

Metaphysics

Philosophy is concerned with 'truth' – this is what gives us knowledge.

However, how do we know that the 'knowledge' we gain through our senses and perception are giving us the 'truth' and not a version of it? How do we really know the 'truth'?

Plato believed that the only way to have true knowledge was to look beyond this world to the world of the forms.

The Forms are metaphysical (non-physical) ideas and concepts that are unchanging and perfect.

Only philosophers (who know the difference between appearance and the actual reality of things) can have knowledge of the forms (remember this is why Plato thought they should be in charge of running society).

Western Philosophy for nearly two and a half thousand years has been influenced by this idea and this is why Descartes uses this concept to try to get to truth himself.

Descartes

René Descartes was a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. He is considered the father of modern philosophy! His main area of focus is metaphysics and philosophy of mind. He is interested specifically in knowledge and "how" we know things and ourselves.

"All that I have, up to this moment, accepted as possessed of the highest truth and certainty, I received either from or through the senses. I observed, however, that these sometimes misled us; and it is the part of prudence not to place absolute confidence in that by which we have even once been deceived"

– *Meditation 1, paragraph 3.*

Radical doubt: Descartes starts the meditation by observing that many of his common sense opinions have turned out to be false and that this belief system is full of prejudice and error. Descartes wants to get rid of these errors so as to establish "something firm and constant in the sciences". In other words, he wants to find something certain and durable. To do this he plans to get rid of all his previous opinions "begin afresh from the foundations". He, likens the process to tipping out a basket full of apples to identify the rotten ones. Then only putting back the good ones. You could also use the analogy of Descartes demolishing a house and rebuilding it from foundations up. By doing this he hopes that the beliefs that survive any possible doubt must be of the utmost certainty and durability- free from error.

This is called Descartes "method of doubt". To do this Descartes suspends judgment on everything he previously took for granted. All that can be doubted is treated as false for the purpose of argument. For the slightest ground for doubt that he finds will be sufficient for him to treat them as if they were false. This method of doubt is very fierce and will lead him to reject very many (if not all) his beliefs. But because it is so fierce that if anything survives which can't be doubted then this must be absolutely certain. This will then be solid enough to build the foundations for a theory of knowledge which is free from error. Descartes is not himself a sceptic: he does not raise doubts simply for their own sake. He uses sceptical arguments precisely in order to give security to his theory of knowledge by uncovering unshakable first principles. This is known as methodological scepticism. Scepticism in itself is the enemy of philosophy.

The last point Descartes makes about his method is that it need not involve going through each of his beliefs in turn as this would take forever! Rather he decides to doubt what he calls the 'principles' i.e. the most fundamental belief. Since the bulk of his beliefs rest on a few basic principles, by doubting these he can demolish the system more efficiently.

Descartes imagines that a mal genie or evil genius has created a world of illusions and we must doubt everything that could be an illusion – he then sees there is something he cannot doubt – himself

Descartes' project is to eliminate error from his system of beliefs and establish a certain enduring knowledge. To do this he will destroy all his previous opinions by rejecting any that have the slightest grounds for doubt. He won't go through each belief individually but will destroy the 'principles' or most basic beliefs, so that the rest will collapse of their own accord.

NOTE: Descartes doubt is sometimes referred to as HYPERBOILC DOUBT- to reject a belief if there is any grounds what so ever for being suspicious of their truths not just if there is a reasonable grounds.

What Descartes is left with is the KNOWLEDGE that he himself (or his mind at least) exists as a separate thinking thing. I think therefore I exist – Cogito ergo sum

From this belief and his ability to reason he is able to rebuild knowledge of the world around him.

Hume: Hume points out that we think that we know a lot of stuff. How do we know it? Most of it is unobserved. We rely on 2nd hand knowledge.

Hume makes a distinction in knowledge about the different types of knowledge we have. He categorised them as 'matters of fact' and the relation of ideas.

Relations of Ideas: "Something whose denial is inconceivable or self-contradictory" In other relations of ideas are truths you can't deny e.g. $2+2 = 4$. We know them through simply thinking about them! We don't evidence to support it. We know it through what Hume called and operation of thought.

Matters of fact: To deny them is not automatically a contradiction. I.e. it is raining outside. It may be raining or it may not. For Hume these are harder to prove but they are actually more important as they can actually tell us something about the world worth knowing! Not like relations of ideas!

Hume wanted to clear up what we mean by knowledge. There are certain things that are true "no matter what" (relations of ideas) but these only account for a proportion of our knowledge and are only helpful in part of our lives.

The most important philosophical position for a philosopher is to reject disinformation and claims of fact that are really opinions masquerading as fact.

Hume makes it clear that even in all matters of 'fact' (that knowledge that we arrive at through observation and 'evidence') is not necessarily 'true' in the same way that matters of relation are.

When we makes claims of fact based on observation we are using inductive arguments. We infer a conclusion based on evidence, observation and experience. However we have made something called an 'inductive leap'. We have 'inferred' a conclusion based on our evidence, our existing knowledge and the way we see the world (person bias).

This is what Hume calls the **problem of induction**. This is important in debates about 'knowledge' especially when 'knowledge' is used to underpin certain truth claims or used to make decisions that affect our lives i.e. in ethics, politics etc.

Inductive arguments (scientific arguments) use evidence to generate a conclusion. But we have to make the leap (inductive leap) between the evidence and the conclusion. The smaller our evidence bank, the greater the inductive leap and the less certain we are that our conclusion is 'true'.

We may also assume that "The Future will resemble the past" In the case of fire being hot this seems like a reasonable thing to assume. Hume says this is because of something called: "THE UNIFORMITY OF NATURE" – The idea that world nature generally remains the same and repeats patterns. Whilst we might assume that the sun will rise tomorrow we cannot guarantee that it will.

Can we 'know' anything?

So what happens when we doubt everything? What happens if we have no absolute truth? Does this mean that we should no longer look for truth?

We do have absolute truth i.e. we exist and that logic and mathematics exist.

However just because two plus two always equals four doesn't mean that we are seeing two lots of two apples. We may be fooled or it may be an illusion.

The issue here is not about whether we can have any truth but about whether there is absolute (unchanging truth). Hume and Descartes scepticism just reveals the difference between types of truth. Scientific truth is not absolute truth, the way we see the world is not absolute. It is a perspective. And this perspective, scientific truth is helpful, important and relevant to our lives. We may not know for certain that the sun will rise tomorrow but I will still set my alarm ready for school, because it is likely too; if I didn't and I was late for school I would be in trouble.

Hume just wants to point out that we must still question what we mean by truth even if it is generally accepted. This means we are constantly looking to improve the certainty of our truth. If we did not look for a conclusion about the origins of the universe beyond Jewish and Christian scripture (6 days of Creation) we would not have found evolution and wouldn't have enquired into gene mapping or found DNA which in turn would not allow us to highlight rogue and life limiting conditions. We would not have developed astronomy and created space rockets and sophisticated machinery, the technology from which became the basis for modern day incubators for sick babies etc.

Hume wants to continue to strive for better knowledge and more certainty and he raises the issue of acknowledge that what we know now is not all there is to know.

Hume just wants us to understand that we see the world in one way, through Human eyes and this only gives us one perception of reality. This is known as an anthropocentric view and limits our knowledge.



anthropocentric

/ˌænθrəpə(ɪ)ˈsɛntrɪk/

adjective

regarding humankind as the central or most important element of existence, especially as opposed to God or animals.

"when we assess animal intelligence we tend to take a very anthropocentric view"

This rejection of absolute truths is also important for morality. If there are only ways of seeing things then there is no absolute morality. Is this a good or bad thing? What do you think?