

RATIONALISM VS. EMPIRISISM

THE DISPUTE

The dispute between rationalism and empiricism concerns the extent to which we are dependent upon sense experience in our effort to gain knowledge. Rationalists claim that there are significant ways in which our concepts and knowledge are gained independently of sense experience. Empiricists claim that sense experience is the ultimate source of all our concepts and knowledge.

The dispute between rationalism and empiricism takes place within epistemology, the branch of philosophy devoted to studying the nature, sources and limits of knowledge.

The defining questions of epistemology include the following.

What is the nature of propositional knowledge, knowledge that a particular proposition about the world is true?

How can we gain knowledge?

What are the limits of our knowledge?

The disagreement between rationalists and empiricists primarily concerns the second question, regarding the sources of our concepts and knowledge.

Spinoza



Decartes



Leibnitz



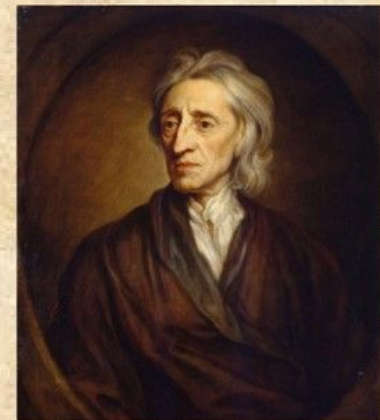
Berckley



Hume



Locke



Rationalism

To be a rationalist is to adopt at least one of the following claims.

*The **Intuition/Deduction** Thesis:* Some propositions in a particular subject area are knowable by us by intuition alone; still others are knowable by being deduced from intuited propositions.

Intuition is a form of rational insight.

Deduction is a process in which we derive conclusions from intuited premises through valid arguments, ones in which the conclusion must be true if the premises are true.

We intuit, for example, that the number three is prime and that it is greater than two. We then deduce from this knowledge that there is a prime number greater than two. Intuition and deduction thus provide us with knowledge *a priori*, which is to say knowledge gained independently of sense experience.

*The **Innate Knowledge** Thesis:* We have knowledge of some truths in a particular subject area, as part of 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.

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

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.

Empiricism

The Empiricism Thesis: We have no source of knowledge other than sense experience.

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.

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.

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.

It is standard practice to group the major philosophers of 17th and 18th centuries 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.

Empirism (cont.)

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.

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.

The debate raises the issue of metaphysics as an area of knowledge.

Intuition/Deduction Thesis

One defense of the Intuition/Deduction thesis assumes that we know some substantive external world truths, adds an analysis of what knowledge requires, and concludes that our knowledge must result from intuition and deduction. Descartes claims that knowledge requires certainty and that certainty about the external world is beyond what empirical evidence can provide.

We can never be sure our sensory impressions are not part of a dream or a massive, demon orchestrated, deception.

This line of argument is one of the least compelling in the rationalist arsenal. First, the assumption that knowledge requires certainty comes at a heavy cost, as it rules out so much of what we commonly take ourselves to know. Second, as many contemporary rationalists accept, intuition is not always a source of certain knowledge.

The possibility of being deceived gives us a reason to doubt our intuitions as well as our empirical beliefs.

Descartes's classic way of meeting this challenge in the *Meditations* is to argue that we can know with certainty that no such deceiver interferes with our intuitions and deductions. They are infallible, as God guarantees their truth. The problem, known as the Cartesian Circle, is that Descartes's account of how we gain this knowledge begs the question, by attempting to deduce the conclusion that all our intuitions are true from intuited premises. Moreover, his account does not touch a remaining problem, which is: Deductions of any appreciable length rely on our fallible memory.

Intuition/Deduction Thesis(cont.)

Leibniz tells us the following in relation to this thesis

“Now all the instances which confirm a general truth, however numerous they may be, are not sufficient to establish the universal necessity of this same truth, for it does not follow that what happened before will happen in the same way again. ...

From which it appears that necessary truths, such as we find in pure mathematics, and particularly in arithmetic and geometry, must have principles whose proof does not depend on instances, nor consequently on the testimony of the senses, although without the senses it would never have occurred to us to think of them...”

Experience cannot warrant beliefs about what is necessarily the case. Hence, experience cannot be the source of our knowledge. The best explanation of our knowledge is that we gain it by intuition and deduction. Leibniz mentions logic, metaphysics and morals as other areas in which our knowledge similarly outstrips what experience can provide.

Judgments in logic and metaphysics involve forms of necessity beyond what experience can support. Judgments in morals involve a form of obligation or value that lies beyond experience.

We know a great deal of mathematics, and what we know, we know to be necessarily true. None of our experiences warrants a belief in such necessity, and we do not seem to base our knowledge on any experiences.

Perhaps most of all, rationalist defenders of the Intuition/Deduction thesis owe us an account of what intuition is and how it provides warranted true beliefs about the external world.

Intuition/Deduction Thesis(cont.)

However we should have a clear understanding of intuition and how it supports warranted beliefs. if intuition is some form of intellectual “grasping,” it appears that all that is grasped is relations among our concepts, rather than facts about the external world.

What accounts for the reliability of our intuitions regarding the external world?

If the rationalist appeals to our knowledge in metaphysics to support the argument, Hume denies that we have such knowledge.

The rationalists’ argument for the Intuition/Deduction thesis goes wrong at the start, according to empiricists, by assuming that we can have substantive knowledge of the external world that outstrips what experience can warrant.

This empiricist reply faces challenges of its own. Our knowledge of mathematics seems to be about something more than our own concepts. Our knowledge of moral judgments seems to concern not just how we feel or act but how we ought to behave. The general principles that provide a basis for the empiricist view, e.g. Hume’s overall account of our ideas, the Verification Principle of Meaning, are problematic in their own right.

In all, rationalists have a strong argument for the Intuition/Deduction thesis relative to our substantive knowledge of the external world, but its success rests on how well they can answer questions about the nature and epistemic force of intuition.

The Innate Knowledge Thesis

Plato's position illustrates the kind of reasoning that has caused many philosophers to adopt some form of the Innate Knowledge thesis.

We are confident that we know certain propositions about the external world, but there seems to be no adequate explanation of how we gained this knowledge short of saying that it is innate. Its content is beyond what we directly gain in experience, as well as what we can gain by performing mental operations on what experience provides. It does not seem to be based on an intuition or deduction. That it is innate in us appears to be the best explanation.

Peter Carruthers (1992) argues that we have innate knowledge of the principles of folk-psychology. He argues that the complexity, universality and depth of folk-psychological principles outstrips what experience can provide, especially to young children who by their fifth year already know a great many of them.

Peter Carruthers claims that our innate knowledge is determined through evolutionary selection

Carruthers maintains that "Innate beliefs will count as known provided that the process through which they come to be innate is a reliable one (provided, that is, that the process tends to generate beliefs that are true)". He argues that natural selection results in the formation of some beliefs and is a truth-reliable process.

The Innate Concept Thesis

According to the Innate Concept thesis, some of our concepts have not been gained from experience. They are instead part of our rational make-up, and experience simply triggers a process by which we consciously grasp them.

An example of this reasoning is presented by Descartes in the *Meditations*.

Innate ideas, such as our ideas of God, of extended matter, of substance and of a perfect triangle, are placed in our minds by God at creation. Consider Descartes's argument that our concept of God, as an infinitely perfect being, is innate.

Our concept of God is not directly gained in experience, as particular tastes, sensations and mental images might be. Its content is beyond what we could ever construct by applying available mental operations to what experience directly provides.

Descartes supplements this argument by another. Not only is the content of our concept of God beyond what experience can provide, the concept is a prerequisite for our employment of the concept of finite perfection gained from experience.

An empiricist response to this general line of argument is given by Locke. Young children and people from other cultures do not consciously entertain the concept of God and have not done so. Contrary to Descartes' argument, we can explain how experience provides all our ideas, including those the rationalists take to be innate. According to Locke, experience consists in external sensation and inner reflection. All our ideas are either simple or complex, with the former being received by us passively in sensation or reflection and the latter being built by the mind from simple materials through various mental operations.

The Innate Concept Thesis (cont.)

Leibniz offers a rationalist reply to the first concern. Where Locke puts forth the image of the mind as a blank tablet on which experience writes, Leibniz offers us the image of a block of marble, the veins of which determine what sculpted figures it will accept.

Leibniz's metaphor contains an insight that Locke misses. The mind plays a role in determining the nature of its contents.

Hume distinguishes between two forms of mental contents or “perceptions,” as he calls them: impressions and ideas. Impressions are the contents of our current experiences: our sensations, feelings, emotions, desires, and so on. Ideas are mental contents derived from impressions. Simple ideas are copies of impressions; complex ideas are derived from impressions by “compounding, transposing, augmenting or diminishing” them.

Our claims, and any knowledge we may have, about causal connections in the world turn out, given the limited content of our empirically based concept of causation, to be claims and knowledge about the constant conjunction of events and our own feelings of expectation. Thus, the initial disagreement between rationalists and empiricists about the source of our ideas leads to one about their content and thereby the content of our descriptions and knowledge of the world.

Like philosophical debates generally, the rationalist/empiricist debate ultimately concerns our position in the world, in this case our position as rational inquirers. To what extent do our faculties of reason and experience support our attempts to know and understand our situation?