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Introduction to Philosophy

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Questions Week 2

Descartes, "New Foundations for Knowledge", pp. 21-25

1. List and explain three of the reasons Descartes gives for doubting what he thought he knew. One reason Descartes gives for doubting what he thought he knew is that he had been taught so much false information that he must doubt everything he thought he once knew and start over to build his foundation on truth. Another reason he gives is that if he wants to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last he must doubt his previous knowledge to start over. He believed that everything he had learned in school that despite being taught for so many years, contained no points that were not disputed and therefore doubtful. He explains that nothing solid could be built on such shaky foundations, so he concurs that he must go through the foundations of his knowledge and doubt their existence to discover what truly exists.

2. While still in the realm of doubt, what does Descartes say about the general sciences and mathematics and their place in our knowledge? He says that psychics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things are doubtful. However, he says that arithmetic, geometry, and other mathematical subjects, which deal with only the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable.

3. What does Descartes ultimately argue is a strong and unshakeable basis for knowledge? How does he make his case? Descartes ultimately concludes with the proposition that he certainly exists. Descartes came to this conclusion by concurring that there is a deceiver of supreme power who is intentionally deceiving him. Therefore, if there is a supreme power deceiving him then he must undoubtedly exist. He says he will let him deceive him as much as

the power can because then he can never bring it about that he is nothing as long as he believes that he is something.

Locke, "The Senses as the Basis for Knowledge", pp. 25-31

1. Explain some of the reasons Locke believes there are no innate ideas. It is believed that innate ideas come from certain principles both speculative and practical universally agreed upon by all mankind that is received in their first beings. Locke says that even if universal assent were established it would not prove innateness because if there can be any other way shown how men may come to that universal agreement in the things they do consent to then those concepts would no longer be innate, which he believes can be done. He also gives the reason that these supposedly innate principles are so far from having a universal assent because there is a great part of mankind to which they are not known.

2. What is the significance of "children" and "idiots" in Locke's argument? Locke cites the cases of idiots and children when he disputes the concept of universal assent because they both do not have the apprehension or thought of innate ideas. He explains that the concept of innate ideas means imprinting something on the mind without the mind's perception of it, which if that is true, then because children and idiots have souls and minds with those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive them, and assent to these truths. But, since they do not, it is evident that there are no such impressions.

3. Explain the concept of the "tabula rasa". Locke compares the mind to a tabula rasa, which means a blank sheet of white paper devoid of all characters without any ideas. He questions how it can be furnished and where all the materials of reason and knowledge are. He responds to this rhetorical question with the word "experience." because he believes that all our knowledge is founded and derives from itself. He believes that our observations from either external objects or internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves are what supply our understandings with all the materials of thinking.

4. Describe in your own words what Locke means by "sensation" and "reflection" in describing the acquisition of knowledge. From my perspective, what Locke means by sensation in terms of acquiring knowledge is the concept that our senses create certain perceptions of things, which lead to our varying ideas and concepts. This source of ideas that

depends on our senses and leads to understanding is what he calls sensation. He also thinks that some understanding of ideas comes from the operations of our own minds within us based on perceptions as it utilizes the ideas it has. By this, he means that as our minds dwell on understanding sets of ideas it creates thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, and so forth. He believes that these sources of ideas every person has completely in themselves, as he calls it internal sense. He further states that this is the concept of “reflection”, which is the process of ideas forming due to the mind reflecting on its own operations within itself. These two concepts are his understanding of where all our ideas take their beginnings.