Rationalism vs. Empiricism

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.

Q1. What is the nature of propositional knowledge, knowledge that a particular proposition about the world is true?

To know a proposition, we must believe it and it must be true, but something more is required, something that distinguishes knowledge from a lucky guess. Let’s call this additional element ‘warrant’. A good deal of philosophical work has been invested in trying to determine the nature of warrant/(justification).

Q2. How can we gain knowledge?

We can form true beliefs just by making lucky guesses. How to gain warranted beliefs is less clear. Moreover, to know the world, we must think about it, and it is unclear how we gain the concepts we use in thought or what assurance, if any, we have that the ways in which we divide up the world using our concepts correspond to divisions that actually exist.

Q3. What are the limits of our knowledge?

Some aspects of the world may be within the limits of our thought but beyond the limits of our knowledge; faced with competing descriptions of them, we cannot know which description is true. Some aspects of the world may even be beyond the limits of our thought, so that we cannot form intelligible descriptions of them, let alone know that a particular description is true.

The disagreement between rationalists and empiricists primarily concerns the second question, regarding the sources of our concepts and knowledge. In some instances, their disagreement on this topic leads them to give conflicting responses to the other questions as well. They may disagree over the nature of warrant or about the limits of our thought and knowledge. Our focus here will be on the competing rationalist and empiricist responses to the second question.

1.1 Rationalism

*The Intuition/Deduction Thesis*: Some propositions in a particular subject area, S, are knowable by us by intuition alone; still others are knowable by being deduced from intuited propositions. Intuition is a form of rational insight. Intellectually grasping a proposition, we just “see” it to be true in such a way as to form a true, warranted belief in it. 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, 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.

*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.

Subsequently, rationalist also consider

*The Indispensability of Reason Thesis*: The knowledge we gain in subject area, S, by intuition and deduction, as well as the ideas and instances of knowledge in S that are innate to us, could not have been gained by us through sense experience.The second is that reason is superior to experience as a source of knowledge.

*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.

1.2 Empiricism

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.

1.3 Idealism

In philosophy, **idealism** is a diverse group of metaphysical views which all assert that "reality" is in some way indistinguishable or inseparable from human, or non-human, perception and/or understanding, that it is in some sense mentally constructed, or that it is otherwise closely connected to ideas. In contemporary scholarship, traditional idealist views are generally divided into two groups.

[Subjective idealism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subjective_idealism) takes as its starting point that objects only exist to the extent that they are perceived by someone.

[Objective idealism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objective_idealism) posits the existence of an *objective* consciousness which exists before and, in some sense, independently of human consciousness, thereby bringing about the existence of objects independently of human minds