

Philosophy General (PHIG), 2nd Semester

Rationalism:

To be a rationalist is to adopt at least one of three claims. The Intuition/Deduction thesis concerns how we become warranted in believing propositions in a particular subject area.

The Innate Knowledge Thesis:

We have knowledge of some truths in a particular subject area, S, as part of our rational nature. Like the Intuition/Deduction thesis, the Innate Knowledge thesis asserts the existence of knowledge gained *a priori*, independently of experience. The difference between them rests in the accompanying understanding of how this *a priori* knowledge is gained. The Intuition/Deduction thesis cites intuition and subsequent deductive reasoning. The Innate Knowledge thesis offers our rational nature. Our innate knowledge is not learned through either sense experience or intuition and deduction. It is just part of our nature. Experiences may trigger a process by which we bring this knowledge to consciousness, but the experiences do not provide us with the knowledge itself. It has in some way been with us all along. According to some rationalists, we gained the knowledge in an earlier existence. According to others, God provided us with it at creation. Still others say it is part of our nature through natural selection.

We get different versions of the Innate Knowledge thesis by substituting different subject areas for the variable 'S'. Once again, the more subjects included within the range of the thesis or the more controversial the claim to have knowledge in them, the more radical the form of rationalism. Stronger and weaker understandings of warrant yield stronger and weaker versions of the thesis as well.

The third important thesis of rationalism is the Innate Concept thesis.

The Innate Concept Thesis:

We have some of the concepts we employ in a particular subject area, S, as part of our rational nature. According to the Innate Concept thesis, some of our concepts are not gained from experience. They are part of our rational nature in such a way that, while sense experiences may trigger a process by which they are brought to consciousness, experience does not provide the concepts or determine the information they contain. Some claim that the Innate Concept thesis is entailed by the Innate Knowledge Thesis; a particular instance of knowledge can only be innate if the concepts that are contained in the known proposition are also innate. This is Locke's position; Others, such as Carruthers, argue against this connection (1992, pp. 53–54). The content and strength of the Innate Concept thesis varies with the concepts claimed to be innate. The more a concept seems removed from experience and the mental operations we can perform on experience the more plausibly it may be claimed to be innate. Since we do not experience perfect triangles but do experience pains, our concept of the former is a more promising candidate for being innate than our concept of the latter.

The Intuition/Deduction thesis, the Innate Knowledge thesis, and the Innate Concept thesis are essential to rationalism: to be a rationalist is to adopt at least one of them. Two other closely related theses are generally adopted by rationalists, although one can certainly be a rationalist without adopting either of them. The first is that experience cannot provide what we gain from reason.

The Superiority of Reason Thesis:

The knowledge we gain in subject area S by intuition and deduction or have innately is superior to any knowledge gained by sense experience. How reason is superior needs explanation, and rationalists have offered different accounts. One view, generally associated with Descartes, is that what we know *a priori* is certain, beyond even the slightest doubt, while what we believe, or even know, on the basis of sense experience is at least somewhat uncertain. Another view, generally associated with Plato, locates the superiority of *a priori* knowledge in the objects known. What we know by reason alone, a Platonic form, say, is superior in an important metaphysical way, e.g. unchanging, eternal, perfect, a higher degree of being, to what we are aware of through sense experience.

Most forms of rationalism involve notable commitments to other philosophical positions. One is a commitment to the denial of scepticism for at least some area of knowledge. If we claim to know some truths by intuition or deduction or to have some innate knowledge, we obviously reject scepticism with regard to those truths. Rationalism in the form of the Intuition/Deduction thesis is also committed to epistemic foundationalism, the view that we know some truths without basing our belief in them on any others and that we then use this foundational knowledge to know more truths.

Empiricism:

Empiricists endorse the following claim for some subject area.

The Empiricism Thesis:

We have no source of knowledge in S or for the concepts we use in S other than sense experience. Empiricism about a particular subject rejects the corresponding version of the Intuition/Deduction thesis and Innate Knowledge thesis. Insofar as we have knowledge in the subject, our knowledge is *a posteriori*, dependent upon sense experience. Empiricists also deny the implication of the corresponding Innate Concept thesis that we have innate ideas in the subject area. Sense experience is our only source of ideas. They reject the corresponding version of the Superiority of Reason thesis. Since reason alone does not give us any knowledge, it certainly does not give us superior knowledge. Empiricists generally reject the Indispensability of Reason thesis, though they need not. The Empiricism thesis does not entail that we have empirical knowledge. It entails that knowledge can only be gained, *if at all*, by experience. Empiricists may assert, as some do for some subjects, that the rationalists are correct to claim that experience cannot give us knowledge. The conclusion they draw from this rationalist lesson is that we do not know at all.

I have stated the basic claims of rationalism and empiricism so that each is relative to a particular subject area. Rationalism and empiricism, so relativized, need not conflict. We can be rationalists in mathematics or a particular area of mathematics and empiricists in all or some of the physical sciences. Rationalism and empiricism only conflict when formulated to cover the same subject. Then the debate, Rationalism vs. Empiricism, is joined. The fact that philosophers can be both rationalists and empiricists has implications for the classification schemes often employed in the history of philosophy, especially the one traditionally used to describe the Early Modern Period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries leading up to Kant. It is standard practice to group the major philosophers of this period as either rationalists or empiricists and to suggest that those under one heading share a common agenda in opposition to those under the other. Thus, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz are the Continental Rationalists in opposition to Locke, Berkeley and Hume, the British Empiricists. We should adopt such general classification schemes with caution. The views of the individual philosophers are more subtle and complex than the simple-minded classification suggests. Locke rejects rationalism in the form of any version of the Innate Knowledge or Innate Concept theses, but he nonetheless adopts the Intuition/Deduction thesis with regard to our knowledge of God's existence. Descartes and Locke have remarkably similar views on the nature of our ideas, even though Descartes takes many to be innate, while Locke ties them all to experience. The rationalist/empiricist classification also encourages us to expect the philosophers on each side of the divide to have common research programs in areas beyond epistemology.

Thus, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz are mistakenly seen as applying a reason-centered epistemology to a common metaphysical agenda, with each trying to improve on the efforts of the one before, while Locke, Berkeley and Hume are mistakenly seen as gradually rejecting those metaphysical claims, with each consciously trying to improve on the efforts of his predecessors. It is also important to note that the rationalist/empiricist distinction is not exhaustive of the possible sources of knowledge. One might claim, for example, that we can gain knowledge in a particular area by a form of Divine revelation or insight that is a product of neither reason nor sense experience. In short, when used carelessly, the labels 'rationalist' and 'empiricist,' as well as the slogan that is the title of this essay, 'Rationalism vs. Empiricism,' can retard rather than advance our understanding.

Nonetheless, an important debate properly described as 'Rationalism vs. Empiricism' is joined whenever the claims for each view are formulated to cover the same subject. What is perhaps the most interesting form of the debate occurs when we take the relevant subject to be truths about the external world, the world beyond our own minds. A full-fledged rationalist with regard to our knowledge of the external world holds that some external world truths can and must be known *a priori*, that some of the ideas required for that knowledge are and must be innate, and that this knowledge is superior to any that experience could ever provide. The full-fledged empiricist about our knowledge of the external world replies that, when it comes to the nature of the world beyond our own minds, experience is our sole source of information. Reason might inform us of the relations among our ideas, but those ideas themselves can only be gained, and any truths about the external reality they represent

can only be known, on the basis of sense experience. This debate concerning our knowledge of the external world will generally be our main focus in what follows.

Historically, the rationalist/empiricist dispute in epistemology has extended into the area of metaphysics, where philosophers are concerned with the basic nature of reality, including the existence of God and such aspects of our nature as freewill and the relation between the mind and body. Major rationalists have presented metaphysical theories, which they have claimed to know by reason alone. Major empiricists have rejected the theories as either speculation, beyond what we can learn from experience, or nonsensical attempts to describe aspects of the world beyond the concepts experience can provide. The debate raises the issue of metaphysics as an area of knowledge. Although, Kant puts the driving assumption clearly.