

Modern epistemology: rationalism and empiricism

- Today, I want to tell the big story of epistemology in the 17th and 18th century. A very schematic understanding of this story goes like this: there were two trends, both inspired by Descartes. One is called rationalism, and the main philosophers belonging to it are Descartes himself, Spinoza and Leibniz. The other is called empiricism, and its main philosophers are Locke, Berkeley and Hume. Finally, Kant somehow overcomes the difference and bring the two together.
- In many ways this story is too simplistic. But it is a good way to get started with understanding modern philosophy, and so I will use it as the central structure underlying this lecture. This means that our leading questions are these: Why is Descartes the great figure at the beginning of early modernity and Kant the even greater figure at the end of it? What ideas start with Descartes and come to full fruition in Kant? As we will see, it is in epistemology, in the philosophy of knowledge, that we must find answers.
- Let us start by summarising what we have learned about Descartes in our previous lectures, so that we can see once again why it is here that we see modern philosophy start – or at least, pick up steam.
 - We can depart from asking two questions about the sceptical strategy of the *Meditations*. First, how is it possible that Descartes is the first philosopher to come up with scepticism about the external world? Second, why did he, and why did later philosophers, take this scepticism seriously? **Well, why?**
 - The first question: the ancient distinction between body and reason was the distinction between the temporal/changing and the eternal/unchanging. Augustine's argument for the immortality of the soul; Plato's world of ideas.
 - Descartes uses a new – epistemological – criterion: the dubitable versus the undubitable. The mind is characterised by privileged access; we cannot doubt its contents.
 - Am I seeing a table? That can be doubted; but it cannot be doubted that I have a table-like impression in my consciousness. Perception moves from the realm of the body to that of the mind; but by the same token, it stops being unproblematically a case of perception. Between me and the world, there is now the veil of ideas. (Note that the Aristotelians thought of perception in terms of sense organs, the early moderns did not. Most of them, at least – you can check out Lady Shepherd's criticism of Berkeley in the course book for a counterexample.)
 - The veil of ideas goes hand in hand with Descartes' attempt to set himself up as a fully self-sufficient centre of knowledge.
 - The model of subject and object, separated by our ideas. External world scepticism becomes relevant; the central task of philosophy is to get object and subject together again and make knowledge possible.
 - Of course, this has to be achieved from the side of the subject. Somehow, within the subject, we must find uncontroversial evidence that our ideas accurately reflect an

external reality. But how is this possible? This is the driving question of early modern philosophy, and it will find its greatest and logical conclusion in Kant.

- For Descartes, it is finding the idea of God in ourselves that does the trick. But he needs something to turn this idea into an external reality; and that something is precisely the controversial assumption that this idea's existence implies the existence of that of which it is the idea. Descartes denies this for everything else, but believes that it must hold for God – and that God can in turn ensure it for everything else. But nobody was convinced.
- At this point, we stop and introduce the two central terms of rationalism and empiricism. Usually, they are defined in this way. The *empiricists* claim that our concepts and our knowledge is gained purely through sense experience. *Rationalists* claim that our concepts and our knowledge are to a significant extent independent of sense experience. So for the rationalist, there is purely rational knowledge of the world; for the empiricist, there is only empirical knowledge of the world. Hence the names.
- This is a fine definition, but it does lead to some problems. For instance, suppose that somebody claims that only one kind of knowledge is non-empirical: mathematics. Does that make him a rationalist or an empiricist? Hard to say, given the definition we just gave.
- Indeed, I think there is a definition that will allow us to grasp the real distinction in modern philosophy more accurately. It is this: *rationalism* is the claim that the world *makes sense*, that is, *that the structure of the world is the structure of thought*. On the other hand, *empiricism* is the claim that the world is primarily *sensed*, *that the structure of the world is the structure of sensation*. To feel the difference, think of this: thoughts have logical connections, sensations do not. Is the world a *logical* structure?
- To get a feeling for rationalism, let us look at Spinoza. Here is a quotation from Book 1 of the *Ethics*:

PROP. XVI. *From the necessity of the divine nature must follow an infinite number of things in infinite ways—that is, all things which can fall within the sphere of infinite intellect.*

[...]

Corollary I.—Hence it follows, that God is the efficient cause of all that can fall within the sphere of an infinite intellect.

- And here another quotation, from book 2:
 - **PROP. VII.** *The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.*
- Proof.*—This proposition is evident from [Part i., Ax. iv.](#) For the idea of everything that is caused depends on a knowledge of the cause, whereof it is an effect.
- Corollary.*—Hence God's power of thinking is equal to his realized power of action—that is, whatsoever follows from the infinite nature of God in the world of extension (*formaliter*), follows without exception in the same order and connection from the idea of God in the world of thought (objective).

- We have to take this absolutely literally. For Spinoza, the world of objects and the world of God's thoughts are *just the same*; they are merely two ways in which God's nature expresses itself in different attributes. This also means that the relation of cause and effect is, for Spinoza, no different from a *logical* relation: to know what something is, is to understand its causes and its effects. The distinction between thought and world does not exist.
- Clearly, this is one way of solving the central task of getting subject and object together. And it is the way that is characteristic of rationalism: God is invoked to close the gap between the subject and the object. Spinoza is the most radical of the rationalists in his insistence that God closes the gap by *being* both sides of the gap. But something like it happens in Descartes, who needs God to ground our epistemological access to the world; and in Leibniz, who needs God to pre-establish an epistemic harmony between windowless monads. Of course, this is problematic insofar as proofs of the existence of God might not be the most solid basis of one's philosophical system...
- In fact, there are more problems. If the structure of thought is the structure of the world... then should it not be the case that everything that can be thought is real? Leibniz faces this question head on, and explains to us that God has created the best of all possible worlds. Here, the 'universe' of all possible worlds is what God *thinks*; our world is what he *creates*. But there is something unsatisfactory here. Does it not introduce a distinction between thought and reality? What is the extra being that the world has and God's thoughts lack?
- Here, Spinoza's answer is again admirably clear: he simply tells us that everything that can be thought is real. Now it may *seem* as if we can think many things that are not real. But that is because our thoughts are unclear. We *think* we can think things that do not exist, but we cannot actually think them clearly at all. (This too may be hard to swallow.)
- Anyway: why God? What is special about God that allows the rationalists to use Him to bridge the gap between subject and object? His omnipotence/creator status, to be sure; but most importantly, the fact that God has all of his attributes necessarily. The senses tell us about the contingent; reason tells us about the necessary. The price for rationalism is that everything must become necessary, and God is the tool for making this happen.
- God is the object that determines everything; the object that I can know in advance; and thus the one road to knowledge. But this means that everything depends on our philosophical knowledge of God... which is highly problematic, as Kant, among others, would show. If it is problematic, it can't be the solution to the central question. And it crucially breaks the promise that we would recover the external world from the subject.
- So what about empiricism? It may seem simple to state that the senses give us knowledge about the external world, and thereby bridge the gap between subject and object. But here is what Descartes would object: how do you know that the senses are reliable? It seems the senses could never prove that they themselves are reliable! At least not unless we *presuppose* that they show us the external world as it is.
- In he wants to dream the dream of modern philosophy, the empiricist has only one option open to him: say that in perception we automatically cross the line to the external world. But, being a modern, he can't take the Aristotelian route – so he has to become an idealist.

- This is probably clearest in Berkeley's slogan *esse est percipii*. But it is equally the position of Hume's idealism and skepticism about the continued existence of material objects. If epistemological primacy is given to the sensations of the subject, then the only way to bridge the gap to the objects is by identifying the objects with the subjective sensations. Empiricism, for all its seeming links to science, has a tendency to become a metaphysical idealism.
- Understood this way, empiricism is an attempt to answer the central question by collapsing the object into the subject. And since this subject is merely a series of sense impressions, the world we end up with will be quite incoherent as well – it will be the world of Hume, in which there is no causation, and in which the problem of induction reigns supreme. Unless of course one takes the route of Berkeley, and brings God in to rescue empiricism! But that would seem to be the worst of both world.
- To summarise: empiricism cannot do justice to the object, but has to identify it with sensation; rationalism cannot stay with the subject, but has to appeal to something external, God. Neither solves the central problem set out by Descartes.
- However, both get something right about knowlegde. Empiricism is surely right to say that we know about the world through our senses. Rationalism is surely right to say that our senses alone are not enough. As Kant famously puts it: “Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.” Kant will attempt a synthesis between empiricism and rationalism. And as we already understand, this must involve a new way of thinking about subject and object.
- Kant's epistemology. Knowledge *a priori* (rationalism) versus *a posteriori* (empiricism). Kant adds a distinction: *analytic* versus *synthetic* knowledge. “No dead person is alive.” A four-fold scheme; two are unproblematic, one is certainly empty... what about synthetic knowledge a priori?
- Kant's philosophy of mathematics. “A straight line is the shortest route between two points.” This is not analytic; but it is not a posteriori either. According to Kant, it is synthetic a priori. (Most current philosophers disagree, but that's another story.)
- Our knowledge in this case is based on our intuition of space. Apart from any specific spatial sensations, I can check my pure intuition of space and find out that indeed a straight line is always the shortest route between two points.
- Now we come to the question that will generate Kant's philosophy: how is such synthetic knowledge a priori possible? If space is outside, how can my intuition, which is inside, be an infallible a priori guide to it? Well, it can't... unless the objects are constituted by the subject. An object is an object of knowledge and must conform to the necessary conditions of experience. On the other hand, a subject is a knowing subject and must be understood in relation to the objects that make up its world – e.g., this spatio-temporal body.
- The intuitions of space and time; the categories, including causation. Kant's metaphysical picture. The thing-in-itself versus the world of appearances. Transcendental idealism and empirical realism.
- We are still moderns.