

Three Principles of Cartesian Epistemology

The principles of Cartesian epistemology outlined by Descartes have formed the foundation for much of modern epistemology. These four basic principles outline the conditions for knowledge, two different types of bases for knowledge, and a need for a connecting principle between the two fundamental types of knowledge and other knowledge, such as that of the external world. I am going to focus on a quick discussion of the first, third, and fourth principles, though I will also need to touch on the second in my discussion of the third, as the third and the second are the two types of bases for knowledge.

The first principle of Cartesian epistemology deals with the concept of knowledge, what knowledge is and what conditions we need to satisfy to say that we have it. Descartes argues that knowledge should be about something indubitable, or absolutely true. One way he shows this is by claiming that his previous false assumptions are not knowledge; their falseness is what concretely excludes them from being knowledge. Further, Descartes implies that a person must have a belief in something for it to constitute knowledge; this is more or less indirectly implied as he only calls his beliefs into doubt, seeing no need to call other "propositions" into doubt. Third, he sees a need for some connection between the belief and the indubitable fact, some reason for belief in the mind. This is why he must examine the source of his beliefs, and prove that they cannot be called into doubt.

The second and third principles outlined by Descartes have to do with two kind of knowledge he believes we can have: a rational base for knowledge and an empirical or sense base for knowledge. Leaving rational knowledge behind (presumably because

Descartes first believes things like mathematics rational indubitable knowledge, and then later changes his mind), we focus on empirical knowledge. Descartes argues that while we cannot know that our experiences have any relation to anything (because of the Dream or Evil Genius arguments), we can be sure that we have the experiences.

The fourth principle is an obvious need for some kind of connection between the two foundational bases for knowledge (principles two and three), and any other kind of knowledge, specifically knowledge of the external world. Descartes uses inference between the third principle (experiential knowledge) and the external world, arguing (in a poor circular fashion) for the existence of God, then using that inference connecting the knowledge of our perceptions to the knowledge of the external world. Despite Descartes' failure to find a strong inferential connection which would "let us out of our minds," there is still the possibility of finding such a connection. This search for the door out of our minds is the basis for the fourth principle of epistemology.

Descartes did the field of philosophy a great service in laying a solid groundwork for the study of epistemology. Many of the ideas he presented, such as the first principle (from which we derive the tripartite analysis of knowledge), as well as the possible foundations for knowledge and the connection between these and other knowledge, are still fundamental issues in epistemology today.