

# Descartes

## Skepticism and Rationalism



# Skepticism

- Skepticism is the claim that we do not have knowledge
- Skepticism admits that we have beliefs and can agree that theoretically knowledge is true, justified belief. But Skepticism denies
  - i) that it is possible to justify beliefs
  - ii) or, that beliefs are things that can even be justified

## Skeptic's Argument

1. We can find reasons for doubting any one of our beliefs
2. It follows that we can doubt all our beliefs.
3. If we can doubt all our beliefs, then we cannot be certain of any of them.
4. If we do not have certainty about any of our beliefs, then we do not have knowledge.
5. Therefore, we do not have knowledge.

## Descartes Method of Doubt and the Search for Certainty

- Is there any belief which cannot be doubted?
- If a belief can be doubted, then there is no reason to think that it can be the basis for knowledge
  - Descartes contrasts doubt with certainty
- Does Descartes think that a belief that can be doubted is false?
  - No, a belief that can be doubted might be true
  - It is simply that it is possible that a belief which can be doubted is false
  - And, if it's possible for a belief to be doubted, certainty cannot exist.

## Doubt This....

- Is it possible to doubt these beliefs?
  - Limes are green.
  - The sky is farther way than the tops of trees and buildings.
  - I am \_\_\_\_\_ (your age) years old.
  - Humans have walked on the moon.
  - I am sitting in class.
  - $2+2=4$
  - I am now doubting.
  - I exist.

## Descartes's Method

- Doubt sense experiences: how things appear can mislead
- Doubt the world of objects: why think what appears to be the real world is not just vivid dream?
- Is the evil demon possible? Could "reality" just be a creation of the evil demon?
  - If the evil demon is possible, then anything is possible including  $2+2=5$ , we don't have bodies, that we are brains in a vat, etc.
- Is there anything beyond doubt?

## Is There Anything Beyond Doubt?

- Can one doubt that one is doubting?
- What happens if one does doubt that one is doubting?
- Must there exist someone who is doubting if doubting is occurring?

## Descartes Hits Bottom

- From the method of doubt Descartes concludes that the only thing that cannot be doubted is the fact that he is doubting
- He believes, “I am, I exist.”
- *Cogito ergo sum*: “I think, therefore I am”
- From this conclusion, Descartes begins to build a system of knowledge

## Chew On This....

- Why don't mathematicians need laboratories to discover mathematical truths? How do mathematicians make their discoveries?
- Touch your nose. Now, touch your ears. Now, touch your rights. Why can't you touch your rights? You have them, don't you? Doesn't everybody? Even though we want to say that everyone has rights, no one can sense them. So, how do we know that we have them? How do we gain knowledge about our rights?
- Think about the visual illusions we viewed. We have beliefs about the causes of those illusions that don't necessarily match what we perceived. Where did those beliefs come from?

## Rationalism

Descartes' response to skepticism

## Rationalism

- Rationalism claims that reason or the intellect is the primary source of our fundamental knowledge about reality.
  - Reason provides knowledge apart from sense experience
  - Reason provides one with knowledge of the world independently of experience

## Rationalism's Claims

1. Reason is the primary source of knowledge about reality
2. Sense experience is an unreliable and inadequate means to knowledge
3. The fundamental truths about the world can be known *a priori*

## 1. Reason is the Primary Source of Knowledge About Reality

- For the rationalist, we come to understand reality through reason
  - Knowledge about reality is gained through (i) deduction or intuition alone, (ii) one's innate rational nature, (iii) concepts which are the results of one's innate rational nature
- Experience may help tell us about concrete particulars, but reason tells us about the fundamental nature of reality
- So, sensory experience cannot tell us about *a priori* truths, i.e., truths that can be know independently of experience

## Examples of *A Priori* Truths

- Logical truths: "A and not-A cannot both be true at the same time"
- Mathematical truths: "A square has four sides of equal lengths meeting in right angles"
- Metaphysical truths: "Every event has a cause"
- Ethical principles: "Truth-telling is an essential component of social relations"

## 2. Sense Experience is an Unreliable and Inadequate Avenue to Knowledge

- Rationalists argue that sense experience is relative, changing and illusory
  - We need our reason to make sense of illusory perceptions
  - While we need sense experience, rationalists deny that experience is the only or best source of knowledge about reality
- Only reason can tell us about universal, foundational truths of reality
  - As a result, the inadequacy of sense experience to give us knowledge means that reason and rationality reign supreme and are indispensable

## 3. The Fundamental Truths About the World Can Be Known A Priori

- Reason is superior to sense experience because we can have certainty about the *a priori*
  - **Innate Ideas:** there are ideas or principles that the mind contains prior to experience
    - These ideas are called innate ideas, they are inborn
    - Innate ideas include: truths of logic, mathematics, concept of justice, or the idea of God
  - **Self-evident Ideas:** the mind does not already contain these ideas but is structured such that it has a natural predisposition to recognize certain things in certain ways
    - When humans reach certain stages of cognitive development, then they will realize the self-evident truths of certain ideas. Descartes thought that God implanted these ideas and capacities within us.

## Descartes as Pure Intellect

- After Descartes's skeptical adventures, he is left with certainty about himself as a thinking thing or pure intellect
  - He could not be certain about his body or the experiences he had with his body
- What could there be external to the mind to guarantee that he was representing reality correctly?
  - If there is nothing external, then Descartes is left only with his own existence
  - Descartes' solution: appeal to God
    - "As soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else."

## Descartes's Proof of God's Existence, I

- So what is Descartes to use to prove God's existence?
  - He has doubted everything but his existence
  - Descartes must fashion a proof from the reasons arising only in his mind
- While Descartes thinks he could have fashioned ideas of other animals and objects from ideas he possesses about himself, he does not think he could have come up with the idea of God
  - Why? Because his mind could not have given form to something infinite and perfect

## Descartes's Proof of God's Existence, II

- Descartes thinks that the idea of God as an infinite and perfect being could not have come from his own mind because his mind is finite and imperfect
  - The principle grounding this conclusion is that there must be as much reality in the cause as in the effect
  - So, the ideas of God must have come from God himself
- Why think that the ideas of God correspond to some external reality?
  - Descartes thinks the idea of perfection is different from any other idea
  - It is a 'clear and distinct' idea and these ideas are true

## Descartes's Proof of God's Existence, III

- Only if there were an infinite and perfect God could Descartes have had the idea of an infinite and perfect God in the first place
- How did God give Descartes this idea?
  - This idea is innate, it is already in the mind and cannot be based on anything we experience
  - It is "clear and distinct"
    - Clear ideas are present to the attentive mind
    - Distinct ideas are clear ideas unlike any other ideas in that they contain only that which is clearly conceived
  - How does one avoid error and gain certainty? Possess a clear and distinct idea

## Descartes's Argument

1. Something cannot be derived from nothing.
  2. There must be at least as much reality in the cause as there is in the effect.
  3. I have an idea of God (as an infinite and perfect being).
  4. The idea of God in my mind is an effect that was caused by something.
  5. I am finite and imperfect and could not be the cause of the idea of a perfect and infinite being.
  6. Only an infinite and perfect being could be the cause of such an idea.
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7. Therefore, God exists.

## God is Not a Deceiver

- Since God exists, Descartes knows that God would not deceive him, since deception would make God morally imperfect
- Since God is not a deceiver and God is the creator of Descartes's cognitive faculties, Descartes is certain that reason is a reliable tool for gaining knowledge about reality
- Errors about reality are simply errors in reasoning, errors that result from going beyond those things which one can "clearly and distinctly" know
- Now, Descartes is certain that he can have knowledge about his existence, his body, and the external world

## What Say Ye, Descartes?

- Descartes thought it was possible to doubt simple mathematical truths like  $2+2=4$
- But, now he embraces without question a more complex principle: “there must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as in the effect”
  - About which of these two items are you most certain?
  - Do you agree with Descartes that it is impossible to doubt the second item about “more reality in the cause”?
  - Has Descartes relaxed his standard of universal doubt? Is Descartes justified in assuming the latter principle?

## Problem with Perfection

- Descartes argues that the idea of perfection is innate and we do not discover it in experience
- But, can you imagine the perfect baseball player, the perfect quarterback, the perfect rose, etc.?
- We have never experienced any of these things
- So, why think the idea of perfection is innate?
- If anything, is the idea of perfection an idea we create from our finite, imperfect experiences?
  - If so, then the idea of perfection arises from experience and not pure reason