# **Connecting Two Philosophical Epistemologies**

Most of the world's philosophical traditions put emphasis only on certain aspects of life and reality, and it is, therefore, true to say that none of them is in itself a comprehensive philosophy (Kaipayil, 1995). It is a known fact that every philosopher is obsessed by the love of truth and thus every philosophy is a search for truth. This quest to study the nature of truth is what is referred to as epistemology, and was largely developed by great thinkers/philosophers such as René Descartes and John Locke. The former is credited with developing the program of systematic doubt philosophical epistemology, and the latter, representative realism. This paper seeks to explore the connections between the two philosophical epistemologies, and draw a conclusion as to which epistemology is most comparable to my personal belief system.

## René Descartes’ Philosophical Epistemology

René Descartes was a French philosopher and one of the greatest thinkers of his time which led to him being dubbed the “Father of Modern Philosophy.” He was bold enough to break away from the prevalent traditional Aristotelian philosophy and develop his own new mechanistic scientific model, as he believed the ubiquitous philosophy was prone to doubt (Descartes, 2017). This old philosophy was developed by Aristotle and was so entrenched in intellectual institutions during the medieval times that scholars argued that its evidence could be found in the Bible, and anyone trying to refute was liable to punishment. Descartes broke away from this philosophy by coming up with what was known as the Cartesian method which was a program of Systematic Doubt employed so as to find certainty in knowledge.

When Descartes began pursuing knowledge, he decided to doubt everything and see whether anything remained after this process (Mitchell, & Alcérreca, 2011). Whatever would survive this test would, therefore, be considered certain, since what was in his mind up to now, had been told by someone else without questioning the legitimacy of the source. Descartes, therefore, used the Cartesian method to write several meditations such as *Cogito ergo sum* which when translated means “I think, therefore I am” and the mind-body problem (Mitchell, & Alcérreca, 2011). The mind-body problem is a philosophical puzzle which tries to establish the relationship between the mind and the body (Moravia, & Staton, 1995). The mind-body problem arises in the course of meditations when Descartes concludes that the mind and the body are distinct. He argues that the mind is a substance unique and different from the body and that it can be understood well enough without the help of the body. Descartes goes further to argue the possibility of the mind existing on its own without the body (Descartes, 2017). In his first meditation, he doubts all his earlier beliefs and observes that at times one’s senses could be deceiving. For example, an object which is far away may appear to be smaller than it really is and this implies that it is not wise to trust something that has ever deceived us. In other words, Descartes believed that it was prudent to doubt something to gain knowledge.

## John Locke’s Philosophical Epistemology

John Locke was also a great philosopher who contributed a lot to political philosophy and the development of epistemology. Unlike Descartes, Locke did not believe in innate ideas but rather believed that people’s minds were often in a blank state which he called the tabula rasa (Locke, 2017). Only experiences gained throughout a person’s life filled this state. Locke went further to describe simple and complex ideas which formed the basis of most of his work. By all means, simple ideas are those which cannot be broken down any further and originate in one sense and color is a good example. The combination of simple ideas form what Locke referred to as complex ideas and it was only with these two kinds of ideas that the primary and secondary qualities of an object were known. In his Theory of Representative Realism, Locke upheld that all objects have either primary qualities or secondary qualities. An objects' primary qualities are perceived same by everyone since they include the shape or size of an object. Secondary qualities, on the other hand, are subjective in nature since they are the creation of the perceiver. They include things such as smell, taste and even the sound of an object. This, therefore, meant that the error to knowing something came as a result of the secondary qualities. Locke’s theory further examined the problem of understanding the knowledge of the external world. The mind is seen to represent the eternal world however it does not duplicate it. The notion of perception comes to play as what is contained in the external mind is not based on inference but solely on sensory experience and perception. For example, a painting may be placed before someone, and some of what they may perceive may be correct and some incorrect. Just because one may see a glare does not mean it exists in reality.

## Connections with these two Epistemologies

From a personal point of view, I believe that I connect more with John Locke’s philosophical epistemology. He was an empiricist whose ideas make the most sense and are easily understood. To me, his ideas appeal more to common sense and this makes it hard for an average person to refute. In like manner, rational thinking is not required to understand Locke's ideas and it is true that people make conclusions based on their perception. For example, just because one perceives a mansion to be a small house from a distance, does not mean that the mansion itself has actually changed in size, but rather one’s own perception. In addition, my own personal beliefs agree with Locke’s idea of the mind being blank at birth, and that it is only through personal experiences that this void becomes filled. This idea (tabula rasa) is contrary to Descartes’ notion of having innate ideas which I believe is misguided. At birth, a child sees but does not understand what they see or hear because the mind is still blank. It is only from interacting more with the environment, gaining personal experiences and going through the learning process that one obtains ideas. Ideas are therefore in no way innate. Lastly, what Descartes put forward-the program of systematic doubt to obtain knowledge seems inaccurate. I believe that just because something remains after everything else has been put to doubt is not an accurate way of achieving certainty. We can fail to doubt the concept of the solar system as it is today and later come to realize we have been wrong for all these years.

## Conclusion

It is no easy feat to obtain the truth from the theories put forward by many scholars and philosophers over the years. There is no doubt that both René Descartes and John Locke were genius philosophers of their time who paved way for other philosophers. They both formed strong arguments/philosophical epistemologies which seek certainty in knowledge. Descartes developed the program of systematic doubt in which he first questioned every belief he had in his quest for knowledge, whereas Locke believed that everything in people’s minds was as a result of personal experience. John Locke’s epistemology, however, is most comparable to my belief system. This is because it is true that at birth the mind is at a blank state waiting to be filled with experiences during growth which contradicts Descartes’ beliefs.

## References

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