Can you be certain of anything other than what goes on inside your mind? If not, what makes you think that there is anything else?

All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.[1]

- Edgar Allan Poe -

Edgar Allan Poe's haunting 1849 verse reminds us that the problem of perception and external reality is not a niche academic inquiry, but an existentially impactful question that many, at one point or another, consider in their lifetimes. Reflections on the limits of reality, of whether or not anything outside the mind exists, and of how one could even be sure of that, have touched as much upon the artistic spirit as they have upon the analytic, invoking wonder as well as intellectual curiosity. This should not come as a surprise, after all, as Socrates reminded us: 'Philosophy begins in wonder.'[2] However, while the creative impulse in response to such wonder may be to wax lyrical and raise a totem to mystery (as Poe so artfully does), the analytic inclination is compelled to inquire and investigate with all the surgical precision that human intelligence can bring to bear. Indeed, the continuous resurgence of this problem within the works of the great philosophers is testament to its timelessness and to the fact that there remain questions to be answered. In this essay, I will investigate these questions and attempt to provide some answers by examining the ideas of five philosophers and utilising aspects of their writings to argue that one cannot be 'certain' of 'anything other' than what goes on inside one's mind. I will adopt an idealist approach, contending that we cannot 'think that there is anything else', and indeed, by thinking that there is, we subsume that 'anything else' into the epistemic-ontological axis of the mind.

Answering the question (or questions - for there are, properly speaking, two) of this essay will require a response that addresses both the epistemological and metaphysical issues arising from the prompt. The first portion of the question requires us to explore the former area and consider what precisely is meant by the word 'certainty'. To this end, I will employ the work of two philosophers - Plato (427-348 BC) and René Descartes (1596-1650 AD) - to construct an adequate definition of 'certainty' that will be conducive to our investigation. I will thereafter deploy that definition to claim that the existence of 'anything other than what goes on inside [the] mind' lies beyond the delineated confines of such a definition. The second portion of the prompt necessitates delving into the territory of metaphysics, and so I will interact with the work of perhaps the most famous subjective idealist, George Berkeley (1685-

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[1] Edgar Allan Poe. *A Dream Within a Dream.* Poetry Foundation, 1850. *https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52829/a-dream-within-a-dream*

[2] Plato. *Theaetetus* (Trans. Benjamin Jowett). Project Gutenberg, 2008. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1726/1726-h/1726-h.htm

1753 AD), before examining two monumental figures of the German idealism: Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 AD) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814 AD).

As stipulated, the first task before us is to define the central terms of the question. Throughout this essay 'mind' will be used interchangeably with expressions such as 'the mental', 'perception', 'subject', 'ego', and 'the "I"'. By 'what goes on inside [the] mind', I expect it will be an uncontroversial statement to say that we are speaking of thought in the broadest possible sense (that is the activity the mind is engaged in which manifests as experience, be it visual, conceptual, or linguistic to name a few varieties).

Now we come to the word on which we must expend the majority of our energy. What do we mean by 'certain'? Upon consideration, there is an instinctual inclination to align it to an epistemic state of strong belief, but we must go further than the dictate of mere instinct. Etymologically, the word derives from the Latin *certus*, meaning 'sure' or 'settled'; this derivation suggests an element of epistemological immutability concerning the state of certainty. To be certain of something requires, therefore, not only that the thing of which we are certain is actually the case - in other words, the object of truth (which is eternal) - but that we *know* it as opposed to merely holding opinion of it (which, again, entails that our epistemic approach to something can and will never change). In this way, 'certainty' bears some resemblance or relation to the Platonic interpretation of knowledge. In Plato's *Theaetetus,* Socrates (c. 470-399 BC), acting as an intellectual midwife, guides the titular character through the labour pains of philosophising in an exploration of what knowledge actually is. As a result of Socrates' questioning, Theaetetus' understanding of knowledge develops through the following formations:

1. A definition rooted in an individual's professional expertise in their respective trade;
2. to knowledge as sensory perception;
3. to knowledge as true opinion;
4. and finally, to a more apt (albeit imperfect) understanding of knowledge as 'true opinion combined with rational explanation'.[3]

The dialogue concludes with no definitive account of knowledge being proffered, though the fourth version is the strongest. Socrates dismisses the definition of knowledge as true opinion using the following analogy:

> *[Consider a jury] justly persuaded of some matter, which only an eye-witness could know and which cannot otherwise be known. Suppose they come to their decision upon hearsay, forming a true judgment. Hence, they have decided the case without knowledge.*[4]

One can come to true opinion without possessing a true and full account of the facts, but this judgment would not constitute knowledge, would not be immutable, and so, being neither immutable nor constituting knowledge, would not be the object of certainty. Why is this? Here

[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

we must bring in the concept of doubt as an agent to epistemic alteration. When exposed to doubt (say, by the raising of a contrary account of the facts), the opinion of the jury, formerly inclined towards the true, could be assuaged to the false. True opinion, being opinion, is still mutable despite being true; it runs away when threatened by doubt. Given this, opinion alone (even if true) cannot be the object of certainty, as certainty (per its etymological derivation above) does not permit alteration; it is 'settled' and 'sure'. Knowledge, on the other hand, according to Plato, is permanent and unalterable and so can be object of certainty. Certainty, therefore, more than simply being 'strong opinion', may be described as an epistemological state from which the subject can never be displaced by doubt, *or* a state in which the subject has conquered doubt and is therefore 'sure' of knowledge. One can only be certain of knowledge, which may be defined along Platonic lines with a final amendment in the following way:

1. True belief/opinion,
2. derived from some valid category of evidence/account,
3. which cannot be assuaged by doubt.

The third clause in this definition of knowledge is the most pertinent to the concept of certainty, for the surety that it promises exists only when all doubt has been defeated. As such, knowledge and certainty exist codependently: it is only when one possesses knowledge of something that they can they be liberated from doubt with certainty, and only when one is liberated from all doubt by certainty that knowledge can rightly be claimed.

This understanding of certainty (as the state of having conquered doubt) and its particular application to the existence of the world outside of the mind, is perhaps most significantly in evidence in the philosophy of the rationalist and radical sceptic, René Descartes. It was he who thrust the problem of perception and the relationship between the mental and material world into the philosophical consciousness of the modern era. Descartes undertakes his exploration of the mind in the deliberate pursuit of the certain, having 'realised how many false opinions [he] had accepted as true from childhood onwards',[5] he found his whole network of beliefs plagued by doubt and committed himself to challenging such misgivings head-on. In this way, he set about rebuilding his epistemic system 'from the bottom up'.[6] Employing a radical scepticism, Descartes applies methodic doubt to each of his beliefs in order to discover whether or not they will stand up to scrutiny. The first beliefs to fall are those which relate to the material world beyond the mind: the 'knowledge' (falsely so-called) which we largely derive from our sense organs. It is only in subjecting his own mental existence to the test of methodic doubt that Descartes discovers an object of certainty - a piece of actual knowledge - which turns the tide of his devastating line of questioning. This is, of course, the most famous of his discoveries: the *Cogito* ('I think therefore I am'). Descartes finds that he can doubt all existence *except* for his own by virtue of the fact that, in attempting to doubt his own existence, he is engaged in the process of thinking with his mind, which entails that there is a thinking thing (an 'I' with which he identifies himself). Hence, Descartes destroys the possibility of doubt about his own existence, and earns the right to claim certainty with

[5] René Descartes. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008. 17.
[6] Ibid. 17.

regards to the knowledge of the ontological reality of the 'I'. The mind is therefore proven. This suffices in its intended purpose of providing an untainted foundation for Cartesian metaphysics, and simultaneously directs us to an understanding of what the mind actually is. I can be certain of the following: 'I am a true thing… one that thinks.'[7] The conception of the 'I', for Descartes, seems to be inextricably tied to the ability to think. That is not to say without thought we cease to exist (this claim is not made), it is rather that the activity of thought is the guarantee of existence. The 'I' (and so the mind) is certain because of the activity of thought. In the immediacy of thought, I defeat the doubt that there is no 'I' which thinks and prove that there is a thinking thing (which I label the 'I').

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that some have been inclined to criticise the apparently self-evident existence of an autonomous 'I' demonstrated by the *Cogito*, hence potentially refuting our whole basis for asserting the certainty of the mind. Bertrand Russell (1872-1970 AD) claimed the word 'I' was simply grammatically convenient and ultimately meaningless since Descartes 'nowhere proves thoughts' need for a thinker'.[8] But while Russell is correct in stipulating that the 'I' represents a semantic convention, that does not negate the fact that it also represents a metaphysical truth. Simon Blackburn, in responding to a very similar point from GC Lichtenburg (1742-1799 AD), reminds us that dents *in* a car cannot exist *without* a car, and thus 'there cannot be a thought without someone thinking it'.[9] It is a bizarre and ultimately unsuccessful philosophical circus trick which the likes of Russell (so famed for his supposedly 'common sense' philosophy) attempt when they suggest there may be thoughts floating around, detached from the mind, waiting to be caught. The 'I' is indeed a semantic convention, but it is a semantic convention which has as its referent a metaphysical entity in which thoughts happen (in other words, a mind).

Considering the certainty of existence outside the mind, however, scholars are appropriately critical of Descartes' postulations beyond the first two meditations. Nonetheless, it is worth examining his attempt to connect the 'I' to the world given its pertinence to our inquiry. Descartes relies on God to give credence to his beliefs about the existence of the material world; thus, God acts as the guarantor for the reality of that which lies beyond the mind. Descartes comes to this conclusion because he believes that God, in his goodness and trustworthiness, affords us certainty that there is 'something else' outside the mind. For Descartes the existence of God 'is akin to an axiom or definition in geometry',[10] it can be known *a priori*, and with logical certainty. Like a triangle containing three sides is a tautology, it is impossible to separate the concept of God as a necessary being from his ontological actuality. Descartes has a 'clear and distinct' idea of God within his mind and so, for him, God must exist. Let us leave aside the obvious leap of faith which (though he may not concede it) is required in Descartes' version of the ontological argument and grant that a supreme being, which he relies upon to connect the mind to the world, exists. This is

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[7] Ibid. 27.

[8] Bertrand Russell. *A History of Western Philosophy and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945. 567.

[9] Simon Blackburn. *Think*. USA: Oxford University Press, 1999. 25.

[10] Lawrence Nolan. "Descartes' Ontological Argument" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), Edward N Zalta (Ed.). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/descartes-ontological/.

insufficient grounds to ensure the certainty of the reality of the material world in that it rests upon what is, for many, largely an object of faith on two accounts: not only in requiring belief in the existence of God (which falls outside the scope of this essay but which is obviously a cause of deep contention), but also in articulating a dubious understanding of God as constituting a being necessitated not to deceive us. I wish to reflect particularly upon this latter point. Descartes claims: 'In all deceit and trickery some element of imperfection is found.'[11] But this is not immediately apparent, nor is it established by any logical means. Why could God not be perfect but also be deceitful? Why could he not place in our mind the illusion of the outside world to trick us? Descartes just assumes the supreme being would not stoop to such scurrilous activity, but other philosophers such as David Hume (1711-1776 AD) provide a catalogue of arguments against God's supposed goodness.[12] Even if God did exist (as per his perfection detailed in the ontological arguments he must), there is no compelling reason to suppose that his nature necessitates an absence of deceitful activity. Omnibenevolence, or all-goodness, is a quality of God common to his conceptualisation in the Christian world, but not the world *en toto*. So, given that doubt is present both as pertains to the fundamental existence of God and as relates to his nature, it is not possible to say that Descartes has provided certainty for anything other than what goes on inside the mind. Thus, while I am inclined to accept his proof of the existence of the 'I', self, or mind, and am epistemically certain that such a claim constitutes knowledge (as defined above), I remain in doubt as to the existence of anything outside of that mind.

This conveniently brings us to the latter part of our investigation: if we cannot be certain of anything other than what goes on inside the mind, what 'makes [us] think that there is anything else'? Here we turn to the Anglo-Irish Bishop of Cloyne, George Berkeley, who controversially responded to the problems arising from Cartesian dualism by positing a form of monism called subjective idealism, which holds that the mind alone exists and that the belief in an external material world is either unnecessary or incorrect. For Berkeley, existence is that which is perceived, and so the reality of 'that which is' is tied to the perception of the perceiver:

> *There is not any other substance but spirit, or that which perceives.*[13]

Thus, given the only perceiving mind that we are aware of is our own, only that which is perceived within in our own mind can be said with any certainty to be real, and real only in the sense that the idea is real. 'Material' objects on this understanding, are not material at all, but mental. The idea of the object exists within our mind and is perceptible to the mind (though seemingly through sense, in reality) through thought:

> *The idea or thing which you immediately perceive, neither sense nor reason inform you that it actually exists without the mind. By sense you only know that*

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[11] René Descartes. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008. 53.

[12] David Hume. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Early modern texts, 2004 (first published 1779). 52. https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1779.pdf

[13] George Berkeley. *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*. London: Penguin Books, 2004. 55.

> *you are affected with such certain sensations of light and colours, etc. And these you will not say are without the mind.*[14]

Experience of the 'material' (even assuming there to be such a thing) occurs, as far as we can be aware, only in a mental capacity. We can have knowledge of sensation but not of the 'material' thing the mind is supposedly reacting to. This raises the question, since all knowledge that occurs in the mental realm is of the immaterial substance of ideas, why do we suppose the existence of a material world beyond the mind at all? According to the principle of Occam's razor, there is no need for us to posit a separate material world, and the strength of thoroughgoing idealism rests in its intellectually honest denunciation of such a realm as being, quite frankly, an article of faith rather than fact. Yet, while it is incredibly difficult to logically refute Berkeley's rejection of the material, it nonetheless seems to many an unacceptable position. AD Smith notes that many scholars are 'rightly suspicious' of metaphysical idealism,[15] and it is to one of those critics we now turn.

Though regarded as the 'Father of German Idealism', for Immanuel Kant, such an appellation does not entail a commitment to the metaphysical beliefs espoused by the likes of Berkeley. This is made apparent in what is perhaps Kant's most famous work, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), in which he contradistinguishes himself from the school of ontological idealism taught by earlier philosophers:

> *One would do us an injustice if one tried to ascribe to us that long-decried empirical idealism that, while assuming the proper reality of space, denies the existence of extended beings in it, or at least finds this existence doubtful, and so in this respect admits no satisfactorily provable distinction between dream and truth.*[16]

The 'empirical idealism' which he is denouncing here is that of Berkeley. Kant supplies two reasons for rejecting this ontological idealism, both of which I will contend are insufficient. The first reason Kant proffers is subjective idealism's inability to properly provide for distinction between reality and illusion (a hallucination, after all, does not appear to have the same ontological quality as something perceived with one's eyes).[17] While this is a reasonable concern, it ultimately arises from a desire for practicability rather than emerging from proof and so may be deemed unsatisfactory in negating ontological idealism. Secondly, the world beyond the mind where 'things in themselves' exist, provides 'a ground of being' for Kant: a wellspring from which he can claim we, as minds, derive our existence. Contra Berkeley, Kant promulgates a 'transcendental idealism' which is epistemological in nature as opposed to ontological or metaphysical. This idealism does not say that the material world does not exist (as Berkeley does), but simply concedes that knowledge of it, of the 'thing in itself', is beyond the capacity of the human mind to experience. But in granting the existence of 'things in

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[14] Ibid. 150.
[15] John Foster and Howard Robinson (Eds.). *Essays on Berkeley: A Tercentennial Celebration*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. 42.
[16] Immanuel Kant. *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W Wood). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 511.
[17] Ibid. 183.

themselves' as metaphysical actualities without experience or proof of them, Kant ultimately relies upon an unwarranted epistemological leap of faith, and faith does not entail certainty.

However, in Kant's own student, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, we are finally presented with a satisfactory metaphysic. In a radical departure from his mentor, Fichte contends that it is impossible to conceptualise the 'thing in itself' separate from the mind (or ego) as the ground of existence, for the 'thing in itself' separate from the mind (the non-ego) necessarily becomes subject to the sovereignty of the mind through the process of conceptualisation. He instead argues that the mind, the 'I', is self-positing and circular: the ground of its own existence. As he writes in *The Science of Knowledge* (1794): 'Ideal ground and real ground are, therefore, one and the same.'[18] The mind, in this sense, *is* the totality of existence *contemplating* the totality of existence: the synthesis of the metaphysical and the epistemological. There is no need to assert a ground of existence beyond an existence already grounded in itself. Any externality or 'anything else' besides the mind or the 'I' is impossible to conceive, because in conceiving it the conceived thing becomes subject to the conceiver, which is the thinking mind. The only thing that could fall outside the bounds of the mind would be that which has never been thought of. But, here again, the mind conquers as it considers, for upon contemplating a particular idea, let us in this instance say the idea of something non-mental, the mind paradoxically renders such an idea mental. It is, therefore, I suggest, impossible to think that there is 'anything else' outside of the mind, for in thinking that there is 'something else', we annex that 'something else' into the imperium of the intellect. As Fichte articulates: 'In this way, the sphere of consciousness gain[s] a new territory.'[19]

In this essay, I have argued that one cannot 'be certain of anything other than what goes on inside [the] mind', and that that it is not only unnecessary to think that there is 'anything else', but impossible to do so. From Plato and the first two meditations of Descartes, I have argued that we cannot be certain of the existence of the material world. I then applied Berkeley's subjective idealism to the problems left unresolved by Cartesian dualism. I considered Kant's criticism of what metaphysical idealism would mean in seemingly depriving us of a 'ground of existence', before finally turning to the philosophy of Fichte to argue that the mind is its own 'ground of existence', which encapsulates all there is. While there is significant scope for further scholarly work into areas such as Berkeley's idea that God's mind could function as the ground of existence, such investigations lie beyond the remit of this current essay.

Word Count: 3940

[18] JG Fichte. *The Science of Knowledge* (Trans. AE Kroeger). London: Trübner and Co, 1889. 150.
[19] JG Fichte. *Foundations of Natural Right* (Trans. Michael Baur). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 6.

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