

Reason, intuition and knowledge¹

Does all our knowledge come from experience, as empiricists claim? Or do we have some knowledge through reason that doesn't depend on experience, as rationalists claim? In this handout, we look at Descartes' idea of reasoning and how it may provide knowledge, and place it alongside Hume's theory of what we can know and how.

'INTUITION' AND 'DEDUCTION'

We will see that the form of reasoning Descartes presents is intended to be deductive. So if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true if the argument is valid. In this case, we say that the conclusion is entailed by the premises. If the premises are true, but the conclusion could be false, then the deduction has failed. The advantage of using deduction is that it is a way of proving the conclusion from the premises. If we can be confident that the premises are true, and the inference is correct, we can be confident that the conclusion is true.

What is 'intuition' in the context of this debate, sometimes also referred to as 'insight'? This doesn't mean a 'gut feeling' or 'instinct'. It refers to rational intuition. For example, when you consider a deductive argument, do you understand why, if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true? Take the example, 'Socrates is a man and all men are mortal. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.' How is it that you can 'see' the conclusion follows - that it must be true if the premises are? This grasping of rational truths takes us towards the idea of 'rational intuition', though it covers much more than deductive reasoning. Another example is necessary truth. How do you understand that $2 + 2$ not only equals 4, but must equal 4? Or that it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be? At the heart of rational intuition is discovering the truth of a claim just by thinking about it. Very often, what we discover in rational intuition is that the claim is true because it must be true.

Descartes puts the two methods together: we know a number of claims by rational intuition, and we can use these as the premises in deductive arguments to gain knowledge of further claims. He argues that using these methods, we can gain knowledge of our own existence as mental substances, of the existence of God, and of the existence and nature of physical objects. In this handout, we will just

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 150-7

look at the first of these - his cogito.

EMPIRICISTS ON KNOWLEDGE

Whether we have rational intuition in this sense is disputed by empiricists, who claim that all knowledge comes from experience. They can agree with rationalists that we can know analytic propositions a priori (just by thinking about them). However, empiricists can argue that knowledge of analytic propositions isn't a function of 'rational intuition', but a form of conceptual knowledge. To know an analytic truth, one simply needs to understand the concepts involved. As long as the concepts are learned from experience, knowledge of analytic truths is no threat to the empiricist claim that all knowledge ultimately derives from experience.

Empiricists also allow that we can, of course, know our own mental states 'just by thinking about them'. The origin of this knowledge isn't rational intuition either, but 'impressions of reflection' - experience of our own minds.

The real debate between empiricism and rationalism, then, concerns whether we can have a priori of any synthetic propositions that don't concern our own mental states. Rationalism claims that we have some a priori knowledge of synthetic propositions about the world external to our minds. Empiricism (about knowledge) claims that there is no a priori knowledge of synthetic propositions about the world external to our minds.

Given this, for any claim that rationalists offer as an example of knowledge through rational intuition and deduction, empiricists have four possible responses:

1. that the proposition is analytic, not synthetic;
2. that the proposition is about our own minds, known from impressions of reflection;
3. that knowledge of the proposition is a posteriori, not a priori; or
4. that we can't know the proposition at all.

Hume's fork

In *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume argues that we can have knowledge of just two sorts of claim: the relations between ideas and matters of fact. He uses two related criteria to make the distinction, though it is easier to grasp what he means by taking them in a different order:

1. Relations of ideas 'can be discovered purely by thinking, with no need to attend to anything that actually exists anywhere in the universe'. Matters of fact, by contrast, are 'propositions about what exists and what is the case'.
2. Relations of ideas are statements that are 'either intuitively or demonstratively certain' (p. 11). Hume gives the example of $3 \times 5 = 30/2$ - a statement about the relations of numbers. Relations of ideas that are demonstratively certain are known by deduction. Matters of fact, by contrast, are not known by deduction, because they are statements that can

be denied without contradiction.

Relations of ideas

The second point needs explanation. First, a contradiction both asserts and denies something. For example, a true analytic proposition cannot be denied without contradiction. To say that vixens are not foxes is a contradiction in terms; it is to say that female foxes are not foxes. Second, in a deductive argument, if you assert the premises, but deny the conclusion, then you contradict yourself, e.g. ' $3 \times 5 = 15$ and $30 \div 2 = 15$, but $3 \times 5 \neq 30 \div 2$ '. Hume is claiming that we gain knowledge of relations of ideas through merely understanding concepts and through deductive inference from such understanding. To deny any claims we know this way would involve a contradiction.

(We can also use deduction to infer matters of fact from other matters of fact, e.g. Socrates is a man and all men are mortal, so Socrates is mortal. But 'Socrates is mortal' isn't known by deduction in Hume's sense, since the premises rely on sense experience.)

We can now connect the two criteria. What we know that is intuitively or demonstratively certain is also what can be discovered purely by thinking - relations of ideas. On the other hand, propositions about what exists - matters of fact - we cannot know by a priori reasoning. Hume goes on to argue that we can know them through experience.

The history of philosophy is full of debate about what qualifies as relations of ideas in Hume's sense. As we shall see, Descartes argues that a great deal can be known through rational intuition and demonstration, while Hume rejects many of Descartes' claims. So we need to interpret Hume in line with empiricism, as saying that a priori knowledge (relations of ideas) is either analytic (and what can be deduced from analytic truths) or only about my own mind, while all knowledge of synthetic propositions about the world beyond my mind (matters of fact) is a posteriori.

Matters of fact

While the main focus of debate between rationalism and empiricism concerns a priori knowledge, it is worth briefly describing Hume's theory of our a posteriori knowledge of matters of fact. The foundation of knowledge of matters of fact, Hume argues, is what we experience here and now, or can remember. We gain it by using observation and employing induction and reasoning about probability. All knowledge that goes beyond what is present to our senses or memory rests on causal inference. We take our experience to be an effect of whatever fact we infer. If I go out in the morning and all the streets are wet when they were dry yesterday evening, I'll infer that it rained in the night. I do this because I think that rain causes the streets to become wet, and if the whole area is wet, not just small part, I'll believe the cause is rain (rather than liquid spilling or some other explanation).

And how do I know all this? How do I know what causes what? Not by a priori reasoning or deduction. If you encounter some object that you've never experienced before, you cannot work out what effects it will have just by

examining it. Just by examining a magnet - having never experienced one before - could you deduce what effect it will have on metal? Just by examining bread, could you work out that it doesn't nourish tigers? Just by seeing a billiard ball roll towards another billiard ball, could you conclude that the second one will move away? Even if you imagine that this is what will happen, that's arbitrary, groundless.

It is only our experience of what causes what that enables us to make causal inferences in particular cases. It is only our experience that enables us to infer from the existence of some cause to its effect, or from some effect to its cause. I have experienced rain wetting the streets around me and spillages wetting smaller areas. Reason can impose some order on the particular causal relations we discover through experience. For example, reason can simplify our causal principles, for instance by identifying different instances (the movements of billiard balls and the vibrations of molecules, say) as examples of the same kind of thing (kinetic energy). But reason can do no more than this.

DESCARTES' THEORY OF RATIONAL INTUITION

Descartes' *Meditations* provide an extended study in establishing knowledge through rational intuition and deduction. We will look at his 'cogito' and his elaboration of the idea of rational intuition through his concept of 'clear and distinct' ideas.

The cogito

At the start of Meditation II, we find Descartes supposing that all that he perceives and remembers is an illusion; that he has no body or senses at all; that in believing anything else, he is being deceived by a 'supremely powerful and cunning deceiver', an 'evil demon'. How did he get into this state?!

Descartes is seeking to find out what he can know as true. To achieve this, he has decided to avoid believing anything that is not 'completely certain and indubitable'. He then argues that he can doubt his senses, his memory and even that he has a body (note that these are all a posteriori claims we would use perception to establish). The demon could make it seem that he sees a tree when he doesn't, that he has a body when he doesn't, and so on. The question now, at the start of Meditation II, is whether he can know anything at all.

Descartes begins by arguing that, even if the evil demon is deceiving him about his senses and so on, 'he will never bring it about that I am nothing while I think I am something'. Why not? Descartes cannot doubt that he exists: if he were to doubt that he exists, that would prove he does exist - as something that thinks (doubting is a kind of thinking). He cannot be deceived that he thinks. So he knows that he exists as something that thinks. The cogito, Latin for 'I think', is Descartes' first stepping stone to knowledge.

However, Descartes can't know that he exists as a body - his sense perception of his body, and of bodies in general, could be something he is deceived about. The demon could make it seem that he has a body when in fact he does not. Could he nevertheless be a body, without knowing it? Descartes can't say, but at least his

knowledge of what he is can't depend on his being a body, since he knows he exists whether or not he has a body. What he is is a thinking thing, 'a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wants, refuses, and also imagines and senses'. Furthermore, he knows which type of thought he is engaging in: he can't mistakenly think that he is imagining when he's conceiving, can't think he's doubting when he's willing and so on.

The last activity of the mind that Descartes lists is 'senses'. But doesn't sense perception involve having a body? So doesn't the fact that he senses establish the existence of physical objects? No, because, Descartes notes, he has sensory experiences in his dreams as well, when he is not seeing or hearing at all. 'Sensing' is just having sensory experiences. Understood like this, independent of their cause, these experiences are nothing more than a form of thinking, and so don't depend on having a body.

Clear and distinct ideas

At the start of Meditation III, Descartes reflects on the cogito. He finds that his certainty in it rests on how the idea presents itself to his mind. So he argues

- P1. 'In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting.'
- P2. If clarity and distinctness do not guarantee truth, then I cannot know that I exist.
- P3. I do know that I exist.
- C1. Therefore, 'as a general rule . . . whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true'.

This argument lays the foundations for Descartes' theory of rational intuition. Descartes has defended the cogito as a claim that he knows to be true just by thinking about it. He knows because it is an idea that is 'clear and distinct'.

What does this mean? Descartes doesn't say in the *Meditations*, but gives this definition in his *Principles of Philosophy*: an idea is clear 'when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind - just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility'. An idea is distinct if it is clear and 'it is so sharply separated from all other ideas that every part of it is clear'. In the *Meditations*, again drawing on an analogy with vision, Descartes connects clear and distinct ideas to what he calls 'the natural light': 'Things that are revealed by the natural light - for example, that if I am doubting then I exist - are not open to any doubt, because no other faculty that might show them to be false could be as trustworthy as the natural light'. So, for Descartes, rational intuition is the 'natural light', our ability to know that clear and distinct ideas are true.

In what sense are clear and distinct ideas 'indubitable'? Just saying 'I can't doubt it, so it must be true' is clearly not good enough. The fact that you can't doubt something may just be a psychological fact about you (cp. 'I'm sure he told the truth. I can't believe he would lie to me' - and yet he did...). Things that we

cannot doubt in this sense are not yet a good guide to the truth.

But this subjective sense of 'indubitable', a feeling of certainty, is not what Descartes means. He means that when I, as a rational thinker, using my best, most careful judgment, consider a proposition, I judge that it is impossible that it should be false. It is necessarily true that when I think of the proposition, it is true. When I think the thought 'I think', then that thought, 'I think', must be true. The indubitability of the proposition is an epistemological fact about the proposition, not a psychological fact about me.

AN EMPIRICIST RESPONSE TO THE COGITO

What does it mean to say 'I exist' or 'I think'? Descartes claims that he is a thinking thing. He is the same thing from one thought to another. But can Descartes know this? The evil demon may deceive him: perhaps there is only a succession of thoughts, nothing that persists between thoughts which is a single thing.

In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume develops the argument as follows: we don't experience a continuing mental substance over time, we only experience a continually changing array of thoughts and feelings. So what is the basis for thinking that there is a thing that thinks? In coming up with the idea of a 'thinking thing' - a mental substance - we confuse similarity for identity. We've confused our experience of the similarity of our thoughts and feelings from one moment to the next with the idea that there is one identical 'thing' persisting through such thoughts and to which they belong.

Descartes' response to this objection, in an appendix to the *Meditations* called 'Objections and Replies', is to say that thoughts logically require a thinker. But is this something Descartes could be deceived about?

Perhaps it is true that there can't be a thought unless something thinks it. But that doesn't entail that the 'thinker' is a subject that persists from one thought to another. Hume argues that even if we experience thinking as active in this way, how does our experience enable us to move to the claim that I am one and the same active substance, persisting through time and different thoughts? As soon as Descartes says that to be a thinker is to doubt, will, imagine, and so on, he assumes we can say these activities belong to the same subject, that he (the same thinker) does all this. But perhaps the evil demon is simply creating a series of false thoughts, among which is the thought that a thinker, a substance, an 'I', exists. Descartes' claims about what he is could be false.

Is the cogito an example of knowledge by rational intuition? Descartes will argue that it is, because it is a clear and distinct idea. But first, we have just questioned whether it is clear and distinct that I am a mental substance. Second, Hume argues that we can know immediately about our minds through impressions of reflection. This will be a priori knowledge and intuitively certain, but impressions of reflection don't provide us with knowledge of our existence as a mental substance.