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METHODOLOGICAL SCEPTICISM IN DESCARTES' EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE IMPERATIVES OF EPISTEMIC CERTAINTY

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Abstract

Knowledge has both instrumental valuation functionality and an arguably anthropocentric operational and relational principle. Beliefs are arguably essential components of knowledge. However, beliefs have ambivalent undertones, for they can either be true or false. The possibility of falsity underscores the skeptical disposition and, syllogistically, the expediency of justification. Cartesian epistemology was an effort to foreground the enterprise of knowledge within a structure that is not only rational and foundational, but also incorrigible in such a manner that forecloses the challenges of skepticism. This paper sets out to appraise skepticism as a viable method and an essential framework in Descartes' epistemology and explicate its relevance in the human quest for epistemic certainty.

Key terms: Methodological scepticism, Cartesian scepticism, Cogito and Epistemic certainty.

Introduction

Questions relating to the definition, nature, and acquisition of knowledge are, perhaps, the most primordial and controversial. This is most likely due to the instrumental value¹ and intrinsically relational² nature of knowledge. In the first, knowledge enables us to fulfill our epistemic goals of upholding truth and also aids "understanding, rationality and utility."³ In the second, knowledge depends equally on both the subject and the object as co-relational existents within the ecosystem. The attainment of knowledge is therefore essential for human interaction with other beings in the ecosystem, towards the right valuation and the ascription of "meaning and direction to the existential life of

man.”⁴ This justifies the human unending epistemic quest.

Knowledge entails beliefs. This is especially so because existential meanings, norms and practices are fabricated upon and around beliefs. Beliefs, however, are usually deep-seated in the believer’s psyche, influencing knowledge claims and perceptions of reality. Thus, beliefs have been employed in formulating socio-cultural perspectives and political, economic and religious doctrines. Ironically, beliefs do not possess a truth-value that is certitude-laden, for beliefs can either be true or false. If false, knowledge structures and perceptions of reality stand the risk of being false too. The possibility of this underscores the skeptics’ arguments,⁵ and, syllogistically, the imperatives of justification.

Within the historicity of western philosophy, particularly epistemology, skepticism as an epistemological methodology was made popular by Renes Descartes, by doubting all the foundations of his beliefs. Realizing the falsity-proneness of some beliefs, he applied the skeptical analyses towards separating false beliefs from true beliefs, particularly those associated with empirical sources of knowledge such as the sensory organs and the external, phenomenal world.

This paper appraises skepticism as an essential and viable method in the epistemological enterprise. Particularly, it presupposes that the skeptical method constitutes the soul for the entirety of the epistemological enterprise as entrenched in Descartes’ epistemic account. Inherent in this epistemic account are some quite interesting features – a hierarchical epistemic structure which is hinged upon metaphysically basic truths, an intuitive deductionism and, most essentially, a methodic skepticism. Specifically, this essay explicates the centrality of skepticism in Descartes’ epistemology and its relevance in the quest for epistemic certainty.

This paper is divided into four segments. The first discusses the nature of knowledge, including issues bothering on definition of, and criteria for knowledge. The second analyzes the skeptical challenge to knowledge, tracing the historicity of the skeptical challenge from the sophists to Edmund Gettier, while the third discusses skepticism as obtainable and applied in Descartes’ epistemology. The fourth explicates the imperative of

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(Cartesian) skepticism to the justification of knowledge claims and the attainment of epistemic certainty, and the development of epistemological philosophy.

On the Nature of Knowledge

Attempts at defining knowledge come with an immediate problem, which bothers on the different instantiations and conceptualizations of knowledge, and the attendant problem of criteria and/or defining characteristics of knowledge. Knowledge, construed within the precincts of English grammar, can be explained as the “information, understanding and skills” gained ‘through education or experience.’⁶ Knowledge also refers to direct perception or intuition with clarity/certainty, truth beyond doubt; practical/experiential understanding; familiarity/acquaintanceship; distinct differentiation or identification; or ability to detect the character or nature of something.⁷ Knowledge also implies “facts and ideas, understanding, and totality of what is known.”⁸ In spite of all these, there are underlying conceptual issues.⁹

Perhaps the concept of knowledge is best understood from the various conceptualizations or typologies of knowledge. Let us examine a form of knowledge known as propositional knowledge. A proposition denotes what is “said or asserted by an utterance, a sentence, or a thought.”¹⁰ Propositions express events or state of affairs, or, according to Roderick Chisholm, denote “an abstract object existing in every possible world.”¹¹ However, it is important to distinguish the proposition from the event in which that proposition is expressed, or the affairs from which it is stated. Events and affairs are said to happen/occur and obtain respectively, at certain times. Propositions, contrarily, are either eternally true or eternally false;¹² and, resultantly, only declarative sentences form propositions. This accounts for propositional knowledge being also referred to as factual knowledge of ‘knowing that.’

Practical knowledge, or ‘knowing how’ represents the ability equation in the discourse of knowledge¹³ in the sense that it obviates the possibility of the problem of linguistic inexpressibility of propositional knowledge by situating further

Agora: Journal of Philosophical & Theological Studies explanation on experience. Whereas propositional knowledge denotes one's cognitive repertoires, practical knowledge is more concerned with issues of competency. Therefore, propositional knowledge essentially correlates with practical knowledge because propositions may further be explained by and identified with demonstrative ability and experience.¹⁴ Practical knowledge is given credence by its explanatory power by implying that mere intelligence does not adequately satisfy the criteria for knowledge, but effective application and performance.¹⁵ It accounts for why it is appropriate to employ the terminologies of knowledge in discussing what an experience is like. In other words, it captures the expediency of using such terms as "discovering," "knowing," "remembering," "forgetting" what an experience is like because such expressions are used to speak about abilities."¹⁶ Practical knowledge, structured on demonstrative abilities and experiential undertones, is usually disseminated through imperative sentences.¹⁷

Inferential or demonstrative knowledge is the knowledge that is acquired while concluding a reasoning process.¹⁸ This type of knowledge emerges from logical inferences from other propositions which function as evidences and/or justifications.¹⁹ If deductive, the reasoning is from general principles to particular cases. If inductive, it comes from particular instances to general conclusions.²⁰ Theoretical knowledge is derived from abstract entities such as geometrical and mathematical axioms.²¹ Other knowledge typologies include perceptual or experiential knowledge; premonitory knowledge; mystical knowledge; and common-sense knowledge.²²

Possibly, the credibility of propositional knowledge over other types of knowledge lies in its anthropocentric presupposition, and its essentiality to the human person for proper valuation and manipulation of the objects in the environment for human betterment.²³ As such, questions bothering on human ontology and eco-relationality, particularly whether non-humans possess intrinsic values independent of human valuations and so on, are fundamental to our quest for knowledge and its consequential benefits for human and environment interconnectivity and a better ecosystem.

Notwithstanding the discourses so far, central in the discourse on knowledge is the criteria question by which we mean the necessities of knowledge. Traditionally, the concept of knowledge has been infused with a trio of independently essential and mutually necessary conditions: “justification, truth, and belief.”²⁴ JTB presupposes that to have knowledge of something (for instance, X), one must, at first, believe it. This entailment of belief is known as the “doxastic condition.”²⁵ However, and instructively, epistemologists have attempted a conceptual comparison between knowledge and belief, thereby eliciting the differences. For some, the difference is only indgree of something or other and for others, they differ in terms of the manifestation of some introspectable criterion/criteria in knowing which is absent in believing.²⁶ Again, whereas knowledge depicts capacity, belief connotes atendency.²⁷ A belief is either true or false, right or wrong, correct or incorrect; and the second disjunct will disqualify it as knowledge. Therefore to know presupposes being equipped to getting something right and correct. This depicts another important fact about knowledge – the entailment of truth. This is the “semantic condition.”²⁸ Still, someone could believe a true proposition without knowing it. This implies that true belief is insufficient for knowledge. The true belief must be established upon some form of evidential justification, warranted or supported reason for it to give credence to the possibility of certitude.²⁹ This is the “epistemic condition.”³⁰ Thus, JTB contends that knowledge involves justified true belief which is “valuable in virtue of the action-guiding character of belief and in virtue of the intrinsic value of finding the truth” and justifying that belief.³¹

In 1963, Edmund Gettier attempted to restructure the knowledge edifice on a pedestal that warrants clarity than the Socratic/Platonic conceptualization of knowledge as justified true belief. He refuted JTB as knowledge, insisting on the possibility of an epistemic agent/subject to have a belief which is true, justifiable and evidential, and yet insufficient for knowledge. This is premised on the fact that what constitutes justification for a belief differs from what constitutes truth for the same belief. Gettier gave two examples in support of this position.³²

Post-Gettier analyses³³ abound on the imperatives of construing knowledge as the cognitive aspect of consciousness with underlying implications for perception, understanding and comprehending; as signifying certitude predicated upon relevant and sufficient premises or evidences as against beliefs,³⁴ guesses or opinions; and as encapsulating a body of information about the phenomenal world such as implies truth, self-satisfaction and indubitability such that prohibits logical possibilityat being false.³⁵ They argue that knowledge or knowledge systems, expediently structured upon and embedded with certainty-conditions, enhance epistemological and normative dimensions.³⁶ Notwithstanding, the challenge for a conclusive, error-proof condition for knowledge persists.

The Epistemic Quest and the Skeptical Challenge to Knowledge

By epistemic quest is meant the latent desire in humans and endless quest for knowledge with such assurance and indubitability that forecloses the possibility of error or even an iota of doubt; hence epistemic certainty. By epistemic certainty, we mean a property of propositional knowledge and a convincing medium through which the epistemic warrant for a proposition is measured and guaranteed in a manner that connotes indubitability and thus forecloses the possibility of doubt.³⁷ Thus the notion of certainty presupposes evidence in the sense that evidence, or an evident proposition, is such that “accepting it is epistemically preferable to withholding it”³⁸ in such a manner that it is apt in deciding the reasonableness or acceptability of other propositions. Whatever is certain is thus presumably evident. But the converse would be untrue. This is because a lot of things we are aware of beyond reasonable doubt may, in actual fact, be bereft of certainty. In other words, certitude becomes a condition for knowledge.³⁹ It is instructive to distinguish between saying that a person feels certain about a given thing or state of affairs and saying that that thing is something which is certain for him. The former implies the strength of his conviction or the felt strength of his conviction while the latter, though not necessarily so, suggests some normativity and/or objectivity.

The inevitability of justifying our beliefs and knowledge claims underlies the quest for epistemic certainty,⁴⁰ and the justification condition necessitates that a belief or knowledge claim be evidentially supported with adequate reasons or grounds so as to prevent lucky guesses, unfounded beliefs or speculations from counting as knowledge. These problematic issues have elicited traditional philosophical controversies over the study/analysis of knowledge and the phenomenon of skepticism with regards to knowledge and justification.

The question arises, then, to the effect of what it is for a state of affairs to be such that its occurrence necessarily presupposes certainty. This question essentially connects with the underlying epistemological question of whether and how the human person can attain the knowledge of anything at all, with certainty; and whether or not the thinking being or epistemic subject/agent can possess adequate knowledge of the epistemic object. In other words, what beliefs about the object of knowledge can the subject/agent of knowledge possess, and what ground(s) justify/legitimate those beliefs? What is the difference between the thinking being having a true belief about the object of knowledge on the one hand, and possessing a certainty of knowledge which transcends any iota of skepticism about the object of knowledge on the other hand? In what dimension(s) do these bear on human relationship with the environment or ecosystem? These are thematic issues underlying our concern.

The history of philosophy is replete with discourses on such matters as these. The ancient Greek pre-Socratic philosophers were bothered with the afore-mentioned problematic.⁴¹ However, the Socratic era and the medieval period seemed to be of a common mind in the quest for epistemic certainty – that nothing less than definite, eternal and absolute truth can avail for an adequate and sure knowledge. Modern philosophy, ushered by the renaissance, was also characterized with the question of the origin and possibility of knowledge across empiricist and rationalist traditions and the attendant skeptical challenge, and represented an obsessive search for the perfect method that guarantees epistemic certainty. Also, experimental science emerged with a wave of enthusiasm and interest that cut across

Europe, especially in Britain where empiricism was predominant. Subsequently, many scientists of the eighteenth century, attuning with Isaac Newton, strongly contended that the only suitable process for attaining epistemic certainty about the world was to formulate generalizations based on observation and the outcomes of experimentation processes.

Logical positivism was founded upon this premise, with a central epistemic agendum that bothered on the notion that the observational procedures enable science to provide general or theoretical knowledge.⁴² This led to the analytic/rationalist and synthetic/empiricist, a priori and a posteriori distinction and the differentials in the modal status between necessary and contingent truths.⁴³ Also, the emergent Vienna Circle ascribed epistemological priority to observation sentences as they are imbued with sense impressions and information about the external world.⁴⁴ Conversely and simultaneously, rationalist philosophy, as pioneered by Renes Descartes, Leibniz and Immanuel Kant, resurged in continental Europe,⁴⁵ proffering reason-based epistemic arguments. However, both the empiricists and the rationalists' perspectives were largely prejudiced, subjective and attended with skepticism.

Descartes' Methodological Skepticism

The skeptical disposition was in vogue in the transitional era of the seventeenth century.⁴⁶ Descartes also adopted the method of doubt. Being primarily a mathematician and a scientist, Descartes was so disturbed by the prejudices and traditionalisms that becloud human epistemic prisms that he sought for an indubitable foundation for an unprejudiced knowledge. His aim was to reduce natural phenomena to the geometrical quantitative and precise descriptions of arithmetic and simplistic reasoning, and thereby find a body of certain and self-evident truths, in a manner which aligns with his metaphysical commitment of depending on clear and distinct ideas.⁴⁷ He opined that once he discovered a foundation of knowledge that is beyond all doubts, it could be treated as a mathematical axiom which is accessible to conscious experience and a sense of rationality construed as epistemically fundamental in a far-reaching manner that implies

indispensability and derivativeness; that is, as that which is capable of deducing logical consequences. As such, he searched through all possible epistemic contents, examined and discarded all those claims which are uncertain, with a determined effort not to adopt less assuring ones.⁴⁸ Thus Descartes held that these prejudices can only be swept away by jettisoning pre-judgments and preconceptions, and applying the principle of methodic doubt towards eliminating the pre-reflective prejudices or preconceived opinions. According to him:

The first rule was never to accept anything as true unless I recognized it to be certainly and evidently such: that is, carefully to avoid all precipitation and prejudgment, and to include nothing in my conclusions unless it presented itself so clearly and distinctly to my mind that there was no reason or occasion to doubt it.⁴⁹

Descartes thus casts doubt upon the reality of the world. In doing this, he proposed a number of skeptical hypotheses – “scenarios which are undetectable from normal experience, but in which one is radically in error, such as that one’s experiences are a product of a dream – in order to discover which of his beliefs were immune to doubt.”⁵⁰ He set his face against accepted and revered authorities and emphasized the practicality of philosophy and the possibility of attaining knowledge certainty by adopting the mathematical model as his paradigm for philosophizing.⁵¹ His proposed agenda for the possibility of knowledge attainment include assembling a thought-system which would imbue philosophy with mathematical certainty, and thus making possible a knowledge system anchored upon a body of certain and self-evident truths.⁵² He not only refused to accept the authority of previous thinkers or his own previous reasoning, but also refused to accept the obvious evidence produced by his own senses based on his belief that conscious sense experience itself could be misleading and therefore should be doubted.⁵³ Both of these, according to Descartes, are subject to prejudice and therefore susceptible to doubt.⁵⁴

Descartes thus found it both possible and philosophically necessary to give this doubting activity an absolutely universal

scope. He found it meaningful to guard the starting point of his philosophy against not just the mere possibility that some external perceptions might be deceptive or hallucinatory but even against the metaphysical possibility that all perceived ideas might as well be illusionary. Thus, he began to cast doubt upon all his beliefs by situating his entire beliefs into different categories, beginning with beliefs of sense perception which, to him, are the most deceptive⁵⁵ and untrustworthy.⁵⁶

The second set of beliefs he doubted were about material things or existents in the physical world which “must be doubted because they are based upon sense perception, which has been shown to be deceptive and therefore lacking in certainty.”⁵⁷ The third set of beliefs were from the natural sciences, including corporeal objects and the sciences that deal with their existence such as Astronomy, Medicine and others. These, too, are filled with the deficiencies of the second set of beliefs.⁵⁸

The fourth set of beliefs to doubt, according to Descartes, was mathematical beliefs. Although Descartes considers mathematics as the very sculpt of certainty, not susceptible to doubt being derived from reason and independent of sense perception; he posits that mathematicians “fall into error sometimes.”⁵⁹ Within a logical framework, Descartes postulates the likelihood of the existence of an evil and powerful genius or demon (a malign genie) who is continually deceiving the epistemic agent in all things the latter construe as knowledge. As such, it may be (at least logically) that the entire universe is a vast illusion and most of our beliefs are false such that even the quest for certainty is illusory.

Going forward, Descartes adopted the Archimedean method by hoping to at least discover one belief that would be certain and indubitable upon which the entire architecture of knowledge can be erected. It was in the process he realized and concluded on his mental activities as presupposing his existence. According to him, even if he was deceived in all his beliefs, the deception justifies his existence as it was his existence that made his being deceived possible;⁶⁰ indicating each time he doubted, he must exist to doubt.⁶¹ Also, since doubting is an intellectual activity, a doubting being is an intellectual being. In addition, since intellection is

a conscious activity, and consciousness presupposes existence, an intellectual-conscious being is therefore an existential being. This underscores his “I think therefore I am” – Cogito Ergo Sum dictum. This foundation of knowledge, according to him, lies within his conceptualization of the mind as an entity detached from the body and takes a pre-eminent position in knowledge acquisition. This position can be buttressed in the sense that it was through the mental processes that Descartes came to the realization of his position.

Being propelled by the exigency of epistemic certainty, Descartes provided a radical, firm, permanent, comprehensible and apodictic ground for a *fundamentum inconcusum* (an absolute foundation) that would aid the possibility of the attainment of the true science, the *mathesis universalis*. This, to Descartes, is embedded within the mental process he employed towards realizing his own existential consciousness and cognitive activities. As such, epistemic certainty presupposes three criteria: first, indubitability; second, ultimate truth; and third, an existent.⁶²

For Descartes, therefore, the methodic doubt has as one of its objectives the creation of a distance between prejudice and epistemic certainty, with the intent to establish an objective, unbiasedly tainted conception of reality. Here we see a construction of a philosophical system hinging on the possibility of epistemic certainty entrenched on the existentiality of the subject on a first-person account, so that by the systematic application of doubt the subject could discover and obtain an axiomatic, self-evident truth which would form the basis of an epistemological enterprise, from which the realities of the external world are to be inferred.⁶³ This philosophical system also gives the possibility of giving our critical thoughts or reflections a chance to operate.⁶⁴ Thus, the methodic doubt, fundamentally applied, reflects a systematic reductionist analysis of all existents, and this is done in the reflective order prior to discerning the tenacity of claims or beliefs which can withstand the greatest challenge of doubt.

Therefore, for Descartes, in spite of the possibility of the existence of some sort of deceiver who employs all his energies at ensuring perpetual deceit, or the constant possibility of situating our knowledge structure upon false beliefs, the realization of

one's own existence and the possession of ratiocinative capacities towards the possible attainment of truth affords the possibility of epistemic certainty.⁶⁵

The Imperative of (Cartesian) Scepticism in the Quest for Epistemic Certainty

From the above analysis, it is explicit that Descartes' skeptical exercise, unlike philosophical skepticism which aims at disproving the possibility of epistemic certainty, presents a systematic approach towards affirming the possibility of epistemic certainty. Underlying the Cartesian skeptical tradition are two epistemic paradigms: the mathematico-rationalistic and the deductivist-foundationalist paradigms.

In the first, there is an opposition to a sole dependence on the senses as a foundation for knowledge, deriving from the understanding that such dependence would pose as a key hindrance to knowledge attainment and intellectual development. Towards an inclusive, decisive and in-depth account of reality, Descartes' methodic skepticism employed the use of reason and its speculative procedures towards a knowledge-account of reality which can be rationally systematized. In the process, Descartes introduced a new ontological category to knowledge discourse in form of ideas construed as structural universals⁶⁶ because they stand in multiple relations to things that fall within their spectrum, with an immediate, unmediated knowledge. Descartes averred that these ideas, in their clarity and distinctiveness, are the principal data of knowledge; and are domiciled in the *cogito* which "is capable of knowing some truths about reality prior to any experience."⁶⁷ Systematically, it progresses from one or more assertions to another whose truth is recognized as being structured upon, and presupposed by the assertions already known.

Thus Descartes' rationalist inclination presupposes mathematics as an operational methodology with the aim of making knowledge attainable to universal human reason towards the possibility of attaining final and certain truth devoid of any iota of doubt and disputations, and this made him to posit that knowledge is attainable only through a *priori* means. In doing this, Descartes employed mathematical principle in his quest to

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attain epistemic certainty and the dream of a universal science, *the mathesis universalis*. To Descartes therefore, the method of mathematics is essential, beginning with axioms which are self-evident and deduce logical consequences.

The deductivist-foundationalist paradigms in the Cartesian skeptical tradition implies that for our knowledge to be certain and thorough, all indices of our knowledge must be scrutinized and analyzed within a coterie of thought which is unbroken, and they must as well be included in a stream of enumerations which must both be adequate and methodical. Inherent in Descartes deductivism is a continuous or an associated movement of thought or ideas such that the emerging constructive syllogism logically entails and explains the relations among the multilayered premises in a manner that the inherent truths must of necessity lead to a precise knowledge. For Descartes, this is essential if we are to attain truth, especially the truths which are not within the immediate deductions from primary and self-evident principles. Attaining this kind of truths requires a long process of deductions or inferences from grounds or premises to consequents or conclusions without the least difficulty in recalling the whole process.

The notion of consequent or conclusion explained above underscores the fact that before there can be any epistemic certainty whatsoever, there must be an absolute truth. This absolute truth, as indicated in Descartes' philosophy, lies in the *Cogito* or mind and presupposes deductive foundational knowledge.⁶⁸ To questions pertaining to what knowledge is and how it is attainable, Descartes posits a belief that is "either foundational" and as such "about which mistake is inconceivable - or derived from foundational beliefs by appropriate principles of inference" in such a manner as would aid "clearness, distinctness and certainty."⁶⁹ Thus we arrive at a foundationalist implication in Descartes' philosophy.

The *Cogito Ego Sum* thesis rests on the notion that such inferential, deductivist and foundationalist beliefs enjoy a special status of indubitability and infallibility which make them non-susceptible to skepticism. Therefore, a belief is acceptable as knowledge only if it meets foundational requirements.⁷⁰ For

Descartes, this is necessary because our epistemic claims largely depend on our capability to justify that such claims are not just packs of spurious claims; hence the necessity of an incorrigible foundation for knowledge. This incorrigible foundation would be firm and aid the discovery of an absolutely certain epistemological and unassailable justificational standpoint upon which further deductions and inferences could be made, and as such could be adjudged unscrupulously as the indubitable foundation and apodictic point of departure or grounds of knowledge on the basis alone of which epistemic certainty is possible.

Conclusion

This essay has carefully analyzed the functionality and expediency of skepticism in epistemology, particularly with respect to the quest for epistemic certainty specifically within the spectrum of Rene Descartes' epistemology which enters the discourse from a novel perspective – the examination of the possibility of epistemic certainty from the first-person subject of knowledge or epistemic agent/self perspective. It highlighted the essentiality of skepticism in the attempts to justify our knowledge claims. The discourse unearthed numerous philosophical problematics in the quest for epistemic certainty such as the definitional and conceptual issues in the conceptualization of knowledge, arguments for epistemic justification in the history of epistemological philosophy and the centrality of skepticism in the justificatory attempts.

More importantly, this discourse harps on the distinction between philosophical skepticism and Cartesian skepticism - whereas the former is hinged on the vacillating data of knowledge and thus concludes on the impossibility of epistemic certainty, the latter was aimed towards the attainment of an apodictic standpoint as key to the possibility of epistemic certainty. The rationale for this doubting activity of Descartes seems justified in the notion that the project of self-knowledge must take into consideration the possibility of doubt; and as the skeptical attitude has been focused on our claim to know the minds of others, it is as such expected that a similar skeptical attitude be directed towards our claim to know our own minds. That is why Descartes' approach

is basically first-person, and goes on to suggest that error occurs not just through failure to notice the inferences to be drawn, but especially through choosing as starting points or premises “poorly understood experiences;” that is, experiences that are not clearly and distinctly perceived. The point is not just that such “experiences” are not certain, so that nothing inferred from them by logical means can be certain either. What makes them downright “deceptive” beyond being merely unreliable is the fact that as epistemic agents human persons either suppose more to be contained in them than just that which is immediately present to consciousness, or fail to attend carefully to all that is actually contained in them. In the former case, they embroider upon what might be called “experiences perfectly understood,” while in the latter they foreshorten these experiences. As such, Descartes arrived at his incorrigible, certain, self-evidential, foundational and indubitable first principle: the notion that it is a contradiction to suppose that that which thinks does not exist at the very time when it thinks; thus the *cogito ergo sum*- “I think, therefore I am” theory.

The question we have been dealing with bothers on an unquestionable account for the possibility of knowledge certainty, and its implications for skepticism. This essay has proposed to formulate it through a critical interrogation of Descartes’ epistemology and its anthropocentric, foundational standpoint, which is imbued with the required attributes such as self-consciousness or self-awareness and rationality which are core criteria to knowledge attainment and affirmation of certitude. It also offers the possibility of a belief structured upon a certainty status such that it is devoid of the possibilities of doubt. Its inherent translucence, distinctness and self-dependence hinges upon an unquestionable, apodictic existent with epistemological normativities upon which knowledge about other phenomena – social, cultural, ethical, political, religious, economic, scientific etc – may be deduced in such a manner that warrants epistemic certainty.

Endnotes

¹ Duncan Pritchard, *What is This Thing called Knowledge?* (London: Routledge, 2006), 12.

² C. Rovelli, *Reality is not what it seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 253.

³ Sven Bernecker, *Reading Epistemology: Selected Texts with Interactive Commentary*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 1.

⁴ Omotade Adegbindin, *Ifa in Yoruba Thought System*. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2014), 113.

⁵ Anselm K. Jimoh, *Certitude and Doubt: A Study Guide in Epistemology*. (Ibadan: Ebony Books, 2013) and Roderick M. Chisholm, *Person and Object*. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1976).

⁶ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. International Student's Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 827. Knowledge by experience is tantamount to what George Graham calls the optimistic science position. This position holds that knowing what experience is like amounts to knowing the intricacies of each and every physical scientific fact about conscious experience. See George Graham, *Philosophy of Mind: An Introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1996), 9.

⁷ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 3rd Edition. (New York: Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.) 998.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Adegbindin, *Ifa in Yoruba Thought System...* 145.

¹⁰ Bernecker, *Reading Epistemology*:

¹¹ Chisholm, *Person and Object...* 122. See also George Edward Moore, *Some main Problems of Philosophy*. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1953), 57-71, 258-260; C. A Baylis, "Facts, Propositions, Exemplification, and Truth." *Mind*. (1948), 459-479; and R. Cartwright, "Propositions." *Analytical Philosophy*. R. J. Butler ed. 1st Series. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 81-103.

¹² Chisholm, *Person and Object...* and Bernecker, *Reading Epistemology*. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz explains this point aptly. According to him, "Do you see, therefore, that truth is of propositions or thoughts – of possible ones, I mean – so that

this at least is certain, that if someone thinks in a given way or its opposite, his thoughts will be true or false?" See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Opera Philosophical*. I. J. E. Erdmann ed. (Berolini: Sumtibus G. Eichleri, 1840) 76.

¹³. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1949), 27-32.

¹⁴. L.Nemirow, "The Cognitive Role of Acquaintance." *The Philosophy of Mind: Classical Problems and Contemporary Issues*. B. Beakley and P. Ludlow Eds. 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Phi Learning Private Limited, 2011), 339.

¹⁵. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*... 29

¹⁶. Nemirow, "*The Cognitive Role of Acquaintance*...."

¹⁷. R. M. Hare, *Practical Inferences*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) 3.

¹⁸. Jim Unah, *Lectures on Philosophy and Logic*. (Lagos: Fadec Publishers Ltd, 2013), 63.

¹⁹. Bernecker, *Reading Epistemology*:

²⁰. Irvin M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*. 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1978), 32

²¹. *ibid*, 57

²². See A. F. Uduigwomen, Ed. *The Place of Oral Tradition in African Epistemology. Footmarks in African Philosophy*. (Ikeja: OOP Press, 1995); and A. J. Minton, and T. A. Shipka, *Philosophy, Paradox and Discovery*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982).

²³. This is buttressed by Freya Moya's position that homo sapiens' superiority over other terrestrial fauna lies essentially in his intelligence and rationality, which are the basic criteria for personhood. See Freya C. Moya, *Moral Responsibility: The Ways of Skepticism*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

²⁴. Bernecker, *Reading Epistemology*: 5. Also see Plato, *Theatetus*. F. M. Cornfold Trans. (London: Routledge, 1971).

²⁵. F. Feldman, *A Cartesian Introduction to Philosophy*. (United States of America: McGraw -Hill Inc, 1986). 23

²⁶. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*... 128

²⁷. *ibid*.

²⁸. Feldman, *A Cartesian Introduction to Philosophy*...

²⁹. Bernecker, *Reading Epistemology*:

³⁰. Feldman, *A Cartesian Introduction to Philosophy*...

^{31.} J. L. Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 204.

^{32.} See Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis*. (Vol. 23, 1963), 121-123

^{33.} Gettier-type counter examples include Keith Lehrer, "Knowledge, Truth and Evidence." *Analysis*. (vol. 25, 1965), 168-75; Alvin Goldman, "Discrimination and Perpetual Knowledge" in *Perpetual Knowledge*. ed. Jonathan Dancy. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 41-65 and R. K. Shope, *The Analysis of Knowing*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

^{34.} For Donald Davidson, "beliefs are either true or false, but they represent nothing. It is good to be rid of representations.... for it is thinking that there are representations that engender thoughts of relativism." See Donald Davidson, "The myth of the subjective," in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*. ed. M. Kraus (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 165-166.

^{35.} J. B. Baldwin, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. (Gloucester: Macmillan, 1960), 604

^{36.} Epistemologically, certain issues constrict and prevent the possession or acquisition of knowledge structured upon certitude.

^{37.} Chisholm, *Person and Object*... 176-177

^{38.} See J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*. 2nd Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 76-116.

^{39.} Adegbindin, *Ifa in Yoruba Thought System*... 115; C. J. Hookway, "Certainty," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. ed. T. Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 129.

^{40.} In the quest for epistemic certainty, there had been puzzling statements and characterization of specific beliefs, views and outlooks as subjective, and others as objective (detached, dispassionate and unprejudiced). For instance, an opinion or belief or judgment that is idiosyncratic or whimsical, capricious, biased or reflective of personal prejudice, or expresses suspicion or distrust, or disregarded the evidence could be regarded as subjective; while an opinion or belief or judgment that is detached, balanced and based fairly on the available evidence could be called objective. It is unarguable that the attainment of epistemic certainty would require some level of objectivity

which must transcend the divergent points of view through critical examination and as such can explain the extent of their respective epistemic veracity. As such, the quest for epistemic certainty takes us beyond and above the clout of subjectivism.

⁴¹. See William F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*. (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002), 17.

⁴². To put the quest of the logical positivists in perspective, the question boils down to “how is it possible that observing a finite number of instances of a generalization (law or theory) can enable one to know that the generalization holds in all the unexamined or unobserved cases (of which there normally is a potential infinity)? Being mainly scientists, mathematicians and science-oriented philosophers, they shared some general agreement about how this problematic may be solved by concerning themselves with basic and important scientific issues which have philosophical undertones and which were sprouted by ongoing scientific developments. See Frederick Suppe, ed. “Historical Background to the Received View,” in *The Structure of Scientific Theories*. ed. F. Suppe. (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 6.

⁴³. This distinction dates back to earlier philosophers such as Hume, Leibniz, and Kant. For Hume, propositions which relate ideas and have their truth-value dependent on the meanings of the terms employed are analytic while propositions which state facts and have their truth-value determined by experience are synthetic. For Leibniz, some propositions portray truths of reason and are self-explanatory and self-evidently true (analytic propositions) while others show truths of facts and are dependent on empirical verification (synthetic propositions). For Kant, analytic propositions or statements are arranged in such a manner that the predicate is entailed within the subject (which may have a larger spectrum of meaning) and such that the truth is situated within and determined by the meaning and relationship of its terms such that its denial would imply a logical contradiction. For example, “All bachelors are unmarried men.” This contrasts with synthetic propositions or statements which are arranged in such a manner that the predicate adds more information to the subject

Agora: Journal of Philosophical & Theological Studies which is not logically contained within it, such that its denial or falsity does not result in a logical contradiction. For example, "All bachelors are below thirty years old." For further studies, consult Francis Offor, "A Comparative Analysis of the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction: An African Conceptual Scheme." *Sophia: An African Journal of Philosophy*. (Vol. 2, No. 2, 2000), 12-15.

^{44.} See Rudolf Carnap, "Testability and meaning." *Philosophy of Science*. (Vol. 3/4, 1936/1937), 419-41/1-40.

^{45.} Hans Reichenbach, *The Rise of Scientific Thinking*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 88-100

^{46.} The seventeenth century ushered in the modern period of philosophy which was characterized with a jettisoning of old philosophies and a rebuilding of the edifice of knowledge. Hence the seventeenth century exemplified a passionate concern with the method of knowledge acquisition. The attendant skeptical disposition was adopted by Renes Descartes in a systematic reconstructivist manner otherwise known as methodological skepticism.

^{47.} This metaphysical commitment of Descartes is aptly captured in his statement, "Whenever I conceive something clearly and distinctly, I am assured of its truth." For more information, see Anthony Kenny, *A new history of western philosophy*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 52.

^{48.} Enrique Chavez-Arviso, Op. cit. 86

^{49.} Renes Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*. trans. L. J. Lafleur. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960) 15.

^{50.} Duncan Pritchard, *What is This Thing called Knowledge?* 40

^{51.} Hans Reichenbach. *The Rise of Scientific Thinking...* 40

^{52.} See Paulin Hountondji's *Myth and reality*. Trans Henri Evans (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 89

^{53.} The rationale for this doubting activity of Descartes seems justified in the following words of

David Dewhurst, "It would seem that if the project of self-knowledge is not to be an idle one, doubt, must be a possibility. And since so much skepticism has been exercised over our claim to know the minds of others, one would have expected a similar skepticism concerning our claim to know our own minds." See

D.Dewhurst, How can I know myself? *Philosophy*. (Apr. Vol.59, No.228, 1984), 207. Cartesian skepticism must, however, be distinguished from that of the sophists in the sense that whereas the latter were skeptical only for the sake of being skeptical or vacillating, the former was aimed towards the attainment of greater certainty and assurance.

⁵⁴. See Murray Miles. "Descartes' Method," in *A Companion to Descartes*. eds. J. Broughton and J. Carriero.(Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2008), 155.

⁵⁵.T. Z Lavine, *From Socrates to Sartre*: 230

⁵⁶. *ibid.* 96

⁵⁷. *ibid.*

⁵⁸. *ibid.*

⁵⁹. *ibid.*

⁶⁰. *ibid.*

⁶¹. This foreruns the phenomenologist's dictum of "existence precedes essence." Olatunji A. Oyeshile, *Reconciling the Self with the Other: An Existentialist Perspective*. (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2006), 27.

⁶². T. Z.Lavine, *From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest*. (London: Bantam Books, 1989), 95

⁶³. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*. 18

⁶⁴. See Frederick Broadie, *An Approach to Descartes' 'Meditations.'* (Oxford: Alden & Mowbay Ltd, 1970), 1-2.

⁶⁵. Renes Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *The Philosophical Writings of Renes Descartes*. Vol. 1. eds. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 14. There is a strong suspicion that Descartes might, perhaps, have been influenced towards this postulation by St. Augustine. Frederick Copleston recounts the idea of St. Augustine to the effect that to doubt implies being conscious of doubting and having the certainty of the fact that he is doubting. As such, anyone who doubts the possibility of truth knows at least one truth - that his very capacity to doubt should convince him that there is such a thing as truth." See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy*. Vol. 2. (London: Continuum, 2003), 53

⁶⁶. Cartesian ideas are like universals in two respects. First, they are

such that several individual entities fall under them. For example, each particular green falls under the idea 'green.' Representing thus is like exemplification or participation because the ideas and particular quantities stand in multiple relations. Secondly, they are like universals because they stand indifferently for all the quality instances.

⁶⁷Omotade Adegbindin, *Ifa in Yoruba Thought System...*

⁶⁸See Renes Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*. Trans. A.D Lindsay (London: Everyman's Library, J.M Dent and Sons Ltd, 1957), 94. See also Kolawole Owolabi, "Edmund Husserl's Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis." *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*. (Vol. Xxii. No. 1. Jan. 1995), 13.

⁶⁹See Renes Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Right: Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences," in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*. Vol. 1. Trans. E. Haldane and G. Ross (New York: Dover Publications, 1637). See also Emmanuel Ola Akintona and Odozor Uche Samuel, "The "self" and "Others" in Cultural and Epistemological Pursuit." *Journal of Philosophy and Development*. (Vol. 16, No. 1, 2016), 14.

⁷⁰Hilary Kornblith, "In defense of a Naturalized Epistemology," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*. eds. John Greco and Ernest Sosa. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1999), 159.