

Why Rationalism?

Hyrum Hendrickson

As one begins a serious study of philosophy, it is important to develop a consistent worldview. When selecting an epistemology, rationalism is clearly the best choice. Rationalism has grown less popular in recent years; it has been edged out by newer and younger epistemologies. This trend represents a serious error in the direction of philosophical discourse. Human nature often leads well-intentioned people to find newer ideas and concepts attractive, and the popularity of these new theories, such as constructivism or postmodern epistemology, is based more on their novelty than their merits. It is easy to add additional complexity to an epistemological theory, but much of this complexity does not strengthen the predictive power of the theory. Modern philosophers feel as though they are sophisticated because their theories are complex, but complexity is only valuable insofar as it produces meaningful improvements.

Rationalism, properly understood, represents a beautifully simple yet powerful epistemology. Rationalism posits that reason is the fundamental tool that we are given to understand the world as it truly is. It posits that reason should be the foundational judge in matters of knowledge. When we receive multiple conflicting accounts, we use reason to determine truth, even if that means disregarding sense data or observation. However, we must clarify that rationalism does not preclude the use of sense data or observation, just that their use is predicated upon reason.

One of the most important strengths of a rationalist epistemology is its claim that all people possess some knowledge *a priori*. This claim is certainly bold; however, it need not be controversial. Perhaps the best example lies in moral intuition. Across all known human cultures, there arise very similar codes of ethical conduct. Most cultures largely agree on which actions

are immoral. The primary disagreement between cultures is predicated not on which actions are wrong, but on when such immoral actions are justified. The very fact that people feel the need to provide justification shows that the actions are recognized as intrinsically wrong.

Consider further examples of *a priori* knowledge. The law of noncontradiction states that a proposition P is either true or not true. This is not observable in any sense, yet it is universally accepted as true because people intuitively believe it is true. Many such laws of logic and mathematics are known intuitively by all people. It is clear that *a priori* knowledge exists, so any epistemology that is incompatible with *a priori* knowledge must therefore be rejected.

Another advantage of rationalism is in its amazing simplicity relative to its predictive power. The principle of Occam's Razor tells us that when determining between two theories with equal predictive power, we should prioritize the simpler theory. As an example, compare constructivism to rationalism. Both are able to give a full account of reality as it is perceived, so they have equal predictive power. However, rationalism is much simpler, and thus it should be the preferred theory.

It is easy for intellectuals striving to contribute to their field to look beyond the mark and indulge complexity for the sake of feeling intelligent. This is not unexpected but should still be recognized and stopped. Rationalism stands as the strongest epistemological theory. It coheres with *a priori* knowledge and is more simple than any other fully predictive theory. Philosophy itself is built upon careful and precise reasoning and thought. It is wise, therefore, for philosophers to accept a theory which claims that their chosen discipline is capable of reaching ultimate reality. For a philosopher to claim that rationalism does not best achieve ultimate reality

is for a philosopher to claim that philosophy itself cannot reach ultimate reality. To study philosophy as a non-rationalist is, therefore, not rational.