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Descartes Paper

Problems of Knowledge

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Is Seeing Really Believing?

Raise your hand in front of your face, what do you see? A piece of flesh attached to your arm with five fingers extending into several directions. Now touch the hand in front of your face, the sensation feels real yet is it? Just because we see something in front of our face does not mean that it is real but that does not mean it is unreal either. Rene Descartes would argue that there is no possible way for you to ever truly know if you have two hands. It is not that he is saying you do not have hands but he is also not saying that you have two hands. Seeing does not mean believing and believing doesn't mean what we see is true.

To examine this idea we must first delve into the traditional analysis of knowledge, that knowledge is justified true belief. In order to have any knowledge you must first have belief, one cannot know something without having a belief about it. In order to justify something you must have good evidential reasons for why that thing should be justified. Now you can have true beliefs without it counting as knowledge. This is because you can believe something without justification or evidence, such as believing in God, some people need no evidence for his existence yet it is their true belief that he exists. What makes the evidence provided for justification valid? It is only valid if it can not possibly be false. If there is no chance that the belief is false then it is justified and is therefore considered knowledge. This is how Descartes describes justification. It also leads to his formation of his method of doubt.

Method of doubt, this is the idea that if I can doubt it then it must be false and that if I cannot doubt it then it must be true. Descartes began to go through each of his beliefs one by one, for example two is greater than one and three is greater than one. However part way through he realized this was impossible and that you cannot possibly go through every single belief one holds. He then moved to the idea that our senses justify our beliefs. Taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight are what gives us our evidence that our beliefs are justified. Again, seeing is believing, you see your hands in front of you therefore they must be real and you have that belief. That belief is justified by your senses which then makes that true belief knowledge. But here Descartes came upon a problem, how does one know that they can truly trust the senses? The senses can be tricked by external and internal forces. An example of a trick from external forces is the line test, if you draw two lines of the same length and put open triangles on the end facing either in or out, your mind and eyes will perceive one line as longer than the other, even though this is false. An internal trick can be when you hear someone call your name but really no one has said anything of the sort to you. If the senses can be tricked then how can we gain truly justified knowledge, how do we know we have two hands? Descartes argues that one can never know if you truly have two hands. He has several arguments as to why we can never truly know, the dream argument, which contains the painter argument as well, and the demon argument.

The dream argument, in its essence is that our “reality” is really a dream. In a dream your senses are at their peak and in their ideal condition for the truth to come out, or what is perceived as the truth. When you are dreaming, unless it is a lucid dream in which you have control of what is occurring, you are unaware that you are dreaming. You believe that your dream is reality and that all around you is real, and if what your senses are feeling are real in the dream then that is knowledge. You can never know whether or not you are dreaming or if you are awake. What we see in our dreams are composed of things we see in reality, which means that either what we are living is real or composed of what is truly real. This is the idea that comes from the painter argument.

The demon argument lays out a thought experiment, that may be true or may just be a thought experiment. What if we are all little people under the control of an all knowing and all powerful demon, that demon controls our thoughts, our perceptions, and our behaviors. This demon controls every aspect of our reality, which means that our “reality” can purely be the concoction of an all powerful demon. If all of this is true then every thought that crosses your mind is incorrect and erroneous. This means that nothing we know can truly be justified which means it can never be true knowledge. No knowledge is then possible, if it cannot be justified it cannot be knowledge.

So with these arguments at hand, why would Descartes argue that we may never know that we have 2 hands. When looking at the dream argument and the painter argument it can be argued that the idea of our hands are merely a dream. We may have seen hands in our reality and then composed them onto our arms in our dream like states, imagining our hands functions and purposes. He would argue that since we cannot know if we are dreaming then we cannot ever really know if we have the two hands we see in front of us. In regards to the demon argument Descartes would argue that because the demon controls all of our thoughts that it is making us perceive we have hands which means we may not really have hands at all. However the flip side to this is that the demon also controls thoughts and so it may be placing the idea into our heads that we may not really have two hands, when in fact we do. Using both of these arguments, according to Descartes, we will never know that we have two hands. In fact the only thing that we truly know is that we exist, because if I am being tricked I exist but if I am not being tricked I exist. Therefore the only thing we truly know is that we exist, but not what we exist as. We could be a brain floating in a jar, that brain does not have hands so in fact do not have two hands, or we could be a human being with both arms and hands showing that we do have two hands. There is no way to definitively prove what we exist as or whether our existence is real or not and because of that Descartes argues that we will never know if we have two hands.

Take a look at the hand in front of your face again, it seemed real before but now you are questioning it. You do not know if you truly have two hands. You no longer know if what you are seeing is true. Life and the world as you know it has changed, the hands you see in front of you may be part of a dream or an idea produced by our mind that is not true. It also may be the concoction of an all-powerful and all knowing demon who has placed the idea of you having hands into your head, or it may be that the demon has placed the idea of not having two hands to make you question what is real. No matter which argument of descartes you choose to believe or to side with rather, both leave you with the unanswered question of how can I truly know if I have two hands.