
John Locke and Rene Descartes: the first early philosophers

John Locke and Rene Descartes are quite often seen as two of the first early philosophers. Both of them looking for answers to the same questions such as: is there certainty in knowledge? What is knowledge? How does our mind work? While Locke and Descartes ask the same questions, they do not acquire the same answers. My goal in this paper is to compare and contrast Locke and Descartes beliefs and explain which view I prefer most.

John Locke believes all knowledge comes exclusively through experience. Locke does not believe in any certain knowledge, he believes that “all ideas come from sensation and reflection” and that the only way to gain knowledge is through experience (Locke, 2). Locke argues that at birth the mind is like an empty book, that we are not born with principles of logic such as a square has four sides or two plus two equals four. He believes this kind of information is not innate and that it takes experience to acquire this kind of knowledge. Locke argues that as humans we fill our mind with ideas as we experience the world, and without those experiences there would be no ideas or knowledge. In summary, Locke believes that all knowledge derives from experience and that all knowledge is acquired.

In contrary, according to Descartes knowledge depends on certainty. Descartes believes that knowledge cannot come from the outside world via the 5 senses because perception is unreal. Descartes says that he dreams of things that seem so realistic to him while he is sleeping. He had one dream where he sits by a fire in his room, and it seems like he can feel the true warmth of the fire, just as he feels it in his real life, even though there is no fire at all. The fact that he feels the fire doesn't really allow him to tell when he is awake and when he is dreaming. Therefore, if his five senses can convey to him the heat of the fire when he does not actually feel it, he can't trust that the fire exists when he feels it in his real life. Descartes argues that if the knowledge does not come from within it must come from an experience of the outside world with a strict application of reason to all problems. Even though Descartes says that knowledge can come from experience of the outside world, though, he still believes that knowledge from within is the only certain knowledge.

John Locke was the first to define the self as consciousness. Locke defines the self as “that conscious thinking thing which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends” (Locke 1694, p. 307). Locke believes that consciousness is key. He argues that it is consciousness of one's experiences brought forward to the present moment as a memory that

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gives us identity with our prior self. Thus, because memories are being made all the time and because we don't always remember the same things all the time, our identity is fluid, constantly changing, discontinuous and can die, even though the body lives on. As in the case of extreme amnesia. Locke also believes that consciousness can be transferred from one person to another and that personal identity goes with them as well. Locke states, "The question being what makes the same person; and not whether it be the same identical substance, which always thinks in the same person, which, in this case, matters not at all: different substances, by the same consciousness (where they do partake in it) being united into one person, as well as different bodies by the same life are united into one animal, whose identity is preserved in that change of substances by the unity of one continued life" (Locke 1694, p. 148). Thus, while the soul is changed consciousness stays the same thereby preserving the personal identity. This would mean there would be the same soul but a different person.

Similarly, Descartes, like Locke, also believes that consciousness is key. Except, he argues that it is the conscious substance – the mind – that gives us identity, not just memories. Descartes says that our identity is continuous, never changes and never really dies. Which is an extreme contrast to what Locke believes to be true. Descartes believes that there is a connection between the mind and body where sensations are transferred and that allows us to identify our body as our own. "I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined, and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit" (Descartes, 116). But he continues that "It is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it" (Descartes, 115). For Descartes consciousness refers to the mind alone and not the body, and it is the mind – consciousness – that gives us identity, not memories.

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