

Descartes on knowledge essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Why, according to Descartes, is sensory imagination neither necessary nor sufficient for objective knowledge? Should Kant make us think again?

Descartes considered sensory imagination neither necessary nor sufficient for objective knowledge. His conviction that “sensation” and “imagination” are not dependable sources of knowledge. Only reason or understanding can be trusted. Descartes believed that reason is the principal source of knowledge. (Markie, 2012, p. 1) Descartes likened imagination and knowledge with the idea of the two suns. According to Descartes, there are two distinct ideas of a sun inside his mind. The first one is drawn out of his sense and it is just a small sun. The second sun is very large, more than the size of the earth. This idea is drawn out of his specific and inherent notions or which, he thought, might be fashioned by himself also, in some other ways. (Ariew & Watkins, 1998, p. 12)

According to Descartes, these two distinct concepts cannot both resemble the same sun. He concluded that his notion of the sun which best resembles the most physical or sensible experience is the real sun. Hence, Descartes also ruled that imagination is not part of the mind and that the mind is distinct from one’s body and soul (p. 13) He also expounded on the idea of the imagination.

In his Meditations, Descartes showed that the imagination seems to have the traits of a middling power. (p. 13) It characterizes itself as something resembling sensation while also showing a deviation from the senses. However, Descartes did not rule it as part of a full experience to be considered as part of one’s intellect. According to Descartes, there is a “

making to imagination, but it is not enough to make a reality; it can lead one closer to the truth, but it is incapable of knowing the truth.” (Reynolds, n. d., p. 1) For Descartes, true realities is composed of both dreams and pictures. However, he considers imagination as a reflection of reality which might have untrue elements.

Descartes’ epistemology is contradictory with that of Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, basically, knowledge is a joint production of the external world and the mind. Hence, imagination is a sufficient part of knowledge. This is because Kant considered conception of knowledge or truth as something which cannot be purely experiential or sensory. It cannot also be mere imagination. He introduced us to the concept of intuition wherein the conception of a certain idea or object is not a pure conception of one’s understanding. (Kant, 2011, p. 1) In essence, pure reason cannot be the main source of knowledge as what Descartes believed.

In this category, the idea of a number is pure. Yet, it is neither intellectual nor sensory. Another great example is the concept of time. We accept time to be true and to be a pure concept even when it rests on the transcendental scheme of our understanding. (Reynolds, n. d., p. 1)

Often, the way we order things and conceive them as truths often fall under this schema. Kant explained that this schema is, in itself, often a mere product of the imagination. (p. 1) However, the schema is distinguished from the image through our common sense intuition and our general tendency to unify things which we believe in.

The way we represent the concept in our schema is the part where Kant conceived imagination to be a logical and a necessary source of knowledge. He believed that we cannot intuit the truth if we plainly depend on pure logic or rationality because we do think nor order things that way.

In his own example, Kant explained it as:

“ Thus, if I place five points one after another this is an image of the number five. On the other hand, if I only think a number in general, which may be either five or a hundred, this thought is rather the representation of a method of representing in an image a sum (e. g., a thousand) in conformity with a conception, than the image itself, an image which I should find some little difficulty in reviewing, and comparing with the conception.” This is how Kant explains schema and how humans generally order the concepts they conceive as representational and thus with part merely attributed by our imagination.

Kant believes that the schema of things is the foundations of our pure sensory conception and not the graphical representation of objects. This schematism of our way of conceiving things with regards to phenomena and their mere forms is actually unexplainable. It is unveiled by one’s hidden soul. Hence, our conception of a figure in space such as a triangle is not really a concrete conception of the representational image of a three sided object or a cone. The image and the concept is a product of our schema of sensuous conceptions and the “ empirical faculty of our productive imagination. (p. 1) The connection of the image and how we conceive it is also part of our schema. However, while we can connect the abstract and the

representational image of our conception of the said figure, in themselves, this concept is never fully adequate or complete. Kant considered it as a “transcendental product of the imagination, a product which concerns the determination of the internal sense, according to conditions of its form (time) in respect to all representations, in so far as these representations must be conjoined a priori in one conception, conformably to the unity of apperception.” (p. 1)

In my own opinion, Kant only suggests that imagination is sufficient premise for knowledge but I do not believe that it is a necessary condition for we have already illustrated that there are pure reasoning, that by mere experience and senses, we can conceive things to be. According to Markie (2012, p. 1), Kant did not differentiate between the concrete, intuitive, perceptual knowledge of objects and the abstract, intangible and discursive, knowledge of concepts. There are many kinds of concepts such as those of understanding, reason, etc. Many concepts such as freedom, immortality and general concepts were not also classified by Kant according to their composition, if these are all purely conceived or imaginarily conceived.

This does not totally contradict Descartes because the latter was merely distinguishing on the aspect of the sensory imagination as neither necessary nor sufficient premise in the process of knowing things. It seems to me that Kant’s argument is more inclusive of the concept of imagination while Descartes’ excludes the function of sensory imagination per se in knowledge. What Kant did was to categorize our perception or conception of the world, how we should organize knowledge or truths. He intended it to modify our

understanding and confidence in the reality of ourselves and of our universe.
(p. 1)

However, there are weaknesses in these arguments in the justification of these categories. As simply put, how can we be certain that Kant's categories are correct, i. e. sufficient and sufficient? Kant laid down the principles by which we order and understand things. The groupings and classifications matter. However, this only pertains to Kant's conception of causality. Kant divided reason into theoretical and practical. However, this is just one side of knowledge by Kant made us easier to understand. This perhaps is his greatest contribution to the body of knowledge that we have. On the other hand, Descartes also lead us to more reliable truth as he initially screened the by-products of our imaginations to be unreliable truths and therefore, be further understood or verified.

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