

Alex Camilo

Professor Sanchez

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Epistemology Paper

René Descartes was a French philosopher who is considered one of the founders of modern Western philosophy. He believed that knowledge is acquired through reason and deduction, and he is famous for his dictum, "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am). In this paper, I will discuss his views on knowledge and how we attain it.

Descartes' epistemology begins with the recognition that human knowledge is often uncertain and unreliable. He believed that the only way to achieve certain knowledge is to start from a position of radical doubt and skepticism. In other words, he believed that we should question everything we think we know and examine each belief individually to determine whether it is true or not.

To achieve this goal, Descartes devised a method of doubt that involves doubting everything that can be doubted until we arrive at a foundation of knowledge that is indubitable. This foundation of knowledge is based on the idea that there are certain things that we can know with absolute certainty, such as the fact that we exist as thinking beings.

Descartes argued that our senses can deceive us and that we cannot trust them to provide us with certain knowledge. He also argued that our beliefs are often influenced by our upbringing, culture, and personal biases, which further undermines their reliability. Therefore, he believed that we need to rely on reason and deduction to attain certain knowledge.

Descartes believed that the key to attaining certain knowledge is to engage in a process of radical doubt and skepticism. He argued that we should doubt everything that can be doubted, including our own existence, until we arrive at a foundation of knowledge that is indubitable. This foundation of knowledge is based on the idea that we exist as thinking beings and that this is the only thing, we can be certain of.

Descartes' method of doubt is often criticized for being too extreme and for undermining the validity of our everyday experiences and beliefs. However, Descartes responded to this criticism by arguing that his method of doubt is not meant to be applied to everyday life but rather to the realm of philosophical inquiry. He believed that his method of doubt is a tool that can be used to uncover certain knowledge in a systematic and rigorous way.

One of the main criticisms of Descartes' method of doubt is that it is ultimately circular, as it relies on the very thing it seeks to doubt, namely, reason and deduction. In response to this criticism, Descartes argued that reason and deduction are necessary tools for attaining certain knowledge, and that they are not subject to doubt in the same way that our beliefs and perceptions are.

Another criticism of Descartes' views on knowledge is that they are too individualistic and do not consider the social and cultural context in which knowledge is produced. This criticism is based on the idea that knowledge is not simply a matter of individual cognition but is also shaped by the social and cultural norms of a given community.

In conclusion, Descartes' views on knowledge and how we attain it are based on the idea that we should start from a position of radical doubt and skepticism and rely on reason and deduction to achieve certain knowledge. While his views have been criticized, they remain influential in contemporary epistemology. Personally, I find Descartes' approach to be interesting and thought-provoking, but I am also aware of its limitations and the criticisms that have been leveled against it. As Descartes himself said, "It is not enough to have a good mind, the main thing".

Citations

Descartes, René. Meditations on First Philosophy. Edited by John Cottingham, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

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Cottingham, J. (2013). Western philosophy: An anthology. Blackwell Publishing.