Austin Gray

Philosophy 303

Assignment 18

In the first *meditation* Rene Descartes presents a series of arguments to pursue how the scientific method can be used to obtain true and justified knowledge. Descartes contemporaries voiced concerns oF the notion that the results could not be held as true knowledge in the tradition infallibilist manner. Descartes presents arguments and counterarguments to those explore his idea. He uses these arguments to draw out what it means to know something and whether that is possible or not. Descartes concludes that one cannot know anything about the physical world not even that it exists. In this paper, I will be explicating Descartes view of knowledge and his defense of skepticism.

Descartes begins his series of arguments by presenting what is now known as the “Dream Argument”. In this argument Descartes is brings up the common experience of “waking up for the second time”. The feeling that while still asleep you may feel that you have already awoke and began your normal morning routine. While still being asleep your mind was tricked into believing that you had already began to do other things. Descartes uses the words veridical or non-veridical when describing these experiences. The first, veridical, being experiences that are an accurate representation of reality, waking up the second time, and the second, non-veridical, being the opposite of the first, waking up the first time. The “Dream Argument” uses this concept to explore the consequences of experiences like this.

Descartes’ “Dream Argument” starts with the premise that perceptual beliefs are justified by appealing to ones experiences. He continues stating that every veridical experience has an identical non-veridical experience with the same content. The last premise of the argument is that an individual cannot distinguish between a veridical experience and its identical non-veridical experience. Descartes conclude that one cannot know their perceptual beliefs to be true if the traditional definition of infallibles is held as the measuring metric.

Descartes’ continues with a counter argument to the “Dream Argument” known as the “Transcendental Argument”. To better understand the argument, knowing some of the concepts that are presented will be beneficial. Descartes presents the idea that all human experiences involve complex ideas. In addition to this he states that these complex ideas are constructed of multiple, simpler concepts. He also states that human beings are capable of doing two things with respect to these ideas, synthesize simple ideas into more complex ideas, or analyze the complex ideas and extract simpler ideas from them. Much like with the swimming example, the complex idea can be broken down to the simpler, but we cannot create new simple ideas. Descartes gives the example of a painter painting a “new” beast; this beast is not totally new, but a compilation of parts of other beasts they have seen in the past (Descartes, *Meditations On First Philosophy*, 1-7).

Descartes’ counter argument of the “Dream Argument”, the “Transcendental Argument”, consists of three premises. First that all human experiences are made up of complex ideas. Second these complex ideas are composed of multiple simple ideas. Third that humans can synthesize simple ideas into new complex ideas, analyze complex ideas and extract simpler ideas from them, but they cannot generate new simple ideas. With these premises Descartes concludes that all simple ideas must come from an outside source of some kind. Descates’ conclusion goes further stating:

“That is possibly why our reasoning is not unjust when we conclude from this that Physics, Astronomy, Medicine and all other sciences which have as their end the consideration of composite things, are very dubious and uncertain; but that Arithmetic, Geometry and other sciences of that kind which only treat of things that are very simple and very general, without taking great trouble to ascertain whether they are actually existent or not, contain some measure of certainty and an element of the indubitable.”

To address the conclusion of the “Transcendental Argument”, Descartes presents the “Evil Demon Argument”. In this argument Descartes presents the concept of an ultimately powerful evil demon. This demon is capable of presenting people with any information he would like whether true or not. As an example he could present to people that the clouds are made of cotton candy, he could give them evidence of this. Further the demon is always consistent when presenting information, that being that if someone measures or observes the same thing multiple times it will always have the same result. To continue the example of the cotton candy, if someone were to go take samples of the clouds they would always support that idea. There would be no way for the people to know that they are being presented “false” information.

Descartes argument for skepticism comes mainly from the “Evil Demon Argument”. The argument is presented with the premises that instead of an all-powerful and good God there is possibly an Evil demon that is powerful enough to deceive people. This evil demon is consistent with all physical experiences and makes no mistakes. Descartes’s conclusion that because this evil demon is possible there is no way for an individual to know anything about the physical world, not even whether it exists or not.