

Philosophy class:
decarte's meditation
2. there are 2
questions to answer
and exp...



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Descartes Second Meditation The ' Father of Modern Philosophy,' Rene

Descartes was a French philosopher, mathematician and scientist who lived between 1596 and 1650. He introduced a fundamental shift in scientific thinking from the empiricist school of thought to the rationalist. The empiricist school that had dominated for several centuries previous held that all available knowledge ultimately comes to humans through a thorough examination of our senses. Descartes' rationalist school suggested that human reason was the true source of knowledge. He proposes that absolute certainty can be reached through a careful thought process in his presentation of Meditation 2 in Discourse on Method.

To achieve absolute certainty, Descartes felt it was necessary to question every assumption that had even the ghost of a chance of being false. " I had long before remarked that ... it is sometimes necessary to adopt, as if above doubt, opinions which we discern to be highly uncertain" (Descartes, 2001).

To achieve this, he meditated for hours, carefully dismissing each piece of knowledge he had gained through his senses. " When I considered that the very same thoughts (presentations) which we experience when awake may also be experienced when we are asleep, while there is at that time not one of them true, I supposed that all the objects (presentations) that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams" (Descartes, 2001). When he was through, he was sure of only one thing, that he was still thinking. This gave birth to the statement for which he is perhaps best known: " I think therefore I am." In other words, because there was still a being that was capable of thinking,

Descartes discovered that there could be no denying that he was in

existence. Because it is illogical to believe that there is a being in existence

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that is constantly endeavoring to fool this mind into thinking something other than what is true, Descartes determined that he had arrived at a clear and distinct truth. Within this questioning process, Descartes makes it clear that thought must be the right foundation for certain knowledge rather than observation of the senses. As a result, Descartes defines certainty as true knowledge gained through a clear and distinct perception of the truth. However, before absolute certainty can be discovered there remains a problem to be addressed. The idea that knowledge can be identified by a “clear and distinct perception” is itself dependent on the senses that Descartes has already rejected as being insufficient for knowledge. The philosopher argues his way out of this dilemma by suggesting that in order to fool a mind, a mind must first exist. “But there is I know not what being, who is possessed at once of the highest power and the deepest cunning, who is constantly employing all his ingenuity in deceiving me. 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, 1989). Regardless of how it’s presented, there remains a hole in his logic as it creates a logical loop - thought must be the basis for knowledge because the senses are unreliable but the evidence of correct thought depends upon the senses to be known.

In pursuing absolute certainty, Descartes essentially completed a logical loop that continues to prove itself, but which introduces a completely new way of thinking to the world. Beginning with a full denial of the existence of anything that was known through the senses, Descartes argued that certainty could only be obtained through careful thought resulting in a clear and distinct impression. However, in coming to this clear and distinct

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impression, it is necessary to depend on the senses as a means of identification. As a result, Descartes left generations to ponder what exactly is absolute certainty and whether it can actually be obtained.

Works Cited

Descartes, René. Discourse on Method. Vol. XXXIV, Part 1. The Harvard Classics. New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909-14; Bartleby. com, 2001. (March 9, 2009) [www. bartleby. com/34/1/](http://www.bartleby.com/34/1/)