

## 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 or self-evident ideas is necessary for reasoning to be correct.
- c- The necessity of foundations: the certain and self-evident ideas are the foundations without which knowledge about the world can not be derived.

### *II- The historical context of the 17<sup>th</sup> 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.
- d- 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.

**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 self-evident. an idea is self-evident 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**.

**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.

Why the proofs of God are crucial? If God exists, the very existence of God will solve the above mentioned problems: it guarantees identification of clear and distinct ideas and also it ensures the certainty of beliefs about the world.

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 self-evident ideas

Stage 2 - Use some of the self-evident 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 self-evident 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-self-evident ideas that he was supposed to justify by proving God's existence

### ***IX- Descartes' legacy:***

1) Skepticism: Is it possible to have knowledge?

2) The primacy of consciousness: Descartes' philosophy emphasizes the importance of the conscious self as the foundation for all knowledge

\*\*\*\*\*