

DESCARTES' PROJECT OF INQUIRY

I- Descartes' requirements for justified knowledge

- a- The importance of rational method: a rational method is needed to conduct reasoning in a correct way.
- b- Certainty: starting with certain ideas is necessary for reasoning to be correct.
- c- The necessity of foundations: the certain ideas are the foundations without which knowledge about the world can not be derived.

II- The historical context of the 17th century: two dominant schools of philosophy

<i>Empiricism</i>	<i>Rationalism</i>
Sense experience is the only source for knowledge	Sense experience is not the only source for knowledge
Reason is not sufficient by itself as a source of knowledge about the world	Reason is necessary to prove that experience is reliable.
The empirical method of induction	The deductive method

III- A short reconstruction of Descartes' reasoning:

- a- Good sense is distributed equally, but difference in opinions is due to the diversity of methods.
- b- Descartes' "fortune" is that he examined the rules of the various fields since he was in school.
- c- As a result, Descartes expresses deep doubt about these fields except mathematics.
- d- Abandoning the study of books, Descartes focuses on learning from the "great book of the world" and himself.
- e- Soon, Descartes focuses only on himself "to choose the paths that I should follow".
- f- Engaged in self reflection, Descartes observes that beliefs based on solid **foundations** are more justified than beliefs based on shaky foundations.

"...As regards all the opinions to which I had until now given credence, I could not do better than to try to get rid of them once and for all, in order to replace them later on, either with other ones that are better, or even with same ones once I had reconciled them to the norms of reason" (part two, p 8)

V- *The Cartesian Method:*

Descartes proposes a method of inquiry that is modeled after mathematics
The method is made of **four** rules:

- a- Accept ideas as true and justified only if they are certain. An idea is certain if it is clear and distinct in one's mind.
- b- Analysis: divide complex ideas into their simpler parts.
- c- Synthesis: reach complex ideas by starting with ideas that are the simplest to know.
- d- Exhaustive and complete: the inquiry should be complete and comprehensive. Nothing left out.

How is this method used to examine the nature of knowledge?

Ordinary beliefs fail to qualify as true and justified. The result is **radical doubt**.

“ Considering the fact that all the same thoughts we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any of them being true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams”

VI- *Descartes' Foundations:*

What are the **foundations** that can **rescue** beliefs from **radical doubt**?

Descartes observes that there are a number of self-evident ideas. The first basic self-evident idea is the *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am- I cannot possibly doubt my own existence

Two problems:

- 1) Is our identification of clear and distinct ideas itself certain?
- 2) Besides, the Cogito doesn't prove that ideas about the external world are true and justified.

VII- *Descartes' proofs for Gods' existence*

Descartes moves on to prove the existence of God. - i.e. to prove another certain idea. Descartes presents two proofs:

The cosmological argument:

1. I have the idea of a perfect being
2. Something perfect cannot be caused by something imperfect. The cause must be more perfect than its effect.
3. I am imperfect since I am uncertain about many things. “It is greater perfection to know than to doubt”.
4. Therefore, the idea of a perfect being must come from a perfect being.
5. Therefore, the perfect being (God) exists.

The ontological argument:

- 1- I have the idea of perfect being
- 2- By definition, this perfect being has all the properties that makes anything perfect
- 3- Existence of one of the properties that makes anything perfect.
- 4- Therefore, the perfect being (God) exists.

If God exists and God is perfect, then we can not be deceived about beliefs concerning the world as well as about identifications of clear and distinct ideas. A perfect being cannot be a deceiver, for a perfect being is absolute goodness.

VIII- Problems with Descartes' project

1. Problems with Descartes' proofs of God's existence:

a. Problem with the cosmological argument: can I be sure that my idea of a perfect being is itself perfect?

b. Problem with the ontological argument:

- Is Existence is a property?
- Isn't the argument only hypothetical?

2. Descartes' project is circular:

Cartesian circle:

Stage 1 - Identify certain ideas

Stage 2 - Use some of the certain ideas to prove God's existence.

Stage 3 - Stage 3 justifies stage 1. As you remember, doubts were raised about the very ability of identifying certain ideas. But if God exists, then the ability to identify clear and distinct ideas is guaranteed.

Full circle- Is the circle circular?

It seems that the answer is yes. Descartes' project never gets off the ground. One cannot be certain about self-evident ideas unless God's existence is proven for only God's existence rules out deception. But to prove God's existence Descartes makes use of the very-certain ideas that he was supposed to justify by proving God's existence
