

# The Rationalist Impulse

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Philosophers are rightly suspicious of the usefulness of broadly conceived labels and “-isms.” They are particularly suspicious when the labels mark dichotomies. Rationalism thus qualifies as suspicious if it is taken to be a neatly delineated set of doctrines. The task assumed by this chapter is not to find such a set, but instead to provide an analysis of what I shall call the impulse to philosophize rationalistically. The analysis therefore does not purport to sharply distinguish a set of maxims or propositions characteristic of rationalism from another set proper to its foil, empiricism. Nor does it attempt to delineate specific doctrines to which all “rationalists” adhere. I shall, however, argue that attention to some overarching themes in rationalist systems of philosophy can be of considerable use in understanding the philosophical accomplishments of the great rationalists. Insufficient attention to these themes has often led to interpretations of rationalists that skew the dialectic with their empiricist antagonists in favor of the latter.

I shall draw some examples from Plato, who provides most of the earliest texts clearly articulating rationalist themes. The primary focus will be on the great thinkers from the seventeenth-century heyday of rationalism, but in conclusion some observations will be made about the rationalist impulse in Russell’s logical atomism. This should help bring into relief some respects in which the triumph of empiricist sensibilities among historians of philosophy in the twentieth century and beyond has made the rationalist impulse rather alien. Naturally, this is not conducive to recovering the spirit of rationalist projects.

## I

The primary and customary sense of the term “rationalism” characterizes a philosophical attitude toward knowledge. Knowledge itself is partly characterized both by the subjects, or possessors, of knowledge and by the objects of knowledge, the things to be known. Rationalism, therefore, bears on ontology since it requires an understanding of the natures of these subjects and objects. There are also characteristically rational processes or techniques for obtaining or developing knowledge, so rationalism bears on method, philosophical education, and the nature of philosophy itself.

The traditional series of contrasts with its foil, empiricism, thus begins with subjects and objects of knowledge. Traditional rationalisms identify the intellect, the mind, or the rational part of the soul (or even the State) as of primary importance in receiving and holding knowledge. The corresponding objects of knowledge are then non-sensory, general, and unchanging or eternal. Traditional empiricisms, by contrast, identify the senses, or common sense, or the sensitive part of the soul as of primary importance. The corresponding objects of knowledge are then the inhabitants of the temporal world in flux. Of course, rationalists have a story to tell about how some kinds of derivative knowledge depend directly on the senses. We can come to know that the senses are reliable indicators of what is beneficial to us and we can then know (as opposed to taking it for granted) that, for example, bread nourishes. Furthermore, absolutely all knowledge depends in some attenuated ways on the sensory because we need to learn more esoteric truths by first hearing or reading things that bring us to understand them. Empiricists similarly have a story to tell about the role of the non-sensory. The clearest example is Locke's essential reliance on innate operations of the mind. This is an extreme case, but all empiricists need to have some account of how abstract, general truths are derived from what is given by the senses.

These points are crucial to appreciating the depth of the chasm between rationalism and empiricism despite the pockets of shared concerns and overlap. It is easy to see that the empiricist has an initial debater's advantage. Because human beings are born helpless, pre-linguistic, and dependent, they first become cognizant of the sensory qualities of objects familiar to common sense. A normal person not having a prior education in rationalist philosophy will cling to thoughts of these familiar things when beginning a philosophical education. Thus the empiricist finds a ready pupil, an ally in fact, in what we now like to call the "untutored common sense" of a "sensible" person or a person of "good sense." Such a person is apt to appreciate an analysis of features of the intangible, vaguely perceived, intellectual objects of rationalist knowledge into commonsensical items and their features. The rationalist teacher cannot display the reward of hard study to the beginning student like candy in a jar. Students are instead told that their opinions, while perhaps of considerable utility, are strictly speaking false and that the truth can be only vaguely characterized until they can see it for themselves. And the goal is to *see* the truth. Not visually, of course, but with the mind's eye, through a "purely mental scrutiny" as Descartes put it.

## II

How is the esoteric truth of the rationalist to be accessed? If mere exhortation is the last resort, even open-minded students will be justifiably suspicious. And even those who are somehow moved to appreciate the truth by exhortations might be later persuaded by other, contrary doctrines. What is required is some technique or method for bringing the student from a starting place favoring empiricism to the truth. An effective method must start with easy steps and progressively draw the pupil away from sensory distractions. Let us consider examples with some detail.

A rudimentary development of such a method can be found in Plato's dialogue, *Symposium* (210a–212b). Here, the esoteric truth to be sought is described as a "vision"

of Beauty itself, the Platonic form. Love is characterized as desire, ultimately desire for Beauty. The method, then, can be regarded as instruction in the art of loving well. The first step in this form of Platonic education requires that one love a beautiful body. This is ingeniously designed to be an easy step that requires no prior commitment and no special effort from most students. Loving (that is, desiring) a beautiful body comes naturally to humans and can be mostly driven by sensual appetites. The Trojan horse, of course, is that the body is beautiful in a way that connects it, albeit distantly and vaguely, to the final goal of Beauty itself. The next step is to love many beautiful bodies and this is, unbeknownst to the pupil, loving the Beauty in all these bodies. The beginning students' inability to understand fully their intermediate accomplishments is characteristic of rationalist enlightenment. As students progress, they typically will not fully understand the nature of the progress they have made, nor do they need to. It is the final goal that is important. So lovers of many bodies might conceive their achievement as the ability to love different kinds of corporeal beauty, but the already enlightened understand that those at the second step are loving Beauty despite its degradation by various corporeal guises.

In this course of instruction, students next progress to the love of individual souls, and then to what might be regarded as the soul of the State, its laws. This leads to love of various kinds of knowledge and then to the love of knowledge in general – philosophy. The Philosopher, having thus advanced through these stages of love, is prepared to catch glimpses of Beauty itself. One crucial aspect of this method is that those who completed the course of instruction are able to perceive in ways that are unavailable to the uninitiated. Even a generally competent adult immersed in the world of sense will be unable to perceive truth at will. The situation is quite analogous to the development that can be effected in sensory capacities. All wine might taste sour to the neophyte, but a trained wine taster might make very fine discriminations with some reliability. A symphony orchestra might sound like noise to a child or someone trained in another musical tradition and so on. It is to be expected, therefore, that if rationalists begin a lesson or an exposition with a plain statement of Truth, they will meet with skepticism and incomprehension.

An interesting feature of the method described in the *Symposium* is that it is much more than a means of acquiring some abstract doctrines. It also involves learning a way of life. Since the “bringing forth of beautiful ideas” is itself a high form of appreciating Beauty, the advanced philosopher is motivated to teach beginners. It is not expected that pupils go it alone. This makes progress highly contingent on the availability of suitable teachers. It also means that the process of education requires a very long-term, daunting initial commitment of time from the student. The search for a method of discovery with greater generality, reliability, efficiency, and power led Descartes to his infamous method of universal doubt. Descartes himself would, of course, be horrified by later use of the term “Cartesian Skepticism.” Universal doubt is meant to lead to “perfect knowledge” of the truth and it is for this reason that he calls it “methodical.” The various functions of the doubt include (a) withdrawal from the senses whose particular deliverances are most easily doubted, (b) a preemptive strike against later doubts; if the project begins with, and then overcomes a universal, all-inclusive doubt there is no room for subsequent second guessing of anything that emerges from the doubt, and (c) the imposition of a strict order on the acquisition of knowledge.

Insufficient attention has been given to Descartes' emphasis on the importance of "philosophizing in the correct order." One reason that universal doubt comes first in the order is that it establishes an order for the entire enterprise. The first positive result is the *cogito*, "I think, therefore I am," or simply, "I think, I am." Why is the *cogito* first? Not because it is the obvious place to begin philosophizing; no one before Descartes chose this point. Nor is the *cogito* first because of any special, mysterious fecundity to be found in it. In fact, though Descartes moves from the *cogito* to some very important results, everything beyond the most basic principles of knowledge depends on one's being a human with sensation, memory, and imagination. And the idea that has foundational priority for knowledge is not of the self, it is of God. It is not even the certainty that attaches to the *cogito* that makes it first in the proper order. The trilaterality of triangles is just as certain as the *cogito*. The *cogito* comes first because it is delivered by the universal doubt itself. Doubting is thinking, so given that one doubts, one must exist to doubt. The very fact that one is doubting does not inevitably draw the attention to triangles, squares, or anything else; doubting instead brings to mind that one is doubting.

Once it emerges that one's own existence follows from the idea of oneself present when doubting, there is no way to proceed except to ask whether the existence of anything else at all follows from the ideas of the thinking thing. The pupil, now in the guise of a solitary, independent meditator (independent except for reading Descartes!), is inexorably led to the existence of God, the existence of extension, and finally to the existence of the self as an embodied, thinking thing. This procedure does not enable one to clearly state the Truth to the unenlightened any more than the "steps of love" from the *Symposium*. Descartes' method is, however, designed to be implemented in a number of days rather than a number of years. The method itself is, moreover, something to be employed once in a lifetime of learning with perhaps brief annual checkups or refreshers. And unlike the method described by Plato, it can serve as a foundation for various pursuits.

It is not surprising to the historian that different versions of the Truth are attained by different rationalists. This provides empiricists with a justifiable basis for attacking the general procedures of rationalism notwithstanding the fact that empiricists agree among themselves no more than do rationalists. There are, however, significant generalizations to be made about the sorts of Truth that a rationalist education is supposed to reveal. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of rationalist truth is its simplicity. It is simple in the strict sense that it is undivided and indivisible. In case there are a modest number of separate truths, they are each simple in themselves.

### III

The most prominent example of a simple rationalist truth is the idea of infinite being. Empiricists tend to believe that insofar as we can understand infinity at all, our concept of it must be constructed from ideas of finite things. And insofar as we can do that, the result will be complex and unclear relative to the ideas of finite things employed in its construction. Rationalists, by contrast, believe that the idea of the infinite is conceptually prior to ideas of the finite. This does not mean that infants think about

the infinite before they think about the finite. The point is that finite things are to be philosophically understood as limitations of the infinite. One does not begin with the truth concerning the finite and work to extend these truths to the infinite. Instead the post-enlightenment beginning, the principle of philosophy proper, is the infinite. The task of philosophy, after the attainment of the simple truth, is discovering the truth about finite things by understanding the respects in which they are limitations of what is infinite.

For example, finite things are limited in their knowledge, their power, their creative activity, their temporal and spatial extent (at least in some rationalist accounts), their goodness, etc. Again, the rationalist will agree with the empiricist that learning to conceive infinity might involve first reflecting on the conceptions of finite things and then imagining the various limitations being removed, perhaps one by one. But once in command of the idea of infinity, the epistemic situation is reversed. The perfect wholeness and simplicity of the idea of the infinite must have limitations imposed upon it in thought to arrive at accurate conceptions of finite things. Spinoza expresses this by saying that finite things “follow” from the infinite and must be “conceived through” it.

A more specific example is provided once more by Descartes’ position on the nature of thought. Scholars have long debated whether Descartes is best interpreted as taking consciousness or intentionality as the fundamental core of thought. Others have disputed whether it is the intellect or the will that is more basic to the thinking thing. None of these discussions are Cartesian in spirit. Descartes makes it very clear that the essence of a thinking thing is to think. Thought itself is something as perfectly simple as a finite thing can be. The philosopher’s task is to explain the variety of phenomena, the empirical, given the simple idea of thought. This is the opposite of the empiricist’s task of searching for deep mysterious essences (often concluded to be inaccessible anyway) using commonsensical building blocks.

The principal theoretical device for explaining the appearance of diversity in what is really simple depends on being able to think identically the same ideas “under different aspects” or “regarding” them in different ways. Doing this is said to produce a distinction of reason, a conceptual distinction, or (especially appropriate in the present context) a *rational distinction*. So a Cartesian philosopher might regard the idea of himself as a finite thinking thing in various ways. He might regard the passive aspect of thought in which it perceives ideas of things, or instead he might regard its active aspect in which it chooses to attend to the apparent good. In this account, will and intellect are only rationally distinct. When one accurately perceives will or intellect one is in each case perceiving the same idea, the idea of finite thought albeit under different aspects. Similarly, perceiving omniscience and omnipotence is to perceive exactly the same thing, infinity, but under different aspects. Yet another example would be the perception of divisibility and quantity, which are both aspects of Cartesian extension. In each case, the simple ideas of infinity, thought, or extension are conceptually prior to the particular, rationally distinct aspects under which they might be regarded.

The notion of rational distinction itself was probably an invention of medieval philosophers attempting to explain the various ways in which the perfect simplicity of God is perceived. The device is particularly important in developing the rationalist impulse, but it is very important to note that empiricists also have occasion to put it to

work. The arch empiricist Hume found it necessary to employ a version of the rational distinction to understand the comparisons between, for example, “figure and body figured; motion and the body moved” (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.1.7). The only essential difference between Hume and Descartes on this point is that Hume takes sensory impressions to be prior to the abstract ideas in question, while Descartes would take these ideas to be distinct, “concrete,” and prior to their confused representation in the senses.

Although the centrality of the theory of rational distinction has not been much noted by scholars, its importance to rationalist philosophy cannot be overstated. After an education in rationalism has freed the philosopher from the prejudices of the senses and the truth is uncovered, that truth is revealed to be simple. For most rationalists, the truth available to human beings is expressed in a handful of innate ideas. The richness of human experience then needs to be explained as somehow arising from this source. Otherwise, rationalism would be reduced to either the inquiry-halting position of Zeno of Elea who taught that Being is an unintelligible, really undifferentiated unity, or else to a skeptical phenomenalism in which sensation is utterly unconnected with reality. Once it is understood that the appearances or phenomena of unschooled, everyday life are grounded in simple ideas expressing a Truth inaccessible to sensory investigation, the phenomena themselves appear in a new light to the rationalist. The appearances are transformed and reconfigured by the reality of which they are, after all, mere appearances.

#### IV

The rationalists’ reconfiguration of experience brings into sharp relief an important contrast with empiricism. For an empiricist, the ultimate test of the reasonableness, the credibility, and the fruitfulness of a philosophical theory is its conformity with appearances as experienced by common sense. It is fine to be told that the dog down the street is a machine, or an aggregate of monads, or a finite mode of the infinite, so long as one arrives at a deep analysis of what the *dog* really is. And the same holds for cookies, hands, the moral wrongness of taking candy from babies, and so on. A committed, theoretically minded empiricist might be prepared for thoroughgoing analyses, or even reductions, of all these items to esoteric theoretical entities. A cookie might be an aggregate of elementary particles, and the wrongness of an action might even reduce to something that is not intrinsically normative – say, Hume’s custom. What a certain kind of empiricist is not prepared to accept is that *dogs*, *hands*, *taking candy from babies*, etc. are not the touchstones, the base from which philosophical theorizing begins. For these empiricists, philosophical theories are to be judged according to the fidelity with which their analyses result in the furniture of the commonsense world. The rationalist, by contrast, discovers that the world of common sense is merely an appearance of what is real and true. So it is to be expected that dogs, hands, and the rest are not *really* precisely individuated.

The present point connects with the previous observations about rationalism. We first saw how the proper starting place for philosophical explanation is not ready to hand, but requires careful education. One must unlearn the apparent truths of



common sense to gain an appreciation of where philosophy proper begins. Perhaps this is best expressed by saying that philosophy consists of two stages. The first stage is an unlearning of prejudice, a preparation for doing real philosophy. According to a rationalist, the empiricist attempts to do philosophy on the cheap without bothering to put in the requisite training. The empiricist is like the tennis player who wants to be a champion without practicing ground strokes or the pianist who wants to play Chopin without practicing scales. The second stage can only begin once an adequate understanding of the Truth is in place. The rationalist's understanding of the Truth is, therefore, not rightly characterized as a "theory." It is not a hypothesis supported by evidence. What might the evidence be except for the deliverances of the empiricist's common sense? The Truth must instead come to be understood, appreciated, or "seen" by the knower's innate attunement with it. This attunement must, of course, receive some explanation. But – and this is the sticking point – the explanation of attunement must itself proceed from the Truth as explanans.

We also saw that the rationalist's Truth is relatively simple. Infinity, thought, and extension are simple in Descartes' system, for example. And this simplicity means that they are easy to understand for the enlightened sage; a claim that provokes frustration or amusement from the empiricist. But given that the rationalist's Truth is simple, the empiricist's easily understood items – dog, hand, etc. – turn out to be fabulously complex in reality. This is not to deny that empiricists might welcome a theory which maintains that dogs are complexes of cells, or atoms, or impressions, or etc. It is instead characteristic of the empiricist to insist that what are *really* dogs can be given a theoretical analysis into theoretical simples. The theoretical entities cannot be more *real* than commonsensical objects because the latter are what ground the fallible *postulation* of the former.

## V

Once the topic of the analysis of appearances has been raised in this way, it is natural to see how it is played out in philosophy that is analytic in a historically strict sense of the term. The issues arise clearly at the very beginning in the twentieth-century analytic philosophy of Russell and Moore. To standardize terminology we can say that this sort of analysis takes the objects of knowledge to be *facts*. Facts are symbolized or expressed by propositions. Analysis then consists in analyzing some propositions into others. For Moore, analysis typically begins with a proposition that we *know* to be true. Some of these propositions also have analyses that are known. We might know, for example, "T is an equilateral triangle" and know that this analyzes into "T is a closed, plane figure with three equal sides." Philosophical analysis most typically involves cases in which we know the analysandum to be true, but do not know its correct analysis. A typical Moorean example is the proposition expressed by the sentence "I now see a hand before me" when one is looking at one's own hand before oneself. Moore regards this as known for certain, but thinks the correct analysis is very hard to come by. At times he thought the first step in the analysis includes the proposition "'This is seen by me' and 'This is part of the surface of a hand,'" but he was never sure of how to proceed. What I wish to stress here is that Moore begins by taking the

deliverances of common sense as known for certain. Being in possession of correct analyses would somehow enhance this knowledge though Moore, with characteristic caution, was unsure of the nature of the enhancement. This is very much in the spirit of empiricism. Knowledge in philosophy derives from analyses of what is known for certain by common sense. Moore rejected outright the suggestion that an analysis of common sense could lead to knowledge that revealed common sense as false. That is, propositions expressing commonsensical truisms express *facts*, and these propositions cannot be discovered to be false because these facts are indisputable. This is the foundation of Moore's famous "defense of common sense." We know that any philosopher purporting to undercut common sense by showing propositions expressing commonsensical truisms to be false must have made a mistake in analysis.

Analysis in Russell's logical atomism is different in character. He agrees with Moore that valuable philosophical analyses begin with things that we take for certainly true. Where else would we begin the quest for philosophical enlightenment – with things we regard as highly dubious? Russell believed, however, that sentences in natural language expressing commonsensical truisms are highly misleading in their logical form. Sentences like "Socrates was snub-nosed" or "The cat is on the mat" might appear to the uneducated to express simple facts about Socrates and the cat. We begin the analysis of such sentences by first translating them into a more appropriate symbolism. The full analysis of the sentences into a proposition with an appropriate logical form would reveal vast complexity, perhaps an infinite complexity. This is because the logical atoms which are the goal of the analysis must include names for logically perfect simples, items with no further structure whatsoever. These atoms are manifestly unavailable to common sense. They are, in fact, probably unavailable altogether although logical atomism holds by a kind of transcendental argument that they must be at the "ground floor" as a condition of the possibility of a symbolic system's representing reality.

Russellian analysis thus displays some of the characteristic features of rationalism. Most prominent is its radical reconfiguration of common sense. Propositions that Moore knows to express facts are revealed under Russellian analysis to be vaguely and ambiguously expressed complexes of facts beyond the grasp of human intellect. So "Socrates," "snub-nosedness," "the cat," and "Piccadilly" all stand for logical constructions, and apparently well-formed propositions employing these symbols vaguely and ambiguously symbolize complexes of atomic facts. Russell, therefore, was prepared for analysis to reveal that such "things" as dogs, cats, mats, even persons, the "properties" of these things, and their ordinary activities are not fully real. (Or better, that they are not in the end constituents of facts.)

Russell himself does seem to have been inclined to think that the atomic facts contain as constituents something very much like Hume's simple impressions and simple ideas. This reflects his sympathy with empiricism. In other places, he seems to regard it as no more than a hypothesis, or even an example of what the logical atoms might be like. So it seems to be the simplicity and indivisibility of the atoms that impressed Russell most and this is, as we have seen, guided by the rationalist impulse. To be sure, logical atomism results in a great many of the simples; in this respect it is more like Leibniz's *Monadology* than like the systems of Descartes or Spinoza. Russell diverged from the more empirically minded Moore in laying heavy stress on the inadequacy of



ordinary expressions in natural languages. For Russell, learning a system of symbols that reflected the structure of the esoteric atomic facts was a necessary prerequisite to effective philosophy. This might be seen as a version of the first of the three characteristics of rationalist thought discussed above; namely the requirement that the philosopher be trained to transcend the truths of common sense to appreciate an esoteric simple truth.

In short, Russell's analytic philosophy, especially in this period of his development, was in crucial aspects aligned with mainline rationalism. Moore's version of analysis was much more in line with traditional empiricism. It is interesting to observe that much contemporary analytic philosophy is done more in the spirit of Moore than in the spirit of Russell. When an analysis is controlled by, and ultimately answerable to, untutored "intuitions" about the commonsensical observations of "plain" people in Western cultures, that analysis is in an empiricist tradition.

Philosophers trained in these techniques might be in an excellent position to understand what the great, canonical empiricists were trying to do and how they viewed the philosophical enterprise. It might, however, be necessary for them to exercise particular caution when they turn to the interpretation of the rationalist tradition. Rationalist philosophy, like modern science, does not "leave everything as it is." It is instead an adventure that transforms the philosopher's perception of the world.