

## RATIONALISM VIS-A-VIS EMPIRICISM: THE SAME ORIGIN DIVERSE IN MECHANISM

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### Abstract

*This research work is geared towards the two schools that emerged from epistemology in search of sources in which humans can gain authentic knowledge. The two schools are Rationalism and Empiricism. In the quest to investigate the possible means one can possess knowledge, resulted to heterogeneous viewpoints. The Rationalism school generates their premises in two ways; the first argument was that, knowledge from reason excels the information that sense experience furnishes us with. While the second argument deals on how reason forms additional information about the universe we find ourselves. The Empiricism on the other hand, adopted sense experience as the only source of knowledge. This work is embarked to expose the debate between the two schools and to conspicuously unveil their shortcomings. And to reconcile the long hydra headed issue that exist between rationalism and empiricism over preponderant (superiority). The finding is that; one can gain knowledge through sense experience and by use of reason. The recommendation of this work is; there is no absolute rationalism and absolute empiricism. The empiricists make use of reason in their argument. Both sense experience and reason are needed to get at certain knowledge, and none of them is indispensable in terms of error.*

### Introduction

The renaissance (transition) period witnessed radical transformation in the development of philosophy. Prior to the emergence of modern period in philosophy, the sceptists held on to the opinion that knowledge is impossible to acquire. Thus, *the question of whether we can attain knowledge or not is not a serious one because one's denial of the possibility of attaining genuine knowledge is already knowledge of its own* (Ozumba, 2009, 166). In an effort to investigate the true nature of knowledge and the intricacies that lead to its acquisition gave birth to two schools, namely; Rationalism and Empiricism. They pushed hard to provide justification for the possibility of knowledge. Thus, their unrelenting effort to jettison out of scepticism (which asserts and tenaciously holds a judgement of unprecedented opinion that knowledge is not possible) resulted to a paradigm shift in epistemology. From denial of knowledge to how can we know? The two schools came up with the results of their findings. The school of rationalism opines that knowledge is gained through reason while that of empiricism raised a protest (objection) with a counter claim that all that we know as knowledge comes from sense

experience. The outcome of their results was further subjected into intellectual debate, to scrutinize the authenticity of what one claims to know. The above stated debate on the sources and limits of knowledge resulted to conflict between the two schools which are embedded within the ambiance of theories of knowledge. This controversy cannot continue in an infinite regress.

The fundamental question that comes to mind is: What is the nature of knowledge? How can we gain knowledge? What are the limits of our knowledge? Do we know through the sense perception of objects in experience? If yes, how can one proof it with certainty that the senses are not deceptive and not affected by what Francis Bacon labelled the Idols? Do the qualities we found in things really exist in them or are they the product of our mind? The bone of contention between the two schools centered on the sources and limit of what we claim as knowledge, without implicitly undermining the ego of superiority over another.

It is highly essential to clear this cobweb that enveloped the atmosphere of learning that both traditions (schools) as the case maybe are not denying the fact of each not having a knowledge

claim. The quest for supremacy (superiority) over the other is the underlying factor. The question we need to ask ourselves is; what is the general criterion of acquiring knowledge with regards to certainty and its limitations? It is true that reason have some special role to play in knowledge acquisition over and above the knowledge that experience supplies or provides. The argument is that rational knowledge that human being possesses allow us to manipulate and augment the knowledge which experience provides.

At the camp of empiricists; they argued that sense experience infuses the human mind with primary information that rationalists build on to elaborate and to give it a meaning as a result of the interpretation that the mind provides. Their hallmark is that the first encounter with an object out there is done by the senses. Any idea that did not pass through the senses is not known to mankind.

In judging this kind of case, one should be careful not to run into hasty risk of accepting any position without subjecting their claims to doubt, and to review their arguments with unprejudiced mind. For instance, our senses are apparently full of illusions and deceptive at times. Have you ever observed that when the density of the sun is high, look at a tarred road (coal tar) from a distance, it appears to have waterlogged (pull of water) at the centre of the road, but when one moves close to the point, you shall see nothing (a mirage). When you cite a rail road from a far distance, it appears bent. All colours appear black at night. A straight stick put in water appears bent to even the eye of a normal man. How reliable then is our sense of sight? In life, some people have developed sense organ while some have less developed sense organ. A man born blind has no idea of colour and one born deaf cannot hear sound. How then can we account for the knowledge obtained through the senses?

For the mere fact that sometimes our senses lead us to false judgment of things in nature does not mean that one should render it irrelevance. It does

not sound reasonable enough to suspend all the knowledge we gain from sense experience as useless. What about the correct judgment we receive some times that are authentic. Our experiences might not accurately describe a world that exists.

In some instances, their disagreement on this topic leads to conflicting responses to the other questions as well. They may disagree over the nature of warrant or about the limits of our thought or knowledge. Our focus here will be on the competing rationalist and empiricist responses to the sources of knowledge.

### **Conceptual Framework** **Rationalism**

Rationalism is a philosophical school of thought initiated by Rene Descartes. Other principal philosophers in this tradition are: Benedictus de Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. This doctrine states that knowledge about reality is gotten through reason alone without reference to sense experience. It is a principle that acknowledges reason as the supreme authority in matters of opinion, belief or conduct. Rationalism regards reason as the criterion and test of knowledge.

Philosophers who hold on to this doctrine are called rationalists. Their claim is that knowledge is gained independent of sense experience. Rationalists have high confidence in reason. Hence, (Prado, 2009) comments;

*Descartes profoundly believed that we can reason our way to objective truth and are able to acquire timeless and certain knowledge about ourselves and the world and to some extent about God.(p. 7)*

For rationalists, reality has an intrinsic logical structure. They assert that certain rational principle exist in logic, mathematics and in reasoning that are so fundamental that if denied, one will fall into contradiction. They see reason as a unique way to knowledge. They accept *a priori*

knowledge which is knowledge that arises through reason. *A priori* is not about phenomena in the empirical sense of experience of things in the universe. This aspect of knowledge does not depend upon experience. Example of such is the knowledge of Mathematics and Logic. They do not depend on experience. In rationalism, high regard is given to reason. Our rational belief and our human knowledge come from innate concept.

### **Empiricism**

It is a school of thought that denies a priori knowledge. They hold that all knowledge arises through sense perception. They denied the fact that reason has a role to play in human acquisition of knowledge. On the contrary, it is the sense impressions that imprints the knowledge found in reason. In other words, sense experience supplies knowledge to the mind (reason). On this, (Hume, 1981) notes;

*Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perception and since all ideas are derived from something antecedently present to the mind; it follows that it is impossible for us as much as to conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from idea and impression (p. 67)*

They distinguished sense data and idea. Sense data represents the basic information the senses present to the mind through our perception of objects around us. Philosophers who hold on to this theme are called empiricists. The principal empiricist philosophers are: John Locke, David Hume and George Berkeley.

### **The Criteria for Reason and Sense knowledge**

Reason as a concept in philosophy is referred to as rationality. It has to do with cognition or right thinking. Hence, (Hornby, 1989) in Oxford Advanced learners Dictionary sees reason as; "use one's power to think, understand, form opinions etc. Man's ability to reason."(p. 1046). Thinking comes from ones idea to a related ideas. It

can be identified as the ability of self-consciousness. Reason is the ability to use logic to present a sound argument.

Reason is the guiding principle of modern philosophy of mind. It is a tool that helps man to encode and decode information. It is a vital attribute in man which placed humans higher in the rank of other creatures. *Reason is the faculty we have for arranging our ideas any way we want it (Ozumba, 2009, 168)*. It is the ability to make conscious of something by applying logic in order to establish and to verify facts. Simply put, reason is a process of thinking in an organized clear and distinct way, in other to achieve knowledge and understanding. Reason is a tool that allows us to determine how to gather more information and what kind of information we need. Reason is used to compare and combine new information into the rest of our body of knowledge in order to acquire a more complete understanding.

### **The Three Major Themes of Rationalism**

For one to be an authentic rationalist, he must be committed to at least one of the three claims held tenaciously by rationalist school which are; the Intuition/Deduction thesis, the Innate knowledge thesis and the Innate concept thesis.

### **The Innate Knowledge:**

It is a doctrine which holds that man is born with some ideas. It can also be seen as a knowledge that comes with the human nature. It is part of the attributes which all men inherited from birth. In other word, it is the application God deposited in humans at the time of creation.

For instance, truth is part of the rational nature of man. The truth about God (the Supreme Being), another example is the ability to cry. Innate knowledge is not the knowledge you acquires through learning, not by sense experience or intuition and deduction. It is just inseparable, in detachable attribute from God to humanity. This knowledge is provided to us by God in our earlier stage (creation). A notable example we deemed suitable here is on child birth, every child possesses language acquisition devices which enable every child to learn languages, no one

teaches a child how to cry etc. It is an indication that people are born with a mind of universal idea.

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defined innate as; "quality, feeling etc in one's nature; possessed from birth." The concept of innate, shows that something inherent in man. Man is not empty from birth, he is endowed with the faculty to know and understand something.

Innatism as a concept asserts that human mind has ideas that are inborn in them. Innate is central to Descartes' philosophical work. It affirms the identity and continuity of consciousness in space and time. Innate idea relates to a state of consciousness and to inner experience.

### **Intuition and Deduction**

Intuition is an intellectual activity, in which the human mind grasps rational insight free from doubt, which has no connection with sense experience. Descartes formulated a method which according to him must be the basis of all scientific and philosophic research. Intuition and deduction involve truth. Simple truth is acquired through intuition while deduction is the process of arriving at the truth without interruption. On this, (Stumpf, 1977) comments:

*What makes intuition and deduction similar is that both involve truth; by intuition we grasp a simple truth completely and immediately; whereas by deduction we arrive at a truth by a process a continuous and uninterrupted action of the mind. (p. 247)*

Deduction simply put, is the rigorous process of placing intuited knowledge in an orderly manner. Intuition and deduction are classified under *a priori* knowledge because it provides us with the knowledge acquired without reference to sense experience. For instance, some rationalist considers mathematics as a perfect example of knowledge gained through intuition and deduction. *I understand by the word 'God' an infinite and independent substance intelligent and powerful in*

*the highest degrees, who created me along with everything, else (Descartes, 1981,74).* Other examples are moral truth, the proof of God's existence, and the composite nature of man (soul and body).

It is the process through which the human mind and the intellect attain self-evident proofs in mathematics. Intuition and deduction are two mental operations by which we are able to arrive at the knowledge of things without fear. Hence, (Descartes, 1981) declares:

*By intuition I understand not the fluctuating testimony of the senses, not the misleading judgment that proceeds from the blundering constructions of imagination, but the conception which an unclouded and attentive mind give us as readily and distinctly that we are wholly freed from doubt about that which we understand or what comes to the same thing. Intuition ...springs from the light of reason alone. It is more certain than deduction itself in that it is simpler. Thus each individual can mentally have intuition of the fact that he exists and that he thinks; that the triangle is bounded by three lines only; the sphere by a simple superface (p.155).*

Intuition gives us not only clear notions but also some truth about reality, such as, truth that are basic, simple and irreducible. Hence whatever the mind grasps by intuition is free from error, from the illusions of the senses, truth without any grounds for doubt. To affirm this position, (Ozumba and Ukah, 2012) note;

*Descartes chose intuition and deduction as his method because according to him, intuition means intellectual activity or vision of*

*clarity that leaves no doubt in the mind.... By intuition we grasp a simple truth completely and immediately as where by a process which involves a continuous and uninterrupted action of the mind.(p.12)*

Thus, intuition is the basic operation of the mind in search for the truth that is clearly and distinctly grasp by the light of reason. By intuition we grasp the connection between one truth and another. For example, if A is equal to B, and B is equal to C, then A is equal to C, is made clear to us by intuition. When intuition has done its basic work of clearly and distinctly apprehended truth by the illuminating light of reason, then the second operation of the mind-deduction begins.

Deduction is simpler than intuition. It is the relation of truth to each other while intuition is a simple truth grasp independent of the senses. Descartes described it as all necessary inference from facts that are known with certainty by the continuous and uninterrupted action of a mind that has a clear vision (intuition) of each step in the process. The two are similar because both involve truth. Whereas by intuition we grasp a simple truth completely and immediately, by deduction we arrive at truth by a process, a continuous and uninterrupted action of the mind. With the truth apprehended, the mind now begins to make inferences and to discover new truths which necessarily follow from those already apprehended by intuition. In this way, the mind moves from the known to the unknown and thereby expands its field of knowledge.

By tying deduction so close with intuition, Descartes gave a new interpretation of deduction which up to his time had been identified with a mode of reasoning called the syllogism, for whereas, a syllogism indicates the relationship of concepts to each other. Education for Descartes indicates the relationship of truths to each other. It is one thing to move from a fact that is known with certainty to a conclusion that that fact implies. But it is something different to go from premise to a

conclusion as one does in syllogism; Descartes emphasized this difference between reasoning from a fact and a premise. The central point of this method is at stake here, Descartes was aware that one can reason consistently from a premise but argued that the value of the conclusion would depend upon whether the premise is true or not. Descartes wanted to rest knowledge upon a starting point that has absolute certainty in individual's own mind. Knowledge therefore requires the use of intuition and deduction, where the first principles are given by intuition alone while the remote conclusion are furnished only by deduction.

Intuition then is the most basic mental process in achieving knowledge. Specifically, it is the activity of reason devoid of emotion or desire, prejudices or imagination. The light of reason is the most certain route to knowledge and the mind should admit no other. All other mental processes such as induction, observation and imagination are merely auxiliaries to these. We can therefore say that Descartes method lies purely on reason and self-reflection by which we can achieve transparent self-knowledge.

#### **The Innate Concept of Knowledge:**

The rationalists assert that some of the concepts we use on daily bases and the information that comes with them are independent (does not pass through) of sense experience. Rather sense experience plays the role of catalyst, to rekindle or triggers rational thought to spring forth suitable concept. For example; concepts like faith, truth, love, air, happiness, knowledge of God etc. All these concepts are embedded in man which can only manifest itself when we come in contact with the world of experience. Let's compare the human body with a functional android cell phone,. The innate concept is like phone applications, when activated it start to function and to unfold the inbuilt devices that comes with the phone. Likewise the human nature, all these concepts did not pass through the sense experience for man to possess them. The innate knowledge and the innate concept are similar. The difference between

the two is that; innate knowledge is naturally given to all. The active application and usage of them in solving our existential need is the innate concept. In other word, we can simply put it that the innate knowledge is theoretical while the innate concept itself is practical.

The three aforementioned theses are sacrosanct and are held tenaciously by the school of rationalism. To be counted as an authentic rationalist, one must adopt at least one of the above theses.

### **The Doctrines of the Empiricism**

The very first doctrine in their list is that, the human mind is empty from birth (tabula rasa), which could be liken as blank slate. On this blank slate, experience imprints on it, making an impact on our senses, which convey into the mind as an idea. Sensation furnishes the mind with all content "Nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu".(Nothing exist in the intellect that was not first in the senses).

These ideas or perceptions of some qualities of existential objects are accurate copies of qualities that reside on the object. They are of the opinion that all knowledge must be empirically observed. For instance, football has certain size, shape, weight when we look at it and handle's it, and our sensory apparatus provide us with accurate picture or image or idea of this primary qualities. The football has some secondary qualities like the leather smell, colour, coolness we feel when we hold it. There would be a time when the secondary qualities will not be there like brownness, smell of the leather and coolness, but only the primary qualities like shape, size and weight will remain.

Primary qualities are inherent (natural part of the object) e.g colour, cool, hot. Secondary qualities are not inherent from creation of the object. Eg sweet, bitter etc.

They identified the problem of knowledge as due to the liberty of the mind in supply of materials for reflection. The mind has the capacity to transcend this planet to provide us with ideas that are

inconceivable. Some of the conceivable ideas which the mind presents may not be true. Although the mind has the capacity to create a golden mountain, a hanging garden, a flying horse etc. The mind does not have the capacity to go beyond the materials it get from the sense experience.

When the mind presents us with the idea of a flying horse, it simply means that the mind is exercising its ability to combine two ideas for form something else.

### **The Interface of Rationalism and Empiricism**

Kant in his 'Critique of Pure Reason' came up with the project to reconcile the endless controversy that has been in existence. For Kant, the senses need the cooperation of reason in order to get complete knowledge. Thus he saw both systems as having common origin, diverged in mechanism. For Kant, rationalism failed to establish the transcendence of God over nature, thus he accused rationalists of ending up in the pantheism of Descartes. For Kant too, empiricism failed to prove the existence of the world distinct from thought. Empiricists ended up in skepticism.

Kant saw philosophy as having two elements, that of sensation and that of thought. Sensation has to do with passive intellect while thought has to do with active intellect. In his analysis of knowledge, the senses perceive the objects e.g., the object of sight is colour. It is what the senses can afford to give, it is now the work of reason to interpret and give meaning to what the senses saw or perceiver. Another example is the sense of hearing; it can only perceive the sound but to give interpretation to the sound lies under the faculty of reason to generate meaning to the sound.

We can conclusively assert that the point of difference between the rationalist and the empiricist is on the method to arrive at the certainty of knowledge. They were influenced by science; they saw the problem with skepticism and were eager to proffer solution that yielded concrete result.

### The Debate between Rationalism and Empiricism

Rationalist philosophers share common agenda in opposition to those under the empiricist school. Thus, Rene Descartes was the key player in the camp of rationalist, while Spinoza and Leibniz were part of this team. On the side of empiricism, John Locke was their star player, while others Berkeley and Hume.

### Conclusion

It is plausible to say here that the issue raised by scepticism was able to generate two new schools of thought under Epistemology. To what extent can the faculty of reason and sense experience support our attempts to knowledge and to resolve issue that affects human existence in this contemporary period? The zeal to go in search of knowledge constitutes a model point in the history of thought. In a quest for knowledge, one can gather unconnected thoughts and gave it a new impetus. This intellectual search on the sources of knowledge leads to the development, expansion of scope and subject matter of epistemology, while the conflict between the two schools was simultaneously judged by Immanuel Kant.

Conclusively, this work inspires us for introspection on our life experiences in the world around us. It can be liken to play the role of a guard fly, to stimulate constructive thought on how to contribute towards knowledge and discovery of new concepts in the society. With the idea

received from the debate between rationalism and empiricism, an erudite scholar needs not to build his edifice of learning upon the senses. It is an important fact to review some accepted theories of knowledge to know their true worth. Bearing in mind that man is fallible in nature. Therefore, none of the two schools is indispensable in terms of error

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