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Phi101:Introduction to Philosophy

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Reading Questions Week 2

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.

Descartes contends that our senses can trick us into believing things that are false. He has had a lot of views in the past that have been proven to be wrong, which makes him wonder if any of his present ideas could be as well. As dreams may contain experiences that appear just as genuine as waking experiences, he also contends that it is possible to be dreaming and not be aware of it. This implies that we are unable to know for sure what is genuine and what is not based just on our experiences.

2. While still in the realm of doubt, what does Descartes say about the general sciences and mathematics and their place in our knowledge?The general sciences and mathematics, according to Descartes, are more certain than other fields of knowledge because they are founded on distinct and unambiguous concepts that the mind can understand without the aid of sensory experience. He contends that whereas mathematics teaches us about abstract ideas like numbers and geometric shapes, physics and astronomy teach us about the physical world. These fields produce knowledge through thinking rather than sensory experience.

3. What does Descartes ultimately argue is a strong and unshakeable basis for knowledge? How does he make his case?

According to Descartes, the statement "I am, I exist" is self-evident and serves as the foundation for knowledge that is firm and unflappable. He casts doubt on all of his prior convictions and information using his method of skepticism. He utilizes the cogito, the Latin phrase meaning "I think, therefore I am," to prove that he is a thinking being. Additionally, he contends that the existence of God is necessary for the cogito to be genuine and that God ensures the veracity of our distinct and clear concepts. This adds to the basis for some information.

Locke, "The Senses as the Basis for Knowledge", pp. 25-31

1. Explain some of the reasons Locke believes there are no innate ideas.

According to Locke, everyone would have ideas regardless of upbringing or education, hence there are no innate ideas. He also contends that none of our concepts are intrinsic because they can all be linked to sensory experience.

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

Regardless of a person's experience or mental aptitude, Locke contends that all people should have innate concepts. The lack of innate concepts in children and "idiots" suggests that ideas are learned by experience and then processed by the mind. This shows that intrinsic concepts are actually learned through experience and subsequent mental processing rather than being inborn.

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

"Tabula rasa" refers to the idea that people are born with a blank slate, free of any inborn beliefs or information. The word "tabula rasa" (Latin for "blank slate") is the source of the English phrase.

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

Two sources—sensation and reflection—are the foundation of Locke's theory of knowledge acquisition. The process of receiving information via the senses, such as sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, is referred to as sensation. The act of reflecting involves giving the knowledge acquired through sensation—such as perception, memory, and reasoning—some thought and processing. We can learn more about the world around us by merging these two sources.