

Rationalism

Peter J. Markie

Philosophical Concept

Rationalism is the view that reason, as opposed to, say, sense experience, divine revelation or reliance on institutional authority, plays a dominant role in our attempt to gain knowledge. Different forms of rationalism are distinguished by different conceptions of reason and its role as a source of knowledge, by different descriptions of the alternatives to which reason is opposed, by different accounts of the nature of knowledge, and by different choices of the subject matter, for example, ethics, physics, mathematics, metaphysics, relative to which reason is viewed as the major source of knowledge. The common application of the term 'rationalist' can say very little about what two philosophers have in common.

Suppose we mean by reason our intellectual abilities in general, including sense experience. To employ reason is to use our individual intellectual abilities to seek evidence for and against potential beliefs. To fail to employ reason is to form beliefs on the basis of such non-rational processes as blind faith, guessing or unthinking obedience to institutional authority. Suppose too that we conceive of knowledge as true, warranted belief, where warrant requires that a belief be beyond a reasonable doubt though not beyond the slightest doubt. Here, then, is a version of rationalism: reason is the major source of knowledge in the rational sciences. This is a weak version of rationalism which simply asserts that our individual intellectual abilities, as opposed to blind faith and so on, are the major source of knowledge in the natural sciences. It is clearly not very controversial and is widely accepted.

Suppose, however, we take reason to be a distinct faculty of knowledge distinguished from sense experience in particular. To employ reason is to grasp self-evident truths or to deduce additional conclusions from them. Suppose we conceive of knowledge as true, warranted belief, where warrant now requires that a belief be beyond even the slightest doubt. Let us also extend our attention to metaphysics and issues such as the existence of God, human free will and immortality. Here is a much stronger version of rationalism which asserts that the intellectual grasp of self-evident truths and the deduction of ones that are not self-evident is the major source of true beliefs warranted beyond even the slightest doubt in the natural sciences and metaphysics. Clearly it is highly controversial and not very widely accepted.

The term 'rationalism' has been used to cover a range of views. Scholars of the Enlightenment generally have in mind something like the first example – a general confidence in the powers of

the human intellect, in opposition to faith and blind acceptance of institutional authority, as a source of knowledge – when they refer to the rationalist spirit of the period and the work of such philosophers as Voltaire. Most frequently, the term ‘rationalism’ is used to refer to views, like the second one above, which introduce reason as a distinct faculty of knowledge in contrast to sense experience. Rationalism is then opposed to empiricism, the view that sense experience provides the primary basis for knowledge. This entry concentrates on this still very general form of rationalism, reserving the term ‘rationalism’ for it alone.

1. Continental Rationalism and British Empiricism

The rationalist–empiricist division has traditionally played a major role in our understanding of the history of philosophy, particularly that of the modern period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries leading up to Kant. The major philosophers of the period are regularly grouped into two sets of three: Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz are the Continental Rationalists, in opposition to Locke, Berkeley and Hume, the British Empiricists. Philosophy department curricula, textbooks, scholarly anthologies and conference programmes have all incorporated the classification for years and are likely to continue to do so.

None the less, scholars have at least five basic reservations about its accuracy. First, a close study of the three Continental Rationalists, especially their work in the natural sciences, reveals they had a great respect for the role played by experience in scientific knowledge. Second, the British Empiricists, especially Locke and Berkeley, stress, in one way or another, the importance of reason as a source of knowledge; consider Locke’s account of a priori knowledge and Berkeley’s acceptance of innate ideas. Third, the division encourages us to overlook important areas of agreement between philosophers on different sides of the divide, such as the views of Descartes and Locke on the nature, though not the source, of our ideas. Fourth, the division encourages us to associate irrelevant differences in language and geography – those who do not write in English against those who do; the Continent against England and Scotland – with a supposed difference in philosophical views. Fifth, the grouping of the six philosophers in epistemological terms encourages an incorrect grouping of them in metaphysical ones. The Continental Rationalists are mistakenly seen as attempting to apply their reason-centred epistemology to pursue a common metaphysical programme, each trying to improve on the efforts of those before him; the British Empiricists are incorrectly seen as gradually rejecting those metaphysical claims, with each again consciously trying to improve on the efforts of predecessors. Defenders of the Continental Rationalists–British Empiricists distinction generally admit many, if not all, of these shortcomings but treat them as minor anomalies.

This entry does not attempt to resolve the controversy or even to lay out each side’s supporting evidence from the works of the philosophers involved. A few points deserve mention, however. First, in evaluating whether it is appropriate to classify these philosophers in this way, we must consider what purpose the classification is supposed to serve. The classification might well be

acceptable for pedagogical purposes at a certain level of instruction in the history of philosophy in order to initiate consideration of their views, but not at another level or for other purposes. Second, attempts to group philosophers into such families as the rationalists and the empiricists are best understood as attempts to classify them by shared family resemblances. The question to ask, then, is not whether there is a list of interesting claims the acceptance of which is definitive of being a Continental Rationalist and the rejection of which is definitive of being a British Empiricist, so that Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz may each be classified as a Continental Rationalist just so long as all those claims are accepted, and Locke, Berkeley and Hume may each be classified as a British Empiricist just so long as one rejects them. Critics of the classification sometimes present the issue in this way but few, if any, proponents see it in these terms. We need to consider whether there is an interesting list of claims emphasizing reason as a source of knowledge of the external world, a sufficiently large number of which are accepted by each of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz and rejected by each of Locke, Berkeley and Hume, though the first three may not accept all the same claims and the second three may not reject all the same ones.

Third, independently of the historical accuracy of the classification, the terms ‘rationalist’ and ‘empiricist’ are associated with some basic claims which define the family resemblance for each category. The rest of this entry focuses on the innate idea thesis and the demonstrative knowledge thesis. Minimal attention will be given to the sometimes complex scholarly questions of whether and why the claims are actually adopted by Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, and rejected by Locke, Berkeley and Hume, though some of these philosophers will be cited as examples where the attribution is fairly uncontroversial.

2. Innate ideas

To gain knowledge about the external world we need to think about it and thus we need the appropriate concepts. How do we gain them? One of the central theses associated with rationalism is that at least some of our concepts are not gained from experience but are instead innate. Descartes, for example, divided our ideas into three categories: adventitious ideas, such as our idea of red, are gained through sense experience; fictitious ideas, such as our idea of a hippogriff, are manufactured by us from other ideas we possess; innate ideas, such as our idea of God, of extended matter and of a perfect triangle, are placed in our minds by God at creation. It is important to distinguish the innate-idea thesis from some other ones. The term ‘innate’ is often associated with things other than concepts. Some rationalists, for example Descartes and Leibniz, write of innate propositions as well as innate concepts. They seem to have in mind that we have beliefs, in particular true propositions, as part of our initial mental make-up rather than as a result of experience; the propositions are presumably constructed of innate concepts. Whether and just how such true beliefs might constitute knowledge is not clear. Some philosophers have also claimed that we have innate knowledge, though it is not always clear whether this is ‘knowing that’ or ‘knowing how’ (see Innate

knowledge; Nativism). It has been maintained by contemporary philosophers, for example, that learning a natural language requires a knowledge of grammar which is 'innate' in that learners could not have inferred it from their experience. The focus in this section is solely on the thesis that some of our concepts are innate (see Concepts). The central rationalist positions on knowledge are considered in the next.

Some defences of the innate idea thesis are based in claims peculiar to particular philosophers. Leibniz's view that all substances are causally isolated monads implies a general rejection of sense experience as a source of any ideas and so supports the claim that all ideas are innate. ('It is a bad habit we have of thinking as though our minds receive certain messengers, as it were, or as if they had doors or windows. We have in our minds all those forms for all periods of time because the mind at every moment expresses all its future thoughts and already thinks confusedly of all that of which it will ever think distinctly,' Leibniz 1685: Section 26.) The most common defence of the innate-idea thesis, however, takes the form of admitting experience as a source of ideas but then arguing that some concepts could not have been gained directly or indirectly from experience; that these concepts are innate is then offered as the best explanation of their existence. That the concepts could not have been gained from experience is generally defended in one or both of two ways. First, the content of the concepts is beyond what we directly gain in experience as well as anything we could gain by performing the available mental operations on what experience provides. Second, our possession of the concepts is presupposed by our ability to employ the very empirical concepts that might be thought to provide a basis for them in experience.

Consider, for example, Descartes' defence of the claim that our concept of God, as an infinitely perfect being, is innate. This concept is not directly gained in experience, as a particular sensation of pain might be. Its content is far beyond any we could ever construct by applying available mental operations to what experience provides. Our empirical concepts include the concept of a finitely knowledgeable, powerful and good being; we can even construct the concept of a finitely but *very* knowledgeable, powerful and good being, but we cannot move on to the concept of an infinite one. We cannot, for example, gain the idea of infinite perfection by simply negating our concept of finite perfection. ('I must not think that, just as my conceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light, so my perception of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite' (Descartes 1641: Third Meditation).) Moreover, we must possess the concept of infinite perfection in order to employ the concept of finite perfection gained from experience. ('For how could I understand that... I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison' (Descartes 1641: Third Meditation).) Objections to the standard arguments for the innate-idea thesis generally take two forms. The less radical line of objection, exemplified by Locke, is to argue that the supposedly innate concepts are indeed gained by sense experience and to offer an account of the mental processes

involved. The more radical critique, exemplified by Hume, is to agree that the supposedly innate concept could not be gained by experience and to argue that we do not in fact have the concept as understood by the innate-idea theorists in the first place; a failure to find an experiential source for a supposed concept should not lead to us to the innate idea thesis but to a critical examination of our concepts themselves (see Locke, J. §2; Hume, D. §2).

Besides defending their theory, innate-idea theorists face the task of explaining exactly what it is for an idea to be innate. Innate concepts are in the mind from creation but are not present in consciousness until we actually conceive them. How are these concepts ‘in the mind’ prior to being present to consciousness? How too can any of them, prior to being present to consciousness, serve as a precondition of our employing other ideas gained from experience? Finally, innate idea theorists often assume that the ways in which we conceive of the external world using our innate concepts actually correspond to how it is, and they thus face the question of what justification, if any, there can be for this assumption. A frequent strategy is to find a non-deceptive source for our innate concepts – be it a non-deceiving God, as for Descartes, or a non-sensory experience by the soul prior to its union with the body, as in Plato’s doctrine of recollection (see Plato §§11–14).

3. Intuition and demonstration

A second thesis generally identified with rationalism is the claim that reason alone can provide us with at least some knowledge of the external world through our intuition of self-evident propositions and our subsequent deduction of additional information from those starting points. Intuition is understood as a kind of intellectual ‘grasping’ by which we comprehend a proposition in such a way as to recognize its truth; in a demonstration we reason through a series of intuited premises to a logically entailed conclusion. Propositions known by intuition are self-evident, while those known by demonstration are evidenced by the intuited premises; in either case the knowledge is *a priori*, independent of evidence gained from sense experience (see *A priori*).

It is essential to the rationalist account of knowledge by intuition and demonstration that the knowledge gained in this way is knowledge of the external world. Many empiricists, indeed even Hume, are willing to admit that an intellectual grasping of our concepts can provide us with *a priori* knowledge, but they limit that knowledge to knowledge of the relations of our ideas: when we intuit that two plus three make five, we gain knowledge about how the concepts involved are related, but we do not learn anything about the world as it exists independently of our mind.

The rationalist commitment to intuitive and demonstrative knowledge of the external world is not necessarily a commitment to have such knowledge of propositions affirming the existence of particular concrete objects. It may take the form of a commitment to have such knowledge of

abstract objects which none the less exist, and are as they are, independently of our thought. Descartes, for example, claimed that while he had no knowledge of the existence of any particular triangle, he none the less had an intuitive and demonstrative knowledge of propositions about the properties of a triangle and that the content of his knowledge was a 'determinate nature' independent of his mind.

The rationalist account of knowledge under consideration involves a version of foundationalism. It endorses the view that we know some propositions independently of their being evidenced for us by any other propositions; these basic propositions provide us with the evidential base for additional knowledge (see Foundationalism). Rationalists generally adopt a strong view about the strength of our intuitive and demonstrative knowledge. When we intuit a proposition we know it to be true with certainty. Our intuitive grasp places it beyond even the slightest doubt. This extreme degree of epistemic justification can only be transferred to other beliefs by deductive inference which precludes the possibility of the conclusion being false while the premise is true. Even our ability to gain additional knowledge by demonstration is limited. Once our demonstrations get so lengthy as to rely on memory, the possibility of a mistake in recall weakens our degree of justification. (On some interpretations of Descartes' epistemology, a major aim of his epistemic programme is to remove the limitation that this reliance on memory placed on the certainty of our demonstrations.)

Rationalism is sometimes identified with the view that every science has the same deductive structure in which knowledge moves from the intuition of self-evident axioms to the demonstration of theorems. It is thus seen as endorsing a single method for all sciences and as asserting the priority of the knower over the known: as we move from one subject to another – from mathematics to physics – the subject matter changes, but so long as the nature of the knower's mind remains constant the same method of intuition and demonstration may be used in each case. The Continental Rationalists were all impressed by the rigour and certainty associated with the deductive method of mathematics and they stressed the importance of meeting such standards in other areas. So too, Descartes and Leibniz, like Galileo, were quite concerned with the application of mathematics to the natural sciences. Yet, it is clearly a mistake to attribute to them individually, or to rationalism generally, the view that all science proceeds by intuition and demonstration. Even though Descartes, for example, attempted to use intuition and demonstration to establish some basic laws of nature (that whatever is in motion continues in motion in so far as it can, that all motion is rectilinear, and so on), he admitted that we need to use experiments to move beyond very basic principles.

Just as the innate idea thesis is partially motivated by the belief that sense experience can not provide some concepts we clearly have, so too the rationalist belief in knowledge of the external world by intuition and demonstration is often at least partly motivated by the conviction that sense experience falls short of providing us with knowledge in some areas. Our claims in

mathematics, metaphysics and ethics, for example, seem to outstrip the content of our sense experiences. We experience lots of imperfect triangles but no perfect ones, we may experience the effects of God's creative powers but not God, and we experience how things are but not how they ought to be. So how can we have knowledge in such areas? Intuition and demonstration provide an alternative account; one that becomes increasingly attractive when the other main option seems to be scepticism (see Scepticism).

The rationalist appeal to intuition and deduction is also at times motivated by a demanding conception of knowledge that seems to require more than experience can provide. Descartes' conception of knowledge as permanent supported his requirement that it be absolutely certain which in turn placed it beyond sense experience. Whenever we form beliefs on the basis of sense experience, the possibility that our senses are deceiving us keeps us from absolute certainty (see Certainty; Doubt; Fallibilism). Here again, intuition and demonstration provide an attractive alternative, especially given their apparently successful use in mathematics with its high degree of epistemic justification.

4. Intuition and demonstration (cont.)

Some of the difficulties for the rationalist appeal to intuition and deduction arise out of the reasons for rejecting sense experience. If knowledge requires certainty, what makes our intuitions and subsequent demonstrations certain? We have already noted the worry about the use of memory in extended demonstrations (see Memory, epistemology of). What makes our intuitions a source of certainty even while we are having them? Could not a deceitful God have us intuit false propositions, just as easily as we might deceive ourselves in a dream? Do not such epistemic possibilities as a deceitful God give us at least a slight reason to doubt our intuition that two plus three make five, preventing it from being absolutely certain?

One rationalist strategy for responding to this difficulty is to offer an argument for the veridicality of our intuitions. Once we establish that our intuitions are non-deceptive, we can gain certainty by them, and we can establish the universal veridicality of our intuitions while we cannot establish the universal veridicality of our sense experiences. Yet, the argument for the truth of our intuitions will only meet the sceptical challenge if it establishes its conclusion with certainty, and the demand for certainty thus requires the rationalists to rely on intuition to support the premises of their argument for the veridicality of intuition. They thus fall into an apparently vicious form of circular reasoning (sometimes called the 'Cartesian Circle' in recognition of Descartes' struggle with the problem). A second strategy is to claim that all our intuitions are certain, even when we have not gained certain knowledge that the faculty never deceives. Whenever we intuit a proposition, we are certain of it; such hypotheses as that of a deceiving God do not give us a reason to doubt it, even if they are epistemic possibilities for us. This strategy risks being *ad hoc*: why should we accept intuition as an automatic source of certainty?

Appeals to intuition carry a related methodological problem. Let us assume that real intuitions are always true and always certain. How do we distinguish between real intuitions and only apparent ones, and how do we get ourselves in a position to have the former but not the latter? People have taken themselves to 'just see' the truth of all sorts of contradictory claims; they cannot all be correct (see Pyrrhonism). Descartes' method of doubt is intended to help us gain a psychological state where we will have real intuitions, but his own extravagant list of 'intuited' propositions in the course of following his method illustrates its ineffectiveness.

Another difficulty for the rationalist reliance on intuition and demonstration takes us back to the view that some claims about the external world fall beyond the range of our sense experience but within that of intuition and demonstration. The rationalist must argue that the contents of intellectual intuition are independent of us in such a way that, as in Descartes' theory of simple natures, our knowledge of how they are related is not just knowledge about the structure of our own thoughts. Rationalism, while primarily an epistemological position, thus involves its proponents in at least some metaphysical commitments (see Introspection, epistemology of). According to many contemporary epistemologists, rationalism, like such related theories as foundationalism, is dead. It surely is beset with problems in both the innate idea thesis and the demonstrative knowledge thesis. Yet, a complete evaluation of rationalism must involve more than an examination of these two central points. It must also include an overall examination of the nature and extent of our knowledge and the nature and extent of our experience. Rationalism, in one form or another, will remain attractive so long as we find that we have knowledge of the external world which appears to go beyond what experience can provide.

References and further reading

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(The rationalism–empiricism dispute over intuitive knowledge of the external world is sometimes conceived as involving a distinction between analytic and synthetic truths: the rationalists' commitment to such knowledge is understood as a commitment to synthetic a priori knowledge; the empiricists' rejection of such knowledge is understood as a denial of synthetic a priori knowledge; this piece contains an influential critique of the analytic–synthetic distinction.)

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(A discussion of innate ideas and related topics.)