

Dualism and Rationalism

The French philosopher, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), approached knowledge from quite a different stance than did John Locke. For Descartes, man has ultimate knowledge of his own existence because he is a thinking being – *cogito ergo sum* – "I think, therefore I am." Thus the foundations of knowledge consist of a set of first, "self-evident" principles, *a priori principles*. The mind is not an empty cabinet but is filled with universal, though not readily known, principles.



Access to these first principles is not based on "the fluctuating testimony of the senses" nor on the "blundering constructions of imagination." Descartes distrusted sensory evidence as much as he avoided undisciplined imagination. The first principles are those based on "the conception which an unclouded and attentive mind gives." It is conception "wholly freed from doubt," principles derived from clear and logical thought. From these first principles, other truths can be deduced by a rigorous application of logical rules and axioms.

Knowledge is not so much what corresponds to experience but what has coherency within and among the principles and their deduced statements. And so the deductive and rational methods are born. Descartes published his approach to knowledge in 1637, in *Discourse on Method*.

The rationalist begins with a set of assumptions that are hypothetically true. For instance, Jericho is a community settled by people. The [walls of Jericho](#) are defensive walls. Defense is an activity for defending something. All of these assumptions need not be verified by observation, need not exist in fact. They need only be hypothetically correct. Implicit from these assumptions, a deduction can now be made logically. The people of Jericho have something to defend. Mathematically-rigorous formulas are applied in order to arrive at the deductions. The strength and legitimacy of the rational method is its ability to objectively think about the natural world and deduce statements of truth about that world.

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"Examining attentively what I was, and seeing that I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world or place that I was in, but that I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist, and that on the contrary, from the very fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed very evidently and very certainly that I existed: while on the other hand, if I had only ceased to think, although the rest of what I had ever imagined had been true, I would have had no reason to believe that I existed; I thereby concluded that I was a substance of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking, and which, in order to exist, needs no place and depends upon no material thing; so that this I, that is to say mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and even that is easier to know than the body, and

moreover, that even if the body were not, it would not cease to be all that it is." (*Discourse on Method*, 54)

Rene Descartes made another important contribution. Descartes reasoned that if the mind is capable of clear, objective thinking, then it cannot ultimately be reducible to the influences of the material world. "Mind" and "matter" are the basic constituents of the universe. The defining characteristic of "matter" is extension and movement, i.e., the possession of dimension such as time or space. The defining characteristic of "mind" is thought, i.e., the activity of thinking. Regardless of the way "matter" is extended, e.g., straight or curved, it must be extended. Regardless of the way "mind" thinks, e.g., abstracting or imagining, it must think. Each is absolutely different from the other, requiring nothing but itself to exist. Neither has the properties of the other nor is reducible to the other, yet all in the universe is reducible to one or the other, to "mind" or "matter."

Cartesian Dualism adheres to the understanding that the natural world of "matter" is independent of the "mind," and, conversely, that the "mind" is independent of the "natural world." Objectivity is thus possible. The world of the "other" and of "man" himself have become "objects," for study, in which independent ideas and symbolic representations of the them are possible. The "science of man" was ushered in.

An intriguing set of questions remain. Prior to Descartes, what was the nature of this relationship between humanity's ideas and its material reality, if neither were understood as independent of the other? How was this understood, articulated and acted upon in pre-Cartesians cultures? In these pre-Cartesian cultures, what did their symbolic representations (ideas embedded in language, arts, and social other practices) actually represent?