

Drawing distinctions between Rationalism and Empiricism: A Summary

Rationalism: Key Points

- Rationalism claims that we can have *synthetic a priori* knowledge (through innate knowledge) of how things are outside the mind. Empiricism denies this. Empiricists claim that all knowledge comes from experience (a priori knowledge is only of analytic propositions).
- Descartes claims that reason is needed to establish the nature and existence of material objects in general (and the existence of God in the form of the Ontological Argument). We have the innate ability to judge which allows us to understand something about the nature of physical objects.
- Plato claims that we have innate knowledge that we recollect and 'draw out' through the application of reason (slave-boy example in *Meno* and the doctrine of the eternal soul in *Republic*). The knowledge is drawn from infinite souls that inhabit our finite, physical bodies.
- Whether you believe in Descartes' imagination/judgement based rationalism or Plato's recollective knowledge version, both versions claim that these things help you 'see' the truth of a knowledge claim just by thinking about it (using reason). This is known as rational intuition.
- Descartes argues that sense experience on its own cannot establish truths about the external world. How do we know that all our experiences are not the product of sense deception (Descartes' evil demon argument). A modern version of this would run as follows: we know that certain neurological patterns in the brain cause us to have certain experiences. If we can stimulate the brain in such ways then, regardless of what is the case in the external world, we will have the experience determined by the neurological pattern that has been stimulated.

Empiricism: Key Points

- Empiricists deny that we have an a priori knowledge of synthetic propositions about how the world is outside our minds.

- The mind is a *tabula rasa* at birth; there is no innate knowledge.
- Hume argues that all a priori knowledge is of relations of ideas, and so is analytic. All knowledge of synthetic propositions (matters of fact) is *a posteriori*. It depends either on present experience or inference gained from past experience.
- Empiricists claim that *all* concepts are derived from impressions of sensation or of reflection. (Ideas – according to Hume – are derived from impressions. They are vague copies of the original impressions.)
- Simple concepts are copies of impressions; complex concepts are created out of simple concepts by combining and abstracting from them.
- Our knowledge of matters of facts relies on induction. As such, they can never be proven. This is a problem if knowledge equates to certainty.

- Now think of things that you are able to do (perhaps recognise) without fully being able to explain how.
- **Nativism** is a relatively recent view (pertaining to Rationalism) that there is knowledge that we possess from birth (think about it in terms of knowledge that is native to a particular species).
- This knowledge maybe somehow encoded in our genetic make-up. If it exists, such knowledge would be known independently of experience.
- What do you think? Is there scientific support for rationalism?
- They argue that sensory experience 'triggers' our awareness of such concepts (or truths). Through reason, we can then elaborate on them.
- Modern nativists argue that such knowledge may be genetically determined.
- Peter Carruthers argues that since the development of the eye, the ability to speak and so on are genetically determined, why not concepts?
- It's just a question of the appropriate type of stimulation.

- Given that we know that certain patterns in neurological activity relate to certain concepts, it seems plausible that as the brain develops according to genetic determinants.

A Little Ornithology



- Noam Chomsky argues that it must be the case that our knowledge of grammar is innate because we are able to pick up language naturally and far more quickly than the information that we are given warrants.
- Usually, we learn from using memory, induction from examples, and inference to grammatical rules from language experienced.
- We can't have just learnt this from experience; there must be something innate.

Next week we will be looking at another well-known Rationalist philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. Leibniz believed that knowledge was, essentially, innate and that the mind was analogous to a vein saturated block of marble which we, during our lives, shape. Leibniz remarks:

So [the mind] isn't a bare faculty, consisting in a mere possibility of understanding those truths; it is rather a disposition, an aptitude, a preformation, which determines our soul and brings it about that those truths are derivable from it. Just as the shapes that someone chooses to give to a piece of marble differ from the shapes that its veins already indicate or are disposed to indicate if the sculptor avails himself of them.

The following week we will look at empiricist arguments.