would be a bad objection because it assumes that one can know that p by intuition only if one recognizes that he/she is having an intuition of the right kind.

But Van Cleve concedes the fallibility of intuition, anyway. He then argues that this concession does not end the matter.

Not infallible is not the same as epistemically worthless

Suggestion:

If S intuits that p then this fact is a prima facie justifier for S of believing p

In other words,

Necessarily, anyone who intuits that p is, in the absence of defeaters, justified in believing p

According to this idea, Cantor would no longer have been justified in believing his axiom had he learned of Russell's Paradox.

Thus, for Descartes's premiss 2) substitute

2') Whatever is strongly conceivable for me is something I am prima facie justified in believing to be possible.

Then, the first two premisses do not entail the third, but they do entail that the arguer is prima facie justified in believing that the third statement is true.

One who objects to the weakened conceivability premiss (2') is indulging in a general skepticism. If intuition is not even a prima facie justifier of belief, then how do we even know that $2+3=5$?