

THINKING FOR ONESELF

-The discussion is based on Meditations 1 and 2 by Rene Descartes a French philosopher, also well known mathematician and physicist. Descartes meditations are concerned with the foundations of knowledge, thus raising an epistemological question.

-How secure are the foundations of our knowledge of our world and ourselves?

- Is there any knowledge that is free from doubt?
- How reliable are the various sources of our knowledge of our world and ourselves?
- He was looking for one truth upon which he would develop all knowledge, the foundation of all knowledge.

Cartesian Methodic Doubt

In the search for the foundation of knowledge, Descartes developed a method which came to be known as the Cartesian method or Methodic doubt. The method involves 2 components:

Inquiry (which in turn involves four elements)

1. Not taking anything for granted, accepting only that which is well reasoned, justified, grounded, clear and distinct to the mind
2. To analyze the problem, see the issue or problem in its constituent parts, parts may have characteristics not present in the whole. To handle problem systematically.
3. To synthesize-synthesize involves the attempt to find or construct a solution, beginning with the simplest to the most complex, seeing the problem in its totality and how parts relate to the whole.
4. Revision-identify flaws and errors of omission and commission.

Doubt

- Suspending all received opinion that one has the slightest reason to doubt.
- Suspension of decisions or judgment until we are sure, it is clear and distinct to mind.
- Doubting everything received from the senses until we have strong reason to believe.

As a preliminary to the search for absolute certainty, Descartes thought that it was necessary to doubt all that could be doubted and to treat provisionally as false all that could be doubted. The doubt recommended and practiced by Descartes is universal in the sense that it is applied universally to all that can be doubted- namely, every proposition about whose truth doubt is possible. What Descartes proposes to do is to rethink philosophy from the start. To do this it is necessary to examine all his opinions systematically in the hope of finding certain and secure foundation on which to build.

How far then can doubt be extended? I can in the 1st place doubt all that I have learned through the senses. "I have sometimes experienced that these senses were deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely anything by which we have once been deceived."

Descartes argues that this doubt does not affect the propositions of mathematics. “Whether I am awake or asleep 2 and 3 always make 5, and the square can never have more than 4 sides, and it does not seem possible that truths so clear can be suspected of any uncertainty.” It is possible to envisage being always deceived because the hypothesis has a partial basis in experience. There is ground for doubting ideas which are derived through the senses. However, there seems to be no ground at all for doubting propositions the truth of which I see very clearly and distinctly like the truths of mathematics. Empirical propositions are doubtful, but analytic propositions are surely indubitable.

Hence, Descartes was willing to treat provisionally as false also the principles and demonstrations of those mathematical sciences which had appeared to him to be the models of clarity and certainty. He supposed that some evil genius, no less powerful than deceitful, had employed his whole energies in deceiving him. In this sense, his doubt was universal- no proposition, however evident its truths might appear to be, was to be expected from the test.

a) Cogito ergo sum

However much I doubt, I must exist: otherwise I could not doubt. In the very act of doubting, my existence is manifest. However far I extend the application of doubt, I cannot extend it to my own existence. For in the very act of doubting, my existence is revealed. If I am deceived, I must exist to be deceived: if I am dreaming, I must exist to dream.

According to Descartes, the certainty of my own existence obtains only when I am thinking, when I am conscious. “I am, I exist” is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it or that I mentally conceive it. If I ceased to think I could not assert my existence, I can’t possibly conceive my non-existence here and now; for to conceive is to exist.

Cogito ergo sum is an intuition, and the 1st and most certain of all principles which occur to one who philosophizes in an orderly way. This proposition is the 1st and most certain existential judgment, but not an abstract logical principle. Knowledge built on this universal, clear and distinct principle is indubitable and as such, it cannot be doubted by anyone.

b) The existence of God and the external world

To guarantee the truth of clear and distinct ideas, Descartes considers it necessary to prove the existence of a God who is not a deceiver, since it is God who plants the clear and distinct ideas. A deceiving god could deceive us about the truth of the clear and distinct ideas, making us think that these ideas are true, while in fact they are false, even if they should be clear and distinct.

It is also necessary to prove the existence of God without reference to the external world considered as a really existent object of sensation and thought. He, thus, proves the existence of God solely in terms of his rational awareness of his own existence and internal thoughts.

In his 3rd and 5th meditations, Descartes advances 3 arguments for the existence of God, all based on the concept of God as an infinite and perfect being.

1. In the 3rd meditation, Descartes begins by examining the ideas which he has in his mind. 2 things strike him about these ideas; that they are caused, and that according to their content they differ markedly from each other. Some of his ideas seem to be born with him, some invented by him and others come from without. Reason tells us that something cannot come from nothing and the more perfect cannot be a consequence of the less perfect. Our ideas possess different degree of reality and judging by this, some of his ideas could have an origin in himself. But the idea of God contains so much 'objective reality' that he wonders whether he could have produced the idea himself. By the name 'God' he understands a substance which is infinite, independent, all knowing, all powerful and by which everything that exists has been created. How can a finite substance produce the idea of an infinite substance? How could he know that he is finite unless he compared himself with the idea of a perfect being? The idea of perfection is so clear and distinct that he is convinced that it could not proceed from his imperfect nature. Even if he were potentially perfect, the idea of perfection could not have come from that potentiality, for an actual effect must come from a being that actually exists. Descartes concludes that his idea of a perfect and infinite being comes from outside himself. God cannot be a deceiver, since by reason we understand that fraud and deception are imperfections which proceed from some defect, whereas God is perfect.
2. Descartes asks himself, "who is the author of my being?" if he was the author of his being, he would have made himself a perfect being like the being whose idea he has in his mind. He would have bestowed on himself every perfection and thus would be God. But since he is an imperfect being, it follows that he is not the author of his being. This means that he depends on another being for his existence. If that being on whom he depends for his existence also depends on another being for its own existence, and the being on whom it depends in turn also depends on another being, and so on, there will have to be in the long run the ultimate being who does not depend on any other for its own existence. It is perfectly clear that in this there can be no regress to infinity. We must therefore conclude that there is, in the final analysis, a being on whom all other beings depend for their existence, and this is God.
3. Descartes offers his version of the ontological argument to prove God's existence. He says if "all I know clearly and distinctly as pertaining to this object really does belong to it, may I not derive from this an argument demonstrating the existence of God?" He says that some of our ideas are so clear and distinct that we immediately perceive what they imply. E.g. one cannot think of a triangle without at once thinking of its lines and angles. Even so, it does not follow that to think about a triangle that the triangle exists. But just as the idea of a triangle implies certain attributes, so also one cannot think the idea of

God without recognizing that this idea clearly implies the attribute of existence. Therefore, we can affirm with truth that God exists.

IMPORTANT LESSONS FROM DESCARTES' EXPERIENCE AND TEACHING

1. He demonstrates that to steer thought and reason to new directions involves rejection of merely following tradition and calls for revolution of thinking in which one must stand out as an individual, autonomous thinker.
2. He demonstrates that we must not be captives to traditions; he was rebelling against old dogmatism of the church. There are many parallels to this dogmatism today e.g. tribe, political party, gender, religion e.t.c.
3. He further demonstrates that man through his own faculties can acquire knowledge. This underscores man's rational nature. This however requires clarity of mind and needs a method-not just haphazardly.
4. We need to be critical, creative, innovative to have to have a clear understanding of the world-demonstrates the importance of critical and creative thinking