UNIT 13: KNOWLEDGE AND CERTAINTY OF COGITO

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- explain Descartes quest for true knowledge
- discuss the view that sense experience is not a reliable source of true knowledge
- describe the ability of human reason to discover the truth
- explain Descartes method of doubt
- explain Descartes cogito argument
- analyse the criticisms of Descartes theory of knowledge

13.2.INTRODUCTION

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was born in the Touraine region of France, in the town of La Haye. He is widely known as the father and

originator of modern philosophy and as France's greatest philosopher. He studied in the Jesuit college of La Flèche where his education included mathematics, logic and philosophy. He was most impressed, during these years, with the certainty and precision of mathematics, as compared with philosophy whose teachings invariably produced doubts and disputes. Descartes criticised much of the scholastic-Aristotelian tradition as it was taught in the schools of his day. For a long time he attempted to break with the philosophical traditions of his day and start philosophy anew. Some of his principal works include Discourse on Method (1637), Mediations on First Philosophy (1641), Principles of philosophy (1644), and The Passions of the Soul (1649).

LET US KNOW



Truth is Descartes's passion. He says of himself:

I have always had an extreme desire to learn how to distinguish the true from the false, in order to see clearly how I should act and to be able to travel with assurance through this life.

13.3. KNOWLEDGE AND QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

Descartes realized that our sense experience cannot be the basis of true knowledge because the senses often deceive us and the information we get by relying on sense experience is constantly changing and is often unreliable. Sense experience cannot provide the certainty needed to guarantee that which we claim to know is true. Being a rationalist Descartes claims that knowledge (as opposed to opinion) is possible only if it is based on self-evident and absolutely certain principles. Such principles are not learned through experience; instead, they are implicit in the very notion of reasoning itself. So, like mathematicians, we have to rely on reason. Only with the help of reason we can determine whether our opinions are justified true beliefs (that is, knowledge). Descartes was much influenced by the progress and success of science and mathematics which are based on the

natural ability of reason. He wanted to provide philosophy with the exactness of mathematics.

13.4. THE ROLE OF REASON: RATIONALISM

He believed in the natural ability of human reason to discover the truth. He emphasized the rational capacity of the human mind as the source of truth both about man and about the world. Being a rationalist he assumed that what he could think clearly with his mind did in fact exist in the world outside his mind. He believed that certain ideas are innate in the human mind, that, given the proper occasion, experience would cause these innate truths to become self-evident. He, thus, set out to formulate clear rational principles that could be organized into a system of truths from which accurate information about the world could be deduced.

Descartes broke with the past and gave philosophy a fresh start. He was determined to discover the basis of intellectual certainty in his own reason. He, therefore, gave philosophy a fresh start by using only those truths he could know through his powers as the foundation for all other knowledge. His ideal was to arrive at a system of thought whose various principles were true and were related to each other in such a way that the mind could move easily from one true principle to another, but in order to achieve such an organically connected set of truths, Descartes felt that he must make these truths "conform to a rational scheme." With such a scheme he could not only organize present knowledge but could "direct our reason in order to discover those truths of which we are ignorant." His first task therefore was to work out his "rational scheme," his method.

LET US KNOW



THE WAX ARGUMENT:

Descartes asked, "How is it that we know the essential qualities, for example, of a piece of wax?" At one time a piece of wax is hard, has a certain shape, colour, size, and fragrance. But when we

bring it close to the fire its fragrance vanishes, its shape and colour are lost, and its size increases. What remains in the wax that permits us still to know it is wax? "It cannot," says Descartes, "be anything that I observed by means of the senses, since everything in the field of taste, smell, sight, touch, and hearing are changed, and still the same wax nevertheless remains." It is nothing but my understanding alone which does conceive it, solely an inspection by my mind" which enables me to know the true qualities of the wax. Descartes says, " what I have said here about the wax can be applied to all other things external to me"



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: Who is known as the father of modern philosophy?

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Q.2: Why was Descartes impressed with mathematics?

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Q.3: What is the problem with knowledge based on sense experience?

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Q.4: What is rationalism?

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Q.5 What according to Descartes are the characteristics of true knowledge?

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13.5. DESCARTES'S METHOD

Descartes's method consists of harnessing the powers of the mind with a special set of rules. He insisted upon the necessity of method, upon systematic and orderly thinking because if one aimlessly seeks for truth it will lead to confusions and blind our mental powers. He believed that our minds naturally possess two powers, namely, intuition and deduction by which we are able to arrive at knowledge of things. But by themselves these powers can lead us astray unless they are carefully regulated. Method consists therefore in those rules by which our powers of intuition and deduction are guided in an orderly way.

13.6. THE METHOD OF MATHEMATICS

Descartes looked to mathematics for the best example of clear and precise thinking. He was convinced that mathematical certainty is the result of a special way of thinking, and if he could discover this way, he would have a method for discovering true knowledge of whatever lay within the compass of our powers. Mathematics is not itself the method but merely exhibits the method Descartes is searching for. Mathematics was the basis of his own method. In mathematics he discovered something fundamental about the operation of the human mind. He believed that our minds are capable of knowing some ideas with absolute clarity and distinctness. Moreover, mathematical reasoning showed him that we are able to discover what we do not know by progressing in an orderly way from what we do know. To him all the various sciences are merely different ways in which the same powers of reasoning and the same method are used. In each case it is the orderly use of intuition and deduction.

13.7. INTUITION AND DEDUCTION

According to Descartes these two methods are the most certain routes to knowledge. By intuition he means our understanding of self-evident principles, such as the axioms of geometry or the arithmetic equations. These statements are self-evident in that they prove themselves to reason.

To understand them is to know that they are absolutely true and no one can doubt them.

By deduction he means orderly, logical reasoning or inference from self-evident propositions. Thus, by intuition we grasp a simple truth completely and immediately, whereas by deduction we arrive at a truth by a process.

Descartes's goal as a philosopher was to build a system of philosophy based upon intuition and deduction which will remain as certain and as imperishable as geometry.

Descartes wanted to test knowledge upon a starting point that had absolute certainty in the individual's own mind. Knowledge requires the use, therefore, of intuition and deduction, where 'first principles are given by intuition alone while the remote conclusions... are furnished only by deduction."

Descartes method does not consist only of intuition and deduction, but also in the rules he formulated for their guidance. The chief point of his rules is to provide clear and orderly procedure for the operation of the mind. He gave four precepts in his work the Discourse on Method:

1. 'the first is never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth'

2. 'to divide each of the difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible'

3. 'to direct my thoughts in an orderly manner, by beginning with the simplest and most easily known objects in order to ascend little by little...to knowledge of the most complex'

13.8. METHODIC DOUBT

Descartes used the method of doubt in order to find an absolutely certain, starting point for building up our knowledge. He hoped to find a self

evident principle which serves as the foundation from which an absolutely certain philosophy can be deduced. He lays down three requirements for such a foundational belief:

1. Its certainty must be such that it is impossible to doubt, it is self evident to reason, it is clear (in itself) and distinct (from every other belief).

2. Its certainty must be ultimate and not dependent upon the certainty of any other belief.

3. It must be about something which exists (so that from it beliefs about the existence of other things may be deduced).

Thus Descartes put all his earlier beliefs to doubt. By the method of doubt Descartes shows how uncertain our knowledge is, even of what seems most obvious to us. But to doubt all his beliefs individually would be interminable. So, he examines them by classes or groups to see if there is any one belief which defies doubt by meeting the above three criteria. So, class by class, group by group, he goes though all his beliefs. After examining his beliefs of sense perception, then the belief about the existence of the physical world, then the beliefs from the natural sciences and finally to mathematical beliefs. Even mathematics can fall into error sometimes. He supposes that an evil demon may always deceive him in all the things that he believes to be true even the propositions of mathematics like 2+3=5. Descartes raises the question, "can any belief withstand my doubting all beliefs?"

13.9. COGITO ERGO SUM

Descartes now presents his famous triumphant reply: He says that even if I am deceived in all my beliefs, including those of mathematics, there is one belief that cannot be doubted. Every time I doubt, I must exist to doubt. In doubting the truth of every other belief, I cannot doubt the belief that I am doubting, therefore I exist. He thus establishes the fact that I exist as a thinking thing.

And so Descartes has found his absolutely certain, self evident and indubitable first principle which he formulates in Latin as Cogito, Ergo Sum: I think, therefore I am.

Thinking for Descartes includes any act of consciousness that we are immediately aware of. It includes doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, refusing, feeling.

13.10. CRITICISM

1) The cogito proof establishes that I exist as a mind with my own thoughts, and that this is all that I can know with certainty. This is the position of subjectivism. However Descartes falls into the philosophical position of solipsism, the view that my mind with its thoughts is the only thing that exists, the only reality and that other persons and the physical world are only ideas within my mind.

2) Although Descartes later moved on to prove the existence of god and the physical world yet his philosophy erected a split or a duality between two different kinds of reality: between mental, spiritual, thinking substance on one hand and physical, extended, spatial substances on the other. These two kinds of substances constitute two different and separate realities between which there is a gap which can never be closed.

3) Although Descartes emphasizes self-evident ideas but such ideas provide no new knowledge about the world. Though sense experience may not be certain, it provides us with information which is as reliable as we need. The fact that a belief is not absolutely certain should not disqualify it for knowledge. Why not say that something is known as long as there is no good reason to doubt it?

After proving his own existence, Descartes moves further and proves the existence of God and the external world.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.6. Fill in the blanks:

a) Descartes believed that our minds naturally possess two powers, namely, ...and .....

b) Descartes looked to ..... for the best example of clear and precise thinking.

c) Descartes used the ..... in order to find an absolutely certain, starting point for building up our knowledge.

d) Descartes establishes the fact that I exist as a ..... thing.

e) Descartes's self evident and indubitable first principle is.....

f) Descartes's philosophical position leads one to.....

Q.7. State whether the following statements are true or false:

a) Every time I doubt, I must exist to doubt. (T/F)

b) Descartes method consists only of intuition and deduction. (T/F)

c) Descartes emphasizes self-evident ideas but such ideas provide no new knowledge about the world. (T/F)

d) Only with the help of reason we can determine whether our opinions are justified true beliefs that is, knowledge. (T/F)

Q.8. Why did Descartes use his method of doubt?



13.11. LET US SUM UP

We have discussed in this unit Descartes idea of knowledge and the certainty of the Cogito. The most important points are:

- Descartes realized that our sense experience cannot be the basis of true knowledge.

- Descartes claims that knowledge (as opposed to opinion) is possible only if it is based on self-evident and absolutely certain principles.
- Such principles are not learned through experience; instead, they are implicit in the very notion of reasoning itself.
- He was determined to discover the basis of intellectual certainty in his own reason.
- He believed that our minds naturally possess two powers, namely, intuition and deduction by which were able to arrive at knowledge of things.
- Descartes method does not consist only of intuition and deduction, but also in the rules he formulated for their guidance.
- Descartes used the method of doubt in order to find an absolutely certain, starting point for building up our knowledge.
- In doubting the truth of every other belief, I cannot doubt the belief that I am doubting, therefore I exist. He thus establishes the fact that I exist as a thinking thing.
- So Descartes has found his absolutely certain, self evident and indubitable first principle which he formulates in Latin as Cogito, Ergo Sum: I think, therefore I am.
- After proving his own existence, Descartes moves further and proves the existence of God and the external world.



13.12. FURTHER READINGS

1) **Skirry, J.** (2008). Descartes: A Guide for the Perplexed. London: Continuum

2) **Lavine, T.** (1984). From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest. United States:

3) **Sorell, T.** (2000). Descartes: A very short introduction. New York: Oxford University Press.

13.13. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. To Q. No. 1: Rene Descartes

Ans. To Q. No. 2: Descartes was most impressed with mathematics because of its certainty and precision as compared with philosophy whose teachings invariably produced doubts and disputes.

Ans. To Q. No. 3: Knowledge based on sense experience often deceive us and the information we get by relying on sense experience is constantly changing and is often unreliable. Sense experience cannot provide the certainty needed to guarantee that which we claim to know is true.

Ans. To Q. No. 4: Rationalism is the philosophical movement which regards reason as the ultimate source of knowledge. It is usually associated with the introduction of mathematical methods into philosophy. It relies on the idea that reality has a rational structure in that all aspects of it can be grasped through mathematical and logical principles, and not simply through sensory experience.

Ans. To Q. No. 5: Certainty and indubitability.

Ans. To Q. No. 6:
a) intuition and deduction
b) Mathematics
c) Method of doubt
d) thinking
e) I think therefore I am
f) Solipsism

Ans. To Q. No. 7:
a) True
b) False
c) True
d) True

Ans. To Q. No. 8: Descartes used the method of doubt in order to find an absolutely certain, starting point for building up our knowledge. He hoped

to find a self evident principle which serves as the foundation from which an absolutely certain philosophy can be deduced. Thus Descartes put all his earlier beliefs to doubt. By the method of doubt Descartes shows how uncertain our knowledge is, even of what seems most obvious to us. After putting all his beliefs to doubt he finally reached the principle which he could not doubt. This was the famous principle of Cogito Ego Sum or I think therefore I am.

13.14. MODEL QUESTIONS

a) Very short questions:

Q.1 Who is known as the father of modern philosophy?

Q.2. What was Descartes's passion?

Q.3. What according to Descartes is the source of true knowledge?

Q. 4. What was Descartes's problem with knowledge based on sense experience?

b) Short questions: (answer in about 150-200 words)

Q.1. Why did Descartes want to start philosophy anew?

Q.2. What led Descartes to believe that reason is the sole source of true knowledge?

Q.3 Explain Descartes's method of doubt.

Q.4. Critically discuss Descartes's philosophy of the Cogito.

c) Long questions: (answer in about 300-500 words)

Q.1. Who was Descartes? Discuss Descartes's quest for true knowledge.

Q.2. Distinguish between rationalism and empiricism. Why did Descartes regards reason as the sole source of knowledge?

Q.3. Explain Descartes's method of doubt. How did he arrive at the principle of Cogito Ergo Sum through this method?

Q. 4. Critically examine Descartes's theory of knowledge.

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