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Intro to Philosophy

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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.

- The possibility of deception by the senses: Descartes believed that our senses can be misleading and that we cannot always trust them to give us accurate information. He argues that even what we perceive as clear and distinct ideas may be deceptive and that our senses can be deceived by illusions, dreams, and other similar experiences.
- Influence of past beliefs and opinions: Descartes believed that our beliefs and opinions are often influenced by what we have been taught in the past, and that these beliefs may not necessarily be true. He argues that we need to examine our beliefs critically and rigorously in order to determine what is actually true and what is not.
- The existence of error and mistakes: Descartes believed that it is possible to make mistakes in reasoning and that this is a source of doubt. He argues that even the most seemingly obvious truths may be called into question, and that we need to critically examine all of our beliefs in order to arrive at a certain and indubitable foundation for knowledge.

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

Descartes concludes that mathematics is a certain and indubitable form of knowledge, and that it provides a solid foundation for scientific inquiry. He believes that the truths of mathematics are clear, distinct, and indubitable, and that they can be logically deduced from first principles. As a result, Descartes argues that mathematics should play a central role in the pursuit of knowledge, and that the methods of mathematical reasoning can be applied to other areas of inquiry to help ensure that our beliefs are based on certain indubitable truths.

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 existence of a thinking self is a strong and unshakeable basis for knowledge. He makes his case through his famous philosophical argument, known as “Cogito, ergo sum” or “I think therefore I am”. In this argument, Descartes asserts that the very act of doubting one’s own existence implies the existence of a thinking self, since it is the self that is doing the doubting.

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 variability: Locke argues that if there were innate ideas, then all people should have the same ideas, since they would have the same innate sources of knowledge. However, he observed that people have different beliefs and opinions, even on seemingly fundamental and universal ideas, which suggests that knowledge cannot be innate.
- The argument from the blank slate: Locke argues that the mind is like a blank slate at birth, and that all of our knowledge and ideas are derived from experience and our sensory interactions with the world. He argues that there is no evidence to suggest that the mind is pre-populated with innate ideas, and that all of our beliefs and knowledge must be learned through experience.

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

He uses children and idiots as examples of individuals who are in a state of innocence and have not yet developed their own beliefs and ideas. By using these examples, Locke is making the point that all individuals have the ability to form their own understanding of the world and that the development of one’s ideas and beliefs is not determined by innate factors.

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

Tabula rasa refers to the idea that individuals are born without any innate knowledge or predispositions, and that all of their experiences, ideas, and knowledge are derived solely from their sense perceptions and experiences.

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

“Sensation” refers to the direct, immediate experiences of the senses, such as seeing, hearing, touching, and smelling. Sensory information is data received by the mind, and provides the basis for the acquisition of knowledge about the world. “Reflection” refers to the process by which the mind takes the raw data of sensation and processes it into ideas and concepts. This includes the processes of attention, memory, judgment, and reasoning, which are used to form our understanding of the world.