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3/1/23

Paper 1 - Epistemology

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Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist who is widely considered one of the founding fathers of modern philosophy. He is famous for his theory of knowledge, which is based on the idea that knowledge is acquired through reason rather than sensory experience. He made significant contributions to the development of analytical geometry and is famous for his statement "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am), which became a foundational principle in his philosophical system. Descartes' work had a major impact on the development of modern science, as he believed that knowledge should be based on reason and evidence rather than tradition or authority. He sought to apply mathematical and scientific principles to philosophy and believed that all knowledge could ultimately be reduced to mathematical truths. Some of Descartes' most famous works include "Meditations on First Philosophy," "Discourse on Method," and "Principles of Philosophy." In these works, he developed a philosophical system that sought to provide a firm foundation for knowledge and understanding. His ideas continue to be studied and debated by philosophers and scholars today. This paper will examine Descartes' views on knowledge and how we attain it.

Descartes' views on knowledge and how we attain it are based on the idea of radical doubt, which he uses as a method to arrive at certain knowledge. According to Descartes, many of the

beliefs we hold are based on sense perception, which can be deceptive. To overcome this problem, Descartes proposes that we doubt everything we think we know until we find something that is certain and indubitable. The process of radical doubt is necessary to achieve certainty and avoid errors in our beliefs. He realized that many things he believed to be true were actually false and that he could not be certain about anything unless he could establish a foundation of knowledge that was absolutely certain.

Descartes' theory of knowledge can be summed up in his famous statement "I think, therefore I am" or *cogito ergo sum*. This statement is the foundation of Descartes' epistemology because it is the one undeniable belief that we can hold. From this starting point, Descartes argues that all other knowledge is built through reason and deduction. He argues that we can arrive at the knowledge of the external world through innate ideas, such as the idea of God, and that these ideas are not derived from sense perception.

Descartes believed that knowledge is acquired through reason, and that reason is the only reliable way to distinguish truth from falsehood. He distinguished between two types of ideas, innate ideas, and adventitious ideas. Innate ideas are ideas that are already present in the mind, such as the idea of God, while adventitious ideas are ideas that come from the outside world, such as the idea of a table or a chair.

One concern that may be raised with Descartes' theory is that it is difficult to apply in practical situations. If we doubt everything we believe, it can be difficult to make decisions or take action. Furthermore, some philosophers argue that Descartes' theory is overly skeptical and that we can have knowledge of the external world through sense perception.

To attain knowledge, Descartes argued that we must use a method of doubt, which involves subjecting all beliefs to rigorous scrutiny and rejecting anything that is not absolutely certain. He believed that the only way to acquire knowledge is to start with indubitable beliefs and then use reason to deduce new knowledge from these beliefs. Descartes' method of doubt involves rejecting all beliefs that are not absolutely certain and then building knowledge from the ground up.

Here are two quotes from Descartes' "New Foundations for Knowledge" that explain his views on knowledge: "I am certain that I am a thinking thing; but do I not therefore likewise know what is required to make me certain of something? Namely, that it is true and cannot be doubted." In this quote, Descartes is explaining his famous method of doubt, which he uses to establish a firm foundation for knowledge. He begins by doubting everything that can be doubted until he arrives at the one thing that he cannot doubt: his own existence as a thinking thing. From this starting point, he argues that knowledge must be based on certainty, and that certainty requires that a proposition be true and incapable of being doubted. Next: "The senses, however, are not sufficient for knowledge, since they sometimes deceive us; and it is necessary to have recourse to the mind, which is capable of recognizing truth when it is presented to it." In this quote, Descartes is arguing that knowledge cannot be based solely on the senses, since the senses can be fallible and can sometimes deceive us. Instead, he argues that knowledge must be grounded in the mind, which has the capacity to recognize truth when it is presented to it. This is why he places such a strong emphasis on the use of reason and rationality in his philosophy.

Personally, I find Descartes' theory to be interesting, but I am not entirely convinced of its adequacy for epistemology. While I appreciate the need for certainty in our beliefs, I think that the process of radical doubt can be taken too far and lead to paralysis in decision-making. I also

believe that sense perception plays an important role in our understanding of the world and that we can arrive at knowledge through both innate ideas and sense experience. Overall, while I appreciate Descartes' contribution to philosophy, I do not think that his theory of knowledge is sufficient for understanding the world around us.

In conclusion, Descartes' views on knowledge and how we attain it are based on radical doubt and the use of reason to arrive at certain knowledge. While this approach has its merits, concerns about its practicality and applicability to real-world situations can be raised. Personal reflection suggests that the theory has some limitations in terms of fully accounting for our knowledge of the external world and that a combination of innate ideas and sense experience is necessary to understand the world around us fully.