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Writing Assignment One

René Descartes, a French philosopher of the 17th century, is famous for his contributions to epistemology, the branch of philosophy that deals with knowledge. Descartes believed that knowledge should be certain and indubitable, which means that it should be immune to doubt and error. He argued that the traditional ways of acquiring knowledge, such as relying on sense perception or authority, were insufficient to provide us with such certainty. Instead, Descartes proposed a method of inquiry that would allow us to build a secure foundation of knowledge. Descartes' method of inquiry, also known as the method of doubt, involves systematically doubting any beliefs that are not certain. He believed that we should doubt anything that can be called into question, even if it seems obviously true. Through this process, Descartes aimed to arrive at a set of beliefs that were immune to doubt, known as "first principles." He believed that these first principles would form the foundation upon which all other knowledge could be built. Descartes identified one indubitable belief: "Cogito, ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I am". He argued that this belief was certain because, even if he were deceived about everything else, he could not be deceived by his own existence as a thinking being. From this starting point, Descartes attempted to prove the existence of God and the external world. He believed that if he could show that God existed and was not a deceiver, then he could trust the information he received through his senses.

In addition to his method of doubt, Descartes also believed that knowledge could be attained through reason. He believed that reason was a reliable guide to truth and that we could use it to arrive at certain knowledge. Descartes saw mathematics as the paradigm of certain knowledge and believed that other areas of knowledge could be made equally certain through the use of reason.

Overall, Descartes' view on knowledge was that it should be certain and indubitable. He believed that the traditional ways of acquiring knowledge, such as sense perception or authority, were insufficient to provide us with such certainty. Instead, he proposed a method of inquiry that involved systematically doubting any beliefs that were not certain, in order to arrive at a set of first principles that were immune to doubt. Through reason, Descartes believed that we could use these first principles to build a secure foundation of knowledge.

While Descartes's views on knowledge have been influential in the history of philosophy, they have also been the subject to much criticism and debate. For example, Descartes' method of doubt has been criticized for leading to skepticism, the view that we cannot have any certain knowledge about the world. Some philosophers have argued that the level of doubt Descartes employed in his method was too extreme and that it undermines the very possibility of knowledge. Also, Descartes' argument for the existence of God has been criticized for being circular. Descartes argued that he could only trust his sensory experience if God existed and was not a deceiver. But in order to prove the existence of God, Descartes relied on the reliability of his own reasoning, which assumes the validity of his sensory experience.

Descartes's theory of knowledge has had a significant impact on epistemology, and its emphasis on certainty and systematic doubt has influenced many subsequent philosophers. However, I believe that his theory has some limitations and may not be entirely adequate for epistemology. One of the main issues with Descartes's theory is that it places too much emphasis on individual certainty and does not sufficiently take into account the social and cultural context in which knowledge is produced. The notion that knowledge can be attained through an individual process of doubt and introspection may work for some areas of knowledge, but it may not be applicable to others, such as scientific or historical knowledge. Furthermore, Descartes's theory assumes that knowledge can be acquired solely through reason and introspection, and it neglects the role of empirical observation and experience in the acquisition of knowledge. While rational reflection is undoubtedly important, it cannot provide us with all the knowledge we need to understand the world around us. Another limitation of Descartes's theory is that it presupposes a dualistic view of the mind and body, which has been subject to considerable debate in philosophy. The notion that the mind can exist independently of the body raises questions about the nature of perception and the relationship between the mind and the external world.

In summary, while Descartes's theory of knowledge has made significant contributions to epistemology, it may not be entirely adequate for all areas of knowledge. A more comprehensive approach to epistemology should take into account the social and cultural context in which knowledge is produced, the role of empirical observation and experience, and the complex relationship between the mind and the body.