Empiricism, Rationalism, and Plato’s Innatism
Intro to Philosophy, Spring 2012
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Handout 1

I. Background

The early modern philosophers (roughly, philosophers in 17th and 18th century continental Europe) all thought that the semantic content of our thoughts is a function of the contents of our ideas. “Semantics” is the study of “meaning,” so in this context, a thought’s semantic contents are just what either a linguistic object—a word in a written sentence or a verbalized word in a particular speech utterance—or a sensory object—a visual perception, say—connotes to us by way of an idea. “Ideas,” in turn, are mental objects of a sort, which we have when we think about anything. These objects constitute the essential ingredients of all thought.

Because the philosophers of this period all assumed that knowledge of the world requires a kind of thought, namely, justified true belief, where many of them disagreed was what cognitive faculty or source they held to provide our ideas with the type of contents that generate justified true beliefs. A dominant concern during this period of philosophy, and more generally, of intellectual inquiry—since sharply increased attention to this area of the theory of knowledge, or epistemology, coincided with the advent of the Enlightenment—was hence involved in locating the faculty which is the source of the contents of those ideas that lead to justified true belief, and hence knowledge. Two influential schools of thought which arose in the wake of this epistemological project are what scholars today call empiricism and rationalism.

II. Empiricism

Advocates of empiricism, among which include such figures as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and David Hume, believe that it is ordinary sense experience which is the source of the contents of our ideas that lead to justified true beliefs, and hence knowledge, about the world. An empiricist will thus restrict knowledge to ideas whose contents are encountered in sense experience. For empiricists, then, the ordinary reports of our sense faculties constitute basic knowledge. That is to say, assuming our sensory faculties are functioning properly, experiencing, for example, round things is what gives us justified true belief, and hence knowledge, of roundness. Knowledge gained from experience is a posteriori knowledge.

How does empiricism deal with mathematical truths, such as (a) that “1,007*34 = 34238?” This is an interesting question, because if empiricism is true, we might wonder whether someone who doesn’t find 34 sets of 1007 objects to count up in order to find out what their product is has knowledge of its truth according to empiricism. We might also wonder how empiricism can explain (b) our ability to know that a stick that appears bent when partially submerged in water is not actually bent. It seems that such knowledge relies at least partially on the intellect or reason, and so constitutes a refutation of empiricism. These questions comprise a more fundamental one, I take it: what role do empiricists think reason plays relative to our acquiring a posteriori knowledge, and how central is it to that knowledge?
To see this, consider first how empiricists would respond to (a). Empiricists like Locke and Hume think that math is performed by way of reason alright, via the process of sorting out in the head the relations that obtain between ideas; but because the mind is, as Locke famously put it, a blank slate at birth, the contents of these ideas whose relations to each other reason reflects upon in order to gain mathematical knowledge are themselves dependent on the sense objects which produce them, even if these ideas are made abstract by reason, as when one uses his idea of an apple to stand in for the decimal system. So, if by really bad luck someone is born without any functioning sense faculties, not even the sense of touch, he would not have the ability to have ideas with which to reason about their relations to each other, and so could not gain mathematical knowledge. As regards (b), it is that reason tells us, based on past experiences with sticks only appearing bent when partially immersed in water, that such a stick is not bent. Reason, then, by itself is useless. It needs ideas with which to reason, even about mathematical relations, and the contents of these mental objects are supplied by the sense faculties, without which we simply do not have any ideas by which to gain knowledge.

III. Rationalism and Plato’s Theory of Forms/Ideas

Rationalism, broadly construed, is the view that certain items of knowledge are known independent of sense experience. The contents of ideas which give thoughts their semantic content are provided by reason itself, and hence strictly intellectual. For example, many rationalists hold that mathematical statements like “2 + 2 = 4,” or certain “self-evident” principles like the statement that “something cannot occur without an antecedent cause which brings it about,” are known on the basis of pure reason, i.e., a priori. One might wonder whether certain truths, such as “2 + 2 = 4,” can be known a posteriori as well—as when a young child learns by counting that two apples bunched together with two other apples equals four apples—and how this affects the status of one’s apparent knowledge of such truths. For rationalists, statements which can be known both a posteriori and a priori are known “more perfectly” a priori, for reasons given prior. However, rationalism in the classical sense holds just that there are certain items of knowledge that can only be ascertained by reason. A popular go-to example is the principle of non-contradiction, the axiom that something cannot both be X and not-X at the same time, which cannot be proven by experience, but just “seems” intuitively true.

Plato seems to hold a similar rationalism, although he is difficult to interpret, owing to the metaphysical “baggage” he weighs down his theory of ideas, or forms, with.1 Does he think we can gain a priori knowledge of empirical facts through forms (such as that “water is H₂O”), or does he think all knowledge consists in mere intellection of forms, i.e., the abstract objects corresponding to the individual parts of a sentence expressing a fact, and the relations between them (such as that “Waterness is H₂Oness”? Though he sometimes seems to vacillate between the two, we will construe him as saying simply that all true knowledge is of forms.

What are Plato’s forms, and how do they relate to knowledge? Recall Plato’s description in the Phaedo, around 74c – 74d, about how we gain empirical knowledge that certain things are equal.

1 By the way, it’s perfectly okay to state in philosophy papers that something you read that’s mildly ambiguous “seems” to express a certain idea or view, and then argue for or against it as if that view belonged to its author. Indeed, “playing it safe” in such cases is often the way to go, instead of rashly ascribing a disputable interpretation of an apparent statement of a view to an author.
There, he claims that although the senses may tell us that two things are equal, we nevertheless still think that that sort of equalness is deficient in respect to some ideal equalness, which for him is an abstract, unchanging, and eternal entity, namely, the form of Equalness, which, as perfect equalness, all equal things participate in (without being identical to it). This is so, he argues, because although we can never be certain that any two things that we observe in sense experience are actually equal, the fact that we have this concept of ideal equalness is witness to our knowledge of the form “Equalness,” against which we compare all apparent equalities in sense experience. And since we know it, it must exist, though not in the imperfect, changing, and impermanent world of sense objects, but in a purely abstract realm, to which only the intellect has access. The same argument applies, mutatis mutandis, to any quality/property, thing, or relation observed in the world.

The gist of the argument to rationalism, I take it then, starts with Plato’s assumption that the sense faculties are deeply unreliable. (Hence the stuff about how the body is an impediment to knowledge in much of Phaedo, particularly 65a-66a.) We can never know from experiencing objects in sense experience and comparing them via empirical methods of investigation that two things are in fact equal. Furthermore, for someone deeply against circular ways of defining things, such knowledge would seem to be paradigmatically circular. Consider this exchange: an examiner asks: “How do you know that these sticks are equal?” To which the answerer responds: “I know so because they look equal.” Clearly, whoever asks this question in the first place presupposes that our visual faculty does not provide us with basic knowledge of things seen. Replying that it does, and that you know that because it consistently gives you true reports of equal-looking things, is as circular as arguments can get. True knowledge, then, consists in knowledge of forms.

Note that the fact that two things may look equal to one person but unequal to another while being actually/not actually equal does not by itself pose a problem for Plato. What is going on here is that while such persons to Plato clearly have intellectual access to the form “Equalness,” as evidenced by the fact that they are able to form beliefs about whether two things are equal in length, they are not able to judge firmly as to their equalness because they are making a claim about objects of sense experience using only empirical methods of investigation, as evidenced by their disagreement. In such a case, Plato would simply explain disagreement as yet more proof of the unreliability of the senses. He would not, however, say that the sticks are both participating in the form “Equalness” and “Unequalness,” in violation of the principle of non-contradiction. That is to say, the senses may lead us to ascribe forms to objects of sense experience, but that is not a sufficient condition for those objects’ actually having them; in addition, the objects must truly participate in the form in question.

What is a problem for Plato is the existence of forms which are by their nature relative. Suppose Mandy, whose family suffers from dwarfism, is such that Mandy’s being “tall” is her advantage of having 3 inches on her mother, who is 3 ft. 9. Since it is true that she is tall relative to her mother, she participates in the form “Tallness.” Now suppose her friend John’s family suffers from gigantism, such that his being short is his having a 5 inch disadvantage against his 7 ft. 10 father. John thus participates in “Shortness” relative to his father. Mandy, being much shorter than John, therefore participates in both the forms “Shortness” and “Tallness.” But something seems

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2 In fact, Plato makes the stronger claim that no two things are equal in sense experience, nor do they share in any other quality perfectly.

3 A student in class asked about this objection, to which I gave in hindsight an unsatisfactory response. My apologies. Hopefully this corrects that misunderstanding.
amiss. The form “Shortness” simultaneously defines both the properties of being 7 ft. 5 (John’s height) and being 3 ft. 9 (Mandy’s mother’s height). If we then consider all such relative pairs of tall and short things, we conceivably end up with “Shortness” defining both heights like 1.0^10 inches and 1.0^-10 inches—and, indeed, all possible heights. Similarly for “Tallness.” Then we might wonder whether these forms truly explain tallness or shortness, since two forms that are supposed to explain opposite qualities explain everything the other one does, but just those. There are many more problems with the theory of forms, such as whether there is a form called “Nonexistence” which explains the quality all nonexisting things share of not existing. As an introduction, however, these shall suffice.4

IV. Plato’s Innatism

Usually, rationalists also hold innatism, the doctrine that some (or all, depending on how extreme an innatist is) knowledge is “programmed” into our brains when we’re born, such that we know them even before we ever realize that we do. Plato clearly does. Socrates in the Meno appears to hold a slightly different version of innatism. In addition to believing that all knowledge is innate, thus making a person’s latent body of knowledge at any time in her life, implicit or explicit, all the knowledge she will ever gain in that life, he also appears to hold that the reason they’re innate is because our souls, which have been “born often,” have “seen all things here and in the underworld” (81c).5

Socrates thus seems to hold an innatism that depends on a soul’s “consolidating” things learned in a past life through sense experience which she is then reborn with as innate knowledge, though never learning anything that she picks up in a current life. (This would escape the problem of not being able to explain how a soul ever learns anything if it is born with all the knowledge it will have in that life.) Sometimes, rationalists who are innatists argue not that there is innate knowledge, but that we have innate concepts. Still others argue instead that we are born with certain innate beliefs, but not knowledge or concepts. Descartes, for instance, thought that we have an innate concept of God, and that all knowledge, empirical or “analytic” (roughly, non-empirical), depends on our recognizing God’s existence via grasping the truth of this concept, i.e., that the concept “God” is true.

Finally, it should be (duly) noted that rationalism does not imply innatism. This is true of rationalists who think, for example, that although we are born with Lockean blank slates, and so can only think with ideas gained through sense experience, nevertheless, we don't have any knowledge until reason “certifies” the testimony of the senses. The rationalism/empiricism distinction is one, then, based merely upon which faculty is taken to be more dependent on the other in its characteristic activities, i.e., which is properly basic.

4 We will learn more objections to Plato’s theory of forms when we read chapter IX, titled “Universals,” of Bertrand Russell’s book The Problems of Philosophy.
5 It may be argued that Socrates is speaking colorfully here, and that all he means is that in past lives the soul did come to know new things, whether through sense experience or reason, and that this explains the source of all her latent knowledge. But this subjects the view to a regress objection. The popular rebuttal that the soul is immortal, while an answer, seems deeply unsatisfactory.