

Epistemology assignment

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Regarding many things man is certain that he possesses knowledge. He is equally certain that there are far more things of which he is totally ignorant. He is conscious of the fact that he has made many errors in the past and that much of his present knowledge may be erroneous. He realizes also that he has no exhaustive and fully adequate knowledge of things, not even of himself. The consciousness of all this, is reflected in his mental attitude toward the things he knows or thinks he knows.

This is one of the attitudes of a man to doubt. Doubt is that state of the mind in which a suspended Judgment ensues, due to the mind's inability to decide whether the judgment is true or false. If the mind can discover no reasons, or practically no reasons, which enable it to come to a decision regarding the truth or error of its judgment, then the doubt is negative. If it has discovered reasons, but if they are of practically equal weight for and against the truth of the Judgment, thereby making a decisive Judgment impossible, then the doubt is positive.

In both cases the result is the same: the fear of error cannot be overcome, and the Judgment remains suspended. Like when we sometimes guess that it will rain due to the appearance of the weather that indicates rain; but, the high winds may drive the clouds away. It might rain, but we fear it will not, and so you suspend your Judgment. Another case, is like will the Gillis Philippians win in the next year basketball game? The situation is such that the mind can come to no real decision: it doubts.

And so there are innumerable instances where man cannot overcome his doubts. For Rene Descartes, a French philosopher and mathematician, as the

father of modern philosophy, and credited for the rise of modern era.

Descartes observes, that discipline in which everything has been subjected to dispute. Thus, there is a need to ground knowledge on that which is indubitable. Aware of this enormous task, Descartes devised a simple method, which consist of rules and principles intended to put discipline and direction to the activities of human mind.

This is the methodic doubt. The methodic doubt as a matter of principle acts as the basis for all that can be considered as true and certain.

Hypothetically, the idea is to doubt everything in order to have a firm foundation for all our claims. Thus, the search for the basis of knowledge is one that is purely accomplished by exercising the methodic doubt, one that involves withholding assent from all previous opinions which fail to be certain and indubitable.

For instance, the physical world is subjected to doubt, not in order to reject it, but in order to find the ground in which the truth can be founded. He used the methodic doubt in order to find an absolute and certain starting point for building up our knowledge. Rene Descartes is responsible for the predominance of the problem of human knowledge in modern philosophy. Many of the systems of philosophy and theories of knowledge which have risen in the last three centuries can trace their lineage directly to the influence of the questions.

Descartes raised and the method he employed in answering them. He promulgated the principle of ‘ science without presuppositions’ and thereby introduced a new epoch in science and philosophy. It will, therefore, not be

amiss to analyze fundamental ideas and evaluate his method. As his starting point, Descartes begins with the contention that we rely entirely too much on traditional doctrines and spontaneous convictions, so that our supposed knowledge of truth rests mostly on unproved presuppositions.

This make it difficult for us to distinguish between truth and error, since we do not know what is true knowledge and what in unwarranted belief. Hence, he would tear down the whole edifice of knowledge and rebuild it from the foundation, and would not begin to build until he had reached the one and ultimate truth which was the bedrock of human knowledge. Being a mathematician, he felt convinced that he could device all truth from a single fundamental principle. As the instrument of his search for truth he used a universal methodic doubt. His own words will best reveal his line of thought.

I. In order to seek for the truth, it is necessary once in the course of our life, to doubt, as far as possible, of all things. " As we were at one time children, and as we formed various judgments regarding the objects presented to our senses, when as yet we had not the entire use of our reason, numerous prejudices stand in the way of our arriving at the knowledge of truth; and of these it seems impossible for us to rid ourselves, unless we undertake, once in our lifetime, to doubt of all those things in which we may discover even the smallest suspicion of uncertainty. II. We ought also to consider as false all that is doubtful. Moreover, it will be useful likewise to esteem as false the things of which we shall be able to doubt, that we may with greater clearness discover what possesses most certainty and is easiest to know. "

III. We ought not meanwhile to make use of doubt in the conduct of life.. " IV. Why we may doubt of sensible things. Accordingly, since we now only design

to apply ourselves to the investigation of truth, we will doubt, first, whether of all the things that have ever fallen under our senses, or which we have ever imagined, any one really exists; in the first place, because we know by experience that the senses sometimes err, and it would be imprudent to trust too much to what has ever once deceived us; secondly, because in dreams we perpetually seem to perceive or imagine innumerable objects which have no existence.

And to one who has thus resolved upon a general doubt, there appear no marks by which he can with certainty distinguish sleep from the waking state. N. Why we may also doubt to mathematical demonstrations. We will also doubt of the other things we have before held as most certain, even of the demonstrations of mathematics, and of their principles which we have hitherto deemed self-evident; in the first place, because we have sometimes seen men fall onto error in such matters, and admit as absolutely certain and self-evident what to us appeared false, but chiefly because we have learned that God who created us is all-powerful; for we not know yet whether perhaps it was his will to create us, so that we are always deceived, even in the things we know best: since this does not appear more impossible that our being occasionally deceived, which, however, as observation teaches us, is the case.

And if we suppose that all-powerful, God is not the author of our being, and that we exist of ourselves or by some other means, still, he less powerful we suppose our author to be, the greater reason will we have for believing that we are not so perfect as that we may not be continually deceived. WI. We cannot doubt of our existence while we doubt, and this is the first knowledge
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we acquire when we philosophize in order. “ While we thus reject of all which we can certain the smallest doubt, and even imagine that is false, we easily indeed suppose that there is neither God, nor sky, nor bodies, and that we ourselves have neither hands nor feet, nor, finally, a body; but we cannot in the same way suppose that we re not while we doubt of the truth of these things; for there is a repugnance in conceiving that what thinks does not exist at the very moment when it thinks.

Accordingly, the knowledge, ‘ I think, therefore I am,’ is the first and most certain that occurs to one who philosophizes orderly. ” This is indeed a most radical procedure, a veritable revolution of method. Descartes applies the method of universal doubt on ‘ all things’, attempting to empty the mind completely of all traditional views, preconceived ideas, and spontaneous convictions without exception. Nothing is allowed to remain, no matter how seemingly clear and evident. ” How do I know that I am not also deceived each time I add together two and three, or number the sides of a square, or form some Judgment still more simple, if more simple indeed can be imagined? Not only the whole physical world, our own body, sense-perception, and the internal states of our consciousness, are thus drawn into universal doubt, but also the trustworthiness of our cognitive faculties and the fundamental laws of thinking, like the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the Principle of Contradiction. This is a most important feature of his method that must not be overlooked. Descartes’ universal methodic doubt is not merely simulated for the unprejudiced search after truth; it is a real, genuine doubt. ” As we desired to give our attention solely to the search after truth, the we thought... We ought to reject as absolutely false all in regard to which

I could suppose the least ground for doubt, in order to ascertain whether after that there remained ought in our beliefs that was wholly indubitable. ” Mark the words: ” to reject as absolutely false. He does not intend to hold his mind in a state of suspended Judgment, or merely to leave his spontaneous inventions aside for the time being, in order to investigate their possible validity, which would be a methodic doubt as generally understood; he is convinced that he ought ‘ to reject them as absolutely false,’ and he actually carries out his plan, so that he really rejects everything down to the one indubitable fact: ‘ Cogitator, ergo sum – I think, therefore I exist. ‘ This is more than mere doubt, because a doubt presupposes a suspended Judgment due to the absence of all reasons for and against a propositions (negative doubt) or reasons of more or less equal value for and against it (positive doubt). Descartes ” supposes, for a time, that all these opinions are entirely false and imaginary,” and he ” will continue always in this track until he shall find something that is certain, or tallest, if he can do nothing more, until he shall know with certainty that there is nothing certain. ” He assumes the attitude that all spontaneous convictions and laws of thought are errors.

It makes little difference whether Descartes could and did, actually and really, doubt everything without exception; or whether he merely thought he could and did. The fact is, he did thus doubt everything in principle. He was, of course, not a skeptic, since his purpose was to arrive at the ultimate base of certainty and truth and to rebuild on this indubitable foundation the edifice of knowledge. He compared himself to Archimedes. ” Archimedes, that he might transport the entire globe from the place it occupied to another, demanded only a point that was firm and immovable; so also, if I

shall be entitled to entertain the highest expectations, if I am fortunate enough to discover only one thing that is certain and indubitable. Descartes was fortunate enough to discover his firm and immovable fulcrum: his own existence- ‘ I think, therefore I am. ‘. It would have to be trustworthiness of his reasoning powers. But how could he establish this, seeing that this also was involved in universal doubt and destroyed with all other spontaneous convictions? Descartes hit upon an ingenious idea. He would demonstrate the existence of an infinitely perfect being, who must have given man faculties which are trustworthy and capable of discovering the truth. The only thing absolutely certain so far for Descartes was his own existence; and from this fact alone he would be obliged to deduce God’s existence. We have in our mind the idea of God as an infinitely perfect Being.

But an infinitely perfect being must have existence, otherwise it would not be infinitely perfect. Ergo, God exists. This is an a priori or ontological argument. Descartes attempts to prove God’s existence a posteriori, by means of an argument from causality. We have the idea of God in our mind. Since this idea represents an infinitely perfect being, we, as finite beings, cannot have originated such an idea in virtue of our own powers. This idea being beyond our mental capacity, it could have originated only from a being, who possesses such infinite perfection. Ergo, God exists. Having proved to his own satisfaction that God exists, Descartes proceeds to show that He is the creator of man.

But the infinitely perfect God cannot be a deceiver; consequently, He cannot have given man deceptive powers of knowledge, and man’s faculties are thus shown to be trustworthy, “ provided we separate what there is of clear
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and distinct in the knowledge from what is obscure and confused. ” In the light of this criterion of ‘ clear and distinct’ knowledge all previous doubts about the world, sense-perception, and intellective must vanish. Skepticism is defeated, and valid knowledge is possible. This methodic doubt thus serves as the basis for the truth of the self as consciousness. I am therefore, precisely speaking, only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, understanding, or reason, terms whose signification was before unknown to me.

I am however, a real thing, and really existent; but what thing? The answer is- a thinking thing. Now, even though an evil genius could possibly act as a deceiver, there is no way that the existence of the deceived could be erased. As such, the ego cannot be conceived not to exist. ” I think, therefore, I am ” simply means that it cannot be doubted that there is a consciousness that doubts. The self of ego is certain that it exists. Man, in this regard, is the sole basis of what is true and what is certain. Hence, we need to doubt everything for us to see the reality. Because in life, there are instances that we think it is real, though its not.. Like in distinguishing if we are dreaming or awake.

When we dream we imagine things happening often with the same sense of reality as we do when we are supposedly awake. Even if particular employ objects do not exist, at least the basic colors and shapes that compose them exists but all those are just a dream. We also doubt because life is full of unknowns and having doubt is natural and smart and it prevents us from making rash choices. It encourages us to re-think of a matter and sharpens our minds. It always make us want to learn the truth. People, naturally, never stop doubting until they fill their minds with answers to the questions that

have stuck in their lives for a long time and they wont be at ease until they discover the reality that they were looking for.