

Critically assess Descartes' attempt to find a secure foundation for knowledge.

Knowledge is undoubtedly pivotal to human existence. After all it is what we know from having an 'understanding of or information about a subject that you get by experience or study' ([Cambridge Dictionary \(2023\)](#)), it is how we learn and mature. But what if what we learnt in the past proves false now? It is not that foreign of a concept, we often find ourselves proving what were once facts to be untrue regularly with advances in science and technology, broadening our knowledge and experiences. This fact that the knowledge we once learned as truth can change to be false and therefore cause doubt on what is true is a concept that René Descartes looks into, during his attempt to find a secure foundation for knowledge.

This essay is going to critically assess Descartes' attempt, with particular focus on his theories of clear and distinct ideas, his arguments for the existence of God and his theory about the external world, with particular mention to other renowned philosophers, Bertrand Russell and David Hume.

Before the critical assessment of Descartes' attempt to find a secure foundation for knowledge can begin, it is important to outline, make reference and provide context of Descartes' argument as a whole, before going into some sections deeper to analyse and critically assess the flaws and problems within his theories.

Descartes, a renowned philosopher, famously sought to find the 'perfect knowledge' in which he does so through his book 'meditations'. His method of seeking this 'perfect knowledge' was through his method of doubt, a method which called for him to 'Demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations' (Cottingham, J. (2008). *Western Philosophy: An anthology*. p.22.). Descartes came to this method as he came to know that some of what he learnt in his early years held little to no truth as an adult, motivating him to attempt to find a secure foundation for knowledge, rather than the seemingly everchanging one currently adopted that kept proving what were once facts to be false. 'His system, known as Descartes' Rational Method, marked a significant turning point in Western philosophy, emphasizing doubt as a powerful tool for achieving certainty.' ([Philosophy Institute. \(2023\). Descartes' Rational Method: A Systematic Quest for Certainty](#)). His system consisted of four essential rules which were as follows; 1. we should only accept ideas that are clear and distinct, 2. We should divide the ideas into as many parts as possible, 3. We should always begin with the simplest and easiest problems, 4. Finally we should make sure that our reviews are complete and thorough. By following these four rules we will be able to reason successfully. But perhaps the most important theory and core to many of his beliefs is that of radical doubt, in which Descartes outlines **cogito ergo sum** [I think therefore I am]. This is Descartes first foundational belief and makes reference

to the fact that if we live in doubt then we know one thing for definite that our thoughts exist, as it is impossible to doubt our thoughts due to the fact that if we are doubting, then we must be thinking. This idea will be referenced later on in this critical assessment, but now we have outlined and summarised the ideas we can move onto the assessment in greater detail

As outlined in the initial introduction to Descartes' pursuit and attempt to find a secure foundation in knowledge, there is the important rule of clear and distinct ideas, as it is the first rule out of the four rules of Rational Method. It is outlined as the commitment to only accept the ideas that are clear and distinct. But how can we tell which ideas are clear and distinct? Descartes argues that the ideas are '*those that are sharply separated from all other ideas and cannot be confused with anything else.*' ([Philosophy Institute. \(2023\). Descartes' Rational Method: A Systematic Quest for Certainty](#)). Simply put, anything that we can doubt is not clear enough to be true, if there is room for doubt then the idea is not clear nor distinct for us to consider to be truth. This forms the core of the rational method and allows him to extend his knowledge beyond the cogito, especially in the areas of maths and metaphysics. However, this rule of only accepting various pieces of knowledge due to being '*clear or distinct*' does seem rather flawed, especially if the clarity relies heavily on human reason which Descartes has not necessarily established. What may seem clear and distinct to one may seem unclear to another, leading to pieces of information being subjective to the interpreter, thus creating a problem within Descartes theory as if the knowledge in which we accept as true due to being clear and distinct is varied from another person's distinctions then how can that knowledge be true? For instance for one individual the idea that murder is wrong is so clear and distinct so it must be true according to Descartes' rule, yet for another it is less clear as it is dependent on the circumstance, therefore making the idea untrue since it is unclear. This causes a contradiction as if the idea itself can be both the truth and untruth at the same time then surely the very notion of the idea itself becomes unclear, making even the topic futile as surely the untruth would take precedence over the truth or even create doubt within humankind.

One way that Descartes could argue against this idea; that the clarity and distinctiveness depends on the reliability of human reason, is from the perspective of God. Arguing that God is the one responsible for the clear and distinct ideas, and if this was the case then surely he would create them in such a way that all humans would be able to understand, not just a mere few.

Descartes argues in the existence of a benevolent and non-deceiving God, this is something that is often easily agreed upon when descriptions of God are being shared. He puts emphasis on God being a non deceiver as then our clear and distinct perceptions must be true if they are created by him; which they are according to Descartes as God cannot deceive us. This in turn helps form the epistemic structure of his argument as it furthers and explains the role God plays in the foundation of knowledge.

One argument that can be argued in favour of this method of doubt but goes against the idea that God is non-deceiving is that which is known as the five minute paradox. This paradox was first introduced by Bertrand Russell, who posed the question; if someone were to tell you that the world had been created five minutes ago and everything we know prior to five minutes is just created in our minds, how could we prove it to be false? Or in other words *'suppose you wake up and someone tells you that all your memories were actually given to you, and you were created just five minutes ago. Everything you think you did yesterday or last year never actually happened. This thought experiment asks if we would ever be able to know for sure that our past is real or if it was just created in our minds.'* ([Philosophy \(2023\). Five-Minute Hypothesis Paradox: Explanation and Examples. \[online\] Philosophy Terms.](#)). The thought experiment that Russell presents here is quite an interesting concept to consider, how would we prove this paradox to be false? Afterall if all the knowledge we hold from five minutes prior isn't actually something we experienced then surely we are living lies? This is a fair point as this paradox would call into question everything we know, that is where rational doubt comes in, as this thought experiment supports the idea that **a priori** knowledge does not exist. However, where it can be used as an argument against Descartes is his idea of God. Descartes paints God as a benevolent non-deceiver, which would not be compatible with this thought experience, as if the world was created five minutes ago and our memories were planted in our mind then those memories must've been planted by God, in such a way that it would deceive us into believing that they were reality hence God is a deceiver proving Descartes picture of God to be untrue. However, Descartes argues that this deception is not from God, but some demon. *'I will suppose therefore that [...] some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree.'* (René Descartes (2006). *Meditations of first philosophy*. Kita.: Kessinger.). This notion that a demon is the one responsible for the deceptions is convincing upon first glance, however it still poses a number of problems in regards to his initial definition of God. If God is benevolent then surely he would stop a demon from creating such deceptions within us, for if he didn't and let the demon continue such deceptions could we consider God loving? As surely if God was loving he would free us from such deceptions. Another question raised in criticism of Descartes demon idea is that if a demon is so potent [powerful] that it possesses the ability to create such deceptions in our minds then surely it could also have created the idea of God, meaning that God does not actually exist and is just another deception created by the demon to

misdirect our beliefs and lead us away from discovering the truth. This idea causes a lot of problems for Descartes foundation of knowledge, as described earlier the clear and distinct ideas are created by God, if God is only a mere deception and does not actually exist then neither do these clear and distinct ideas, thus undermining Descartes attempt as God is an important variable in his foundation of knowledge.

Following on from the clear and distinct ideas being created by God, another flaw in Descartes' argument that can be put forward is, the Cartesian Circle. Descartes argues that the existence of God is argued by the reliable perception [the distinct and clear ideas] but those ideas are also created by God. This leads us into a circle, for if the clear and distinct ideas are necessary to prove God's existence but cannot exist without God, his argument becomes even less convincing as it only confuses those he is trying to convince.

But for the sake of continuing Descartes' argument, let's ignore the previous criticisms and lead on from the ideas he has already put forth. We can only accept ideas that are clear and distinct as truth and God exists because of and is responsible for such clear and distinct ideas. Now that God's existence has been established he says he now trusts his natural inclination to believe in the external world.

He however, describes the external world as being distinct from our impression which was justified by John Locke, who agreed that external reality is what causes our impressions, not the other round. However, this idea, unlike the previous few, does seem to hold some validity as it is easily accepted that the external world is what creates our impressions and therefore helps us gain knowledge by broadening our impressions and surroundings. However the validity of this argument is not as clear to everyone. One philosopher who believed that this inference was invalid was David Hume, who believed that the external realm is merely a belief not certainty, which goes against Descartes and Locke's version of the external world as if the world is merely belief according to Hume then it goes against the '*res extensa*' [*an extended thing or substance : material substance*' ([Merriam-webster.com. \(2021\). Merriam-Webster Dictionary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/res%20extensa))] as objective reality.

However even with this comparison between Descartes and Hume we also cannot simply ignore the previous criticisms made in this assessment as they highlight how heavily Descartes is relying on theological assumptions to support his theories on the foundations of knowledge. Which is a little surprising especially when he takes such great effort in stressing the importance of only accepting ideas that are clear and distinct, unless these theological assumptions are so clear to Descartes, meaning that he is unlike so many who these assumptions and even beliefs in God are unconvincing to, we are brought back to the initial problem of the clear and distinct nature of the truths being subjective, even if God created them in such a way to be clear, people will still have different versions of the truth, either due to lack of faith or simply living in ignorance of Descartes rule. Descartes' foundations seem strongest when they are only self-acknowledged as it is simply up to interpretation and personal belief therefore making his theories weak when brought into

the empirical world, due to having illogical factors, such as the Cartesian circle which seems to be a constant loop of confusion.

To conclude, whilst Descartes' attempt to find a secure foundation for knowledge is somewhat interesting, it does hold many flaws and contradictions. Such as different interpretations individuals could hold on what constitutes a clear and distinct idea or the contradictions in which a benevolent and non-deceiving God could not only let his creations [us] be deceived, and the problem of the Cartesian Circle causing more confusion rather than convincing. However, that is not to say his arguments do not have some plausibility; for example his idea that external reality causes our impressions, is acceptable upon first inspection. Furthermore, after this critical assessment, Descartes' attempt to find a secure foundation for knowledge proves more futile than successful as the problems and contradictions lead him to making a heavily theological and assumption based attempt.

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