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Descartes on Knowledge

Descartes' writings were introduced to the world in the early modern period. He had a great impact on the subsequent development of specifically epistemology and generally philosophy. His writings are based on the instability of many accepted and taught doctrines he learned in school. He anonymously released *Discourse on the Method* in 1637. He included a thought provoking quote regarding the doctrines he learned in school, "no point that was not disputed and hence doubtful." (Descartes, 1637) For sciences that borrowed some of their principles from philosophy he said, "nothing solid could be built on such shaky foundations." (Descartes, 1637) He then wants to start afresh and wipe away previously accepted opinions. He expresses his plan to reconstruct knowledge in Latin in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* released in 1641. Descartes' way to attain knowledge is through a systematic method of doubt. He believes that anything that can be called into question should be discarded. From something so definite like picking up a pencil because someone could be dreaming. Descartes explains that what the mind thinks is eternal isn't always accurate. Even our senses aren't reliable which is what previous beliefs were based on. He then questions math and their abstract proportions. God is even questioned on whether He can alter our minds and make us wrong. Descartes comes to a conclusion and first principle of his philosophy that he exists because of his mind. "I am, I exist." or "I am thinking therefore I exist." (Descartes, 1641) This one thing that is certain for Descartes.

A key term that came from Descartes' philosophy is rationalism. Because of him we know that important knowledge is through reason only and not senses. Which makes sense why he was so adamant about doubting everything. It is natural for humans to want to believe something is real or true based on their feelings and thoughts. Instead reason and actual evidence is the only thing that important knowledge should be based on.

An argument that erupted from Descartes' philosophy was based on his definition of perfection. Descartes believed that perfection is a positive trait. Also, existence is based on the fact that he is a thinking thing and he must exist. A man Immanuel Kant contradicted that by claiming that if existence was based on the fact that it must exist then that could pertain to anything. "A thinking thing must exist. An intelligent thing must exist. A strong thing must exist. Even a weak or ignorant or non-thinking thing must exist. Saying that something must exist because existence is necessary is redundant and proves nothing." (Robephiles, 2022) For a philosopher that pushed reason and rationalism so hard. His definition of perfection was based on senses and not reason.

When Descartes first shared his thoughts in the early modern period he had a lot of followers. This is relevant for any philosopher or anyone who expresses their opinions. There are good and bad reviews but for the most part Descartes had a positive following or at least people who respected him. Those who did were "Geraud de Cordemoy, Arnold Geulincx, Antoine Le Grand, Nicolas Malebranche, Regis, and Rohault." (Hatfield, 2018) Some of those who rejected him were Henry Moore, Benedict de Spinoza, and G.W. Leibniz. One has to ask, are the rejections accurate or just misconceptions? The Author's rebuttal for Descartes' skepticism was that we can only know our own sense data or sensory experience. Other authors claimed that his work with Meditations was just limiting human knowledge. Which isn't entirely true because he

believed in rationalism and the system of doubting. For anything I think that Descartes' philosophy encourages the broadening of human knowledge and provoking our thinking.

We are beings that are supposed to think, question, learn and explore. I agree that if we don't agree with a belief or doctrine then we should set it aside and question it. I will apply this to my life and how I decide what is true. This is what causes arguments because everyone has a different outlook on life and has different thoughts. What is true and in reason to me may be based on sensory experiences to someone else. I suppose that is the flaw in Descartes' philosophy. Of course we shouldn't only rely on our senses for proof of important knowledge but reason. On the other hand regarding things of the eternal world we shouldn't limit ourselves to things of the world. Descartes claimed that humans exist from something more complex like God. This is such an interesting outlook on our existence because it could explain our complexity and uncertainty. There is some knowledge that we learn throughout life and reject as we become wiser. Something that stays true in my opinion is I am, I exist.

Hatfield, G. (2014, January 16). René Descartes. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved March 7, 2023, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/#Leg>

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