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Reading Question 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.

1. **The Evil Demon Hypothesis:** Descartes suggests that an evil demon could be manipulating his perceptions and beliefs, leading him to believe things that are false.

2. **The Dream Argument:** Descartes argues that when we dream, our senses can present us with false information, leading us to believe things that are not real. By extension, this makes him question the accuracy of all his senses.

3. **The argument from Illusion:** Descartes argues that our sense can sometime be deceived by illusions, causing us to believe things that are not true. For example, a straight stick in water can appear bent. He reasons that this kind of deception might not be limited to just our sense of sight and could extend to all our sense, leading him to doubt the accuracy of his perceptions.

2. While still in the realm of doubt, what does Descartes say about the general sciences and mathematics and their place in our knowledge?

While still in a state of doubt, Descartes views the general sciences and mathematics as the only certain forms of knowledge. He asserts that the truths of mathematics and geometry are indubitable, as they are deduced through clear and distinct reasoning and are not dependent on the senses. In contrast, he considers the sciences, such as physics, astronomy, and medicine, as prone to error due to their reliance on observations and experiments that can be misleading. However, he does believe that the sciences can provide a high degree of probability, but not a certainty. In his view, mathematics and geometry provide a firm foundation for scientific inquiry, as they allow us to understand and explain the natural world through the use of mathematical models and laws.

3. What does Descartes ultimately argue is a strong and unshakeable basis for knowledge? How does he make his case?

Descartes ultimately argues that the only strong and unshakeable basis for knowledge is clear and distinct reasoning. He makes his case by first doubting everything he had previously believed, and then searching for a single indubitable truth. He finally arrives at the conclusion that he exists as a thinking thing, and that this knowledge can only be gained through intuition and reasoning, not through the senses. He argues that his own existence as a thinking thing provides a firm foundation for knowledge and that all other truths can be deduced from this starting point through clear and distinct reasoning. Descartes argues that the very act of doubting one's own existence proves that one must exist in order to doubt. He asserts that this indubitable truth provides a strong foundation for further knowledge and inquiry, as it allows us to build a system of knowledge based on clear and distinct reasoning, rather than on uncertain and potentially deceptive sense-based information.

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

1. Explain some of the reasons Locke believes there are no innate ideas.

The argument from doubt: Locke argues that if there were innate ideas, then everyone would have a clear and distinct knowledge of them. However, since many people disagree on basic ideas and concepts, it is unlikely that these ideas are innate. The argument from diversity: Locke points out that people from different cultures and backgrounds have very different beliefs and ideas, which would not be possible if these ideas were innate and universal. The argument from language: Locke argues that language, which is a crucial aspect of human thought and knowledge, is not innate, but is learned through experience and exposure to other people. If ideas were innate, then they would not require the use of language to be understood.

2. What is the significance of "children" and "idiots" in Locke's argument?

1. Children: Locke observes that children are born without any ideas and gradually acquire them through experience and exposure to the world around them. He argues that if ideas were innate, then children would already have them at birth, and would not need to learn and develop them over time.
2. Idiots: Locke also notes that some people, such as "idiots," may be born with cognitive disabilities that prevent them from having a full range of ideas. If ideas were innate, then these people would still have them, despite their cognitive limitations. However, since this is not the case, Locke concludes that ideas cannot be innate.

3. Explain the concept of the "tabula rasa".

The concept of the "tabula rasa" (Latin for "blank slate") is a central idea in the philosophy of John Locke and refers to the idea that the mind is initially blank or empty at birth and is gradually filled with knowledge and experiences through sensory information and exposure to the world. According to Locke, the mind does not possess any innate ideas but instead acquires all of its knowledge and beliefs through experience and observation.

4. Describe in your own words what Locke means by "sensation" and "reflection" in describing the acquisition of knowledge.

"Sensation" refers to the process by which we acquire information from our senses - sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Through direct interaction with the physical world, this information is then used to form basic ideas about the properties of objects and their qualities, such as shape, size, color, texture, and taste.

"Reflection" refers to the process of introspection and self-awareness, in which we reflect on our own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Through reflection, we are able to form more complex and abstract ideas, such as concepts of cause and effect, morality, and mathematics. Reflection also allows us to compare, contrast, and analyze our experiences, and to use our reason to make judgments and draw conclusions.