

Descartes first certainty



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In order to understand Descartes' First Certainty, it is best to view and situate the greater scheme of his philosophy against the backdrop of the intellectual revolution of his time. The coming of the seventeenth century also ushered in a great quandary for the philosophers of that time. The triumph of the new scientific method, championed by Isaac Newton and Galileo Galilei, seemed to have edged out philosophy in its focus on quantifiable and mathematical data. Yet something that works so well evidently has some inherent value: perhaps philosophy could benefit from the same rigid and methodical approach of this new science.

This is Rene Descartes' goal - to integrate, seamlessly, the new method in scientific inquiry with philosophy. At the same time, he aims to a very fundamental question - one that cuts across various disciplines - the question of certainty. Though numerous philosophers before him had tried to answer this question, Descartes felt that a lot more work still needed to be done. He refused to accept Aristotle's concept of certainty as being based in the senses. Instead, he believed that certainty in knowledge and experience was rooted in something more fundamental and decisive.

In his Meditations, Descartes gives an overarching answer and method that interrelates philosophy, theology, and science. To reach this goal, Descartes embarks on a doubting spree: everything he has ever hold true and real is doubted and questioned. According to him: All that I have, up to this moment, accepted as possessed of the highest truth and certainty, I received either from or through the senses. I observed, however, that these sometimes misled us; and it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have even once been deceived.

Doubting, he continues, opens up new vistas. It affords him a clean slate with which to work with, delivering him from prejudice, and is the “ easiest pathway by which the mind may withdraw itself from the senses (Descartes, par. 1, Synopsis). ” It is only in the second part of his Meditations that he is able to reach his First Certainty - the cogito certainty. In order to resolve his doubts, there is a pressing need to establish a point of firm certainty.

This, he believes, is found in his famous statement: cogito ergo sum. By virtue of thinking, then, and by virtue of being a thinking being, he is sure that he exists. In order to arrive at this conclusion, Descartes realized that doubting alone was not to be the sole key to his certitude. What if, he surmised, something external to him causes him to doubt by placing doubts in his mind? He reasons, however, that by the very fact that someone or somebody - whether God or the Devil - is causing him to doubt, he already is something, a something that exists:

Doubtless, then, I exist, since I am deceived; and, let him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I shall be conscious that I am something. (Descartes, par. 3, Meditations 2) As such, he is able to arrive at his First Certainty via two pathways - through his own doubts arising from his own mind, and through doubts imposed upon him. Descartes' First Certainty, however, does not say whether or not his existence is qualified as bodily existence.

Cogito ergo sum only states that he is certain that he is a thinking creature, as there is no possible way that he can exist separately and independently from his thoughts. In Descartes' argument, it seems that he has failed to qualify the shift from “ thinking” to “ existing. ” This shift is filled in and

clarified by realizing and qualifying the fact that “ thinking things exist. ” A way to bridge this gap is to consider that the proposition “ I exist” is built upon the first proposition “ I think. ” Hence, a logical argument seems to be the path that Descartes uses to establish his first proposition.

However, as with the intuitive pathway taken, an objection is raised. Given that Descartes considers the certainty of his existence as his first certainty, building it up on another certainty (the fact that he is thinking) clearly violates this logical conclusion. Another way of bridging this gap between “ thinking” and existing” is taken from Descartes’ replies to the objections received by the ideas he put forward in Meditations. According to one critic, knowledge can only come from God, and Descartes proves this in Meditations 3.

However, Descartes has been able to deduce about his own existence before proving this theory, giving rise to a contradiction. To this, Descartes replies that the idea of cogito is not something that can be deduced. Rather, he says, it is an act of pure intuition, a flash of insight. Hence, there is no deduction or logical method employed to arrive at the conclusion of cogito ergo sum (Burnham and Fieser, “ Rene Descartes”). How, then, does Descartes realize that it is through intuition and not by any other means that he reaches this conclusion?

Furthermore, how can he be certain - yet again - that this flash of intuition could be trusted? How can Descartes be sure that just because he has a clear intuition that he exists makes him certain that he exists? Clearly, gut-feel alone, no matter how strong and powerful, does not guarantee certainty. Furthermore, logic and deduction miserably fail in his argumentation.

Another way must then be presented as an option. This is in fact what Descartes does to assure himself of certainty in his conclusion. Descartes first distinguishes between the wellspring of his belief and his justification of why it is certain.

The wellspring of his belief is intuition. To him, at least, it seems that he exists. However, the root of believing must not be confused with truth and justification. Just because it seems to Descartes that his flash of insight and intuition is true and certain does not make it such. Hence, the justification of this belief must be a matter totally separate from the source of believing. In order for Descartes to justify his belief, he hearkens back to the earlier guidelines he established in Meditations 1: “[doubt] makes it impossible for us to doubt wherever we afterward discover truth.”

For Descartes, then, by discovering “truth” (or certainty, belief) through doubting, he has made it impossible to doubt his own conclusion. Consequently, Descartes’ justification rests on the fact that belief, by virtue of being such, is not susceptible to doubt. Its very construction prevents it from any sort of doubting or uncertainty. As a result, Descartes’ argumentation, if it may be called that, does not merely rest on simple logical deduction, nor does it simply take off from a flash of brilliant intuition.

On the other hand, the way that Descartes argued for the certainty of his proposition is through a combination of intuition and further justification that is separate from the source of his belief. The thought of existing then becomes immune from doubt because of the inherent impossibility about doubting one’s own existence. Though Descartes is not the first philosopher to stumble upon the idea that thinking can be equated to existing, he is

certainly the most famous. It is through Descartes' genius of realizing that the First Certainty forms not a basis of knowledge but a foundation of certainty, truth, and clarity.