
Epistemological Arguments Of David Hume And Rene Descartes

Although two of the most important of the early modern philosophers were writing a century apart from each other, Rene Descartes and David Hume were both examining epistemological arguments, ultimately coming to very different conclusions. Rene Descartes was a 17th century French philosopher whose main fields of interest were metaphysics and epistemology, and he is often considered to be the father of modern philosophy. One of his more important works, *The Meditations on First Philosophy*, details his philosophical viewpoints on God, his own existence, the human soul and Christianity. David Hume was an 18th century Scottish philosopher, whose view of epistemology focused on the theories of empiricism and skepticism. David Hume's most important philosophical book, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, lays out his philosophical arguments on topics such as human habits and from where humans obtain their knowledge. Each philosopher presents theories and arguments on various topics of philosophy, such as considering the idea of God, whether or not God exists, and how people attain their knowledge, but Descartes viewed these as a rationalist whereas Hume's viewpoint was that of an empiricist.

In the philosophy of this time period, there are two schools of thought on the subject of attaining knowledge, which are the rational and empirical philosophers. Rational philosophers believe that people's knowledge comes from within themselves. That is by using thought and reasoning we can "put the pieces together" perhaps by recalling something from our memory in order to attain knowledge. On the other hand, empirical philosophers believe that knowledge is attained through experiences, meaning that they believe that humans attain knowledge a posteriori, or after having a direct experience with something. For example, the empirical philosopher believes that a person would know that a hot stove will burn their hand only after experiencing this, and until then that person would not know that the stove is hot and that they should not touch it. The rational philosopher on the other hand, believes that a person who has learned that a hot stove can heat a pan or burn food would be able to recall that and infer that their hand would get burned by the stove as well.

Rene Descartes was a rationalist philosopher whose main focus was epistemology, which is the study of knowledge. The philosophical structure to Descartes' arguments in *The Meditation on First Philosophy* is based on both his cogito argument and his argument for the existence of God. Building on that structure are his two philosophical arguments on mathematics, which he explains must exist, and how we obtain knowledge of the physical world. Further, he argued that human knowledge was equivalent to justified true belief, so that to know that a proposition is true, a person must first believe in the given proposition as well as having a good reason for believing it to be true. Descartes' most famous argument is the cogito argument in which Descartes says that he must exist and be a living being because he is aware of himself and the world around him. The famous saying associated with Descartes is the basis of this cogito argument, "I think, therefore I am", which means that because he can think for himself he must exist in some context. He wrestles with the thought of whether or not he exists and he concludes that he is a thing that thinks (as well as a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines and senses). Descartes then continues with his argument about the existence of God and whether or not God is a deceiver. He argues that the idea of an

absolute perfect God could not have originally come from within his thoughts. Descartes continues by writing that God is an infinite, powerful, and benevolent being that created him and everything else that is living and therefore would not deceive him. The more he focuses on this idea the less likely it is that these ideas could have come from himself alone that they must have come from a being more perfect than himself or any other person who taught him. Therefore he concludes that God must exist and that the idea of God came from God who is the only perfect being. Descartes continues the argument by saying that he admits that he does not understand or can even touch with his thoughts the infinite and many other ideas in God. The nature of the infinite is not for humans to fully understand because Descartes writes that we are restricted in our thoughts and senses. Descartes' conclusion is that the idea he has of God is a true, clear and distinct thought which came from God himself.

Associated with his ideas about existence, Descartes contemplates the attributes of intellect, which is the power of knowledge, and will, which is the power of choice. Descartes says that the will of humans is imperfect while the will of God is always going to be perfect. Descartes writes that even though humans were made in the image of God, we can still make mistakes. Descartes writes that if he only acted through his intellect and because everything he has in his thoughts comes from God, that since God gave him all of these thoughts, he would be incapable of making any errors in his lifetime. When he focuses on the idea of God, he cannot find any mistakes or error in his idea of God. Meanwhile, when he turns his argument back on himself, he finds that he makes a lot of mistakes in his lifetime. Descartes says that it is not a huge surprise that he makes mistakes and that he comprehends that error does not depend on God but is more of a defect in himself. He concludes the argument by saying that the reason he makes mistakes because of his own free will, and he, unlike God, is restricted in his ability to judge the truth.

David Hume's thoughts on epistemology are based on his belief in empiricism, which is knowledge gained through experience. Hume examines the arguments for the existence of God in section two of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. In this section, *Of the Origin of Ideas*, Hume's writes, "The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom." (Hume, 11) In discussing the existence of God, Hume is disagreeing with Descartes' arguments that God exists, that we come from God and that we are not perfect but we are made in the image of God. Instead Hume argues that the idea of God as a perfect Being actually comes from people thinking about themselves and magnifying their own power, intelligence, and good behavior to create in their mind a more perfect Being than themselves. This comes from Hume's empirical beliefs that knowledge comes from what we have experienced.

One of Hume's important arguments as an empiricist philosopher is known as "Hume's fork," which is how Hume divides thoughts into the "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact." Hume believes that an idea in philosophy, like the existence of God, can either be "relations of ideas" or "matters of fact" but the idea cannot fall into both categories at the same time. "Relations of ideas", Hume argues, are the ideas that humans naturally know or can discover by thinking about them, also known as a priori knowledge. An example of "relations of ideas" is the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic. "Relations of ideas" Hume argues are ideas that humans already know or can be known by asking yourself what if that idea is not true, which is also called a contradictory test or a priori. "Matters of Fact" are thoughts and knowledge that we can gain through our own experience so that we should ourselves if an idea

is true something known a posteriori knowledge. All reasoning about “matters of fact” is based on cause and effect, which is based on experience. Knowing our experience and believing that the future will resemble the past means that “matters of fact” are finally based on the principle of custom.

As two of the most important early modern philosophers, Hume and Descartes laid out important epistemological arguments which some times were in agreement and other times completely opposed one another. Descartes’ rationalist approach to philosophy is based his most important arguments about his existence and the existence of God. He writes in *Meditations on First Philosophy* that he is a living thinking thing (his cogito argument) created by a perfect benevolent Being. As a rationalist, another important argument that Descartes makes is that the senses and experiences are unreliable and that knowledge only comes when a person uses pure reason and understanding. Hume and other empirical philosophers agreed that some knowledge which they referred to “relations of ideas”, such as mathematics, could be obtained by thought and reason alone. However they disagreed with the rationalists in how we gain knowledge of the physical world which they say must be learned through the senses and experience. Hume even presented his thoughts on the nature of God in his book, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, as something people understood based on their own experience. Both Descartes and Hume’s philosophical arguments have survived the test of time, laying the groundwork for the arguments of future modern philosophers as well.

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