

A review of the philosophical views of transcendental idealism by kant, cartesian...

[Philosophy](#)



Philosophy is founded on the principles of human reason and dependent on the fact that humans are able to rationalize and seek out the solution to a problem or else knowledge in the face of something unknown. From Socrates onward, philosophy based this reasoning on observable reality, even using concrete, physical examples when facing an otherwise intangible discussion or particularly tricky problem. Cartesian rationalism, founded by the eponymous Rene Descartes (1596-1650) is a type of philosophy that challenges the empirical ideal of reason. In other words, Cartesian rationalism challenges the absolute importance of empirical reality as being necessary to human reason and, subsequently. As Mitchell (2015) states, Descartes “ found that his predecessors often established their ideas upon what he took to be a somewhat shaky and uncertain foundation...everything he think he knows could be the result of sense experience...or inherited ideas” (239). In other words, Cartesian rationalism is a mitigated type of rationalism that sought to establish philosophy as a metaphysical type of science, rather than as an institution of secondary importance. Up until his writings, the majority of philosophy was based on principles of certainty, with the ultimate goal of philosophy a a whole to reach universal truths through rationality and observation. However, as Mitchell (2015) goes on to state, Descartes began his writings “ with the somewhat revolutionary idea that we may not know anything at all with any certainty” (240). In this way, Cartesian rationalism is about seeking out core beliefs that are not dependent on outside sensory input or else inherited ideas, and to use these as the foundation for subsequent knowledge.

How did Descartes formulate this method of ascertaining truth through rationalism? Mitchell (2015) highlights four main precepts of the Cartesian Method, which are which are essentially the philosopher's prerequisites for identifying truth as opposed to something constructed: " Never accept anything as true anything that can be doubted," " Divide ideas/beliefs about which one is uncertain into as many parts as possible," " Proceed to examine each section of knowledge/belief step-by-step, even if these beliefs/ideas are not generally considered to follow from one another," and finally, " Be exhaustive...Review all beliefs for clarity and coherence" (Mitchell, 2015, 241). These four precepts of Cartesian rationality point out the main underlying principle of this philosophy: there may be an absolute truth out there, but much of what we take as truth is neither absolute nor certain. Therefore, Cartesian rationality is focused on sorting out certain truths from uncertain truths, a process that may be more difficult than it seems.

But how is one able to determine what is certain truth and what is uncertain, influenced by outside factors and untruths? This is particularly difficult since Descartes also discounts observation as a reliable mode of gaining knowledge, since (as noted above), senses can be deceived. As Mitchell (2015) states, Descartes " Used to assume that there were things existing outside of him, and that he was capable of distinguishing true judgments about those things from false ones" (241). However, Descartes doubted senses themselves, and needed to come up with another means of establishing truth. To overcome this problem, Descartes made a foundational statement: the idea that one's idea of things cannot be false, no matter how it relates to reality. As Mitchell (2015) relates this idea, " Ideas cannot be

false, even if they do not correspond to real things,” and neither can “volitions, affects, and judgments” (241). In this way, Descartes argues that one must group thoughts into different parts, and determine what are ideas and what are empirical claims. It is only the idea that can remain as a certain truth, since it is the only thing that can be known.

As the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states, this type of rationality takes different forms depending on the philosopher: “ Some rationalists take mathematics to be knowable by intuition and deduction...Some include metaphysical claims, such as that God exists, we have free will, and our mind and body are distinct substances” (SEP, 2015, n. p.). It is this last part that highlights how Cartesian rationality results in a particular kind of problem: the mind/body problem. This is essentially the idea that the mind (the immaterial spirit, or soul, of a person) and the body (the physical entity of a person) are separate entities, given Descartes’ conceptions of internal ideas versus external realities. To solve the problem, Descartes proposed dualism, which separates the mind from the body. However, the problem here is that dualism does not allow for the interaction between the two. With this in mind, Descartes went so far as to propose there is a specific, physical point at which the mind and the body meet, which allows for interaction. In this way, Cartesian rationalism is not just a philosophy of reason and a comment on how truth can be determined within philosophy itself; even more than this, it is a comment on the way one can know reality in the first place. As Mitchell (2015) states, “ Modern Western epistemology began with Descartes’ [assumption that there is] a distinction between the knower and the known” (257). In this way, Cartesian rationalism formed the

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backbone for how reality and knowledge is discussed in modern philosophy, even among those empiricists that disagree with rationalism as a whole. In short, both disciplines separate the ' knower' (individual men and women) from the ' known' (either reasoned or observed knowledge). This is an important distinction for any philosophy.

Cartesian Rationalism & Empiricism

The main philosophical response to Cartesian rationalism is empiricism. Unlike Descartes, this philosophy holds that truth and knowledge can be gained through deductive, or observational, processes: “ Insofar as we have knowledge in the subject, our knowledge is...dependent upon sense experience” (SEP, 2015, n. p.). Where Descartes holds that the senses cannot be trusted for knowledge, empiricism holds the exact opposite line: that senses are the only thing that can be trusted in forming an adequate picture of the world. In this way, empiricism rejects both the Intuition/Deduction thesis and the Innate Knowledge thesis, both of which are integral to rationalism on the other side of the sphere (SEP, 2015). The Innate Knowledge thesis holds that there are certain truths that are inherently known by humans, while the Intuition/Deduction thesis states something similar, that knowledge can be gained through human intuition and subsequent deduction from these original intuitions (SEP, 2015). Clearly, empiricism would not stand for this. In particular, classical empiricism completely rejects this conception of innate knowledge. This form of empiricism is primarily highlighted by John Locke, who famous wrote about the human mind as a tabula rasa, or “ blank slate” when humans enter the world: “ At birth we know nothing; it is only subsequently that the mind is

furnished with information by experience” (SEP, 2015, n. p.). In this way, empiricism overcomes the mind/body problem not by seeking a connecting point between the mind and the body; instead, it simply accepts that the two are part of the same process, the same human experience. Classical empiricism, in particular, does not leave any room for influence from so-called innate knowledge, but instead holds that all knowledge must be gained through empirical, observational means.

Alternative to Empiricism & Rationalism

Of course, empiricism and rationalism are not the only two philosophical lines of thought in terms of how our idea of reality and knowledge can be formed. One of the most prominent alternatives to Cartesian rationalism and its subsequent response, empiricism, is Emmanuel Kant’s idea of transcendental idealism, which takes a sort of middle point between the two lines of thought discussed above. In this regard, Kant argues “ that space and time are merely formal features of how we perceive objects, not things in themselves that exist independently of us, or properties or relations among them” (SEP, 2016, n. p.). At first light, this appears to be a different iteration of rationalism, since Kant apparently holds that real objects cannot be known as real. However, there is an important philosophical distinction here: Kant “ argues that we know nothing of substance about the things in themselves of which they are appearances” (SEP, 2016, n. p.). In this way, Kant held that individuals can know the appearance of objects in space and time, if not the objects themselves. Writing close to a century after Descartes, Kant offers a promising alternative.

But what is transcendental idealism, more specifically? While it is certainly its own idea, it echoes Descartes' conception of absolute reality consisting of ideas about objects and reality, rather than physical objects themselves. Kantian idealism sounds similar: "The objects we intuit in space and time are appearances, not objects that exist independently of our intuition (things in themselves) (SEP, 2016, n. p.). Kant makes a similar statement regarding space and time, which are dependent on our intuition and conception of them, rather than standing independently in reality. However, unlike Descartes' conception of rationalism and ideas in relation to reality, the Kantian conception of transcendental idealism is a less clear ideation of the same topic, and is subject to much debate surrounding its interpretation. More specifically, there are three areas of lack of clarity within transcendental idealism and how it relates to other philosophical ideas. These interpretive issues can be expanded open with subsequent questions. The first is in regards to the nature of appearances; does Kant mean that physical objects are the same as their representations? If they are not, what relationship is there between the physical and the representation of the physical? The second issue is in the nature of physical objects; are we able to say anything definitive about objects at all? Do they exist in reality, or is it mere conception? Finally, the last interpretive issue in transcendental idealism is in how physical objects relate to their appearances; can the appearance be different than the thing itself? Or is the appearance just the means by which we are able to perceive the thing itself? (SEP, 2016). These three issues with the text of Kant make it relatively difficult to apply

transcendental idealism to the distinction between empiricism and rationalism.

Kant's transcendental idealism does not fit within empiricism or rationalism because it is exactly that: transcendental. Kant solves the mind/body problem not by determining whether the mind and body are separate entities or just one entity. Instead, the philosopher makes the issue a bigger one by arguing for a priori forms of being – of which we can only see appearances. As Kant himself states, “ Whatever it is that impinges on us from the mind-independent world does not come located in a spatial or a temporal matrix...The mind has two pure forms of intuition built into it to allow it to... organize this ‘ manifold of raw intuition” (SEP, 2016, n. p.). In other words, Kant holds that the world as conceived through the human mind may be different than the actual world, since there is ostensibly a transcendental reality that may not appear to us. In this way, Kant essentially sidesteps the question of the mind/body problem, since to him they are one and the same for appearance.

Evaluation & Response

The writings of both Descartes and Kant are relatively convincing when it comes to arguing for a dual reality of mind and body. Particularly from a philosophical perspective, dualism appears at first light to be a necessary outpouring of the way we perceive the world. However, upon further reflection, my own views do not necessarily align with any of the three main theories outlined above. Empiricism holds that only the physical world can be relied upon to form ideas about reality; I do not agree that the physical world is the only form of reality, since much of human thought is not related to the <https://assignbuster.com/a-review-of-the-philosophical-views-of-transcendental-idealism-by-kant-cartesian-rationalism-and-empiricism/>

physical world at all. Rationalism holds that human reason is the only way of forming dependable ideas about reality; I do not agree that human senses are inherently fallible and cannot be trusted for deductive reasoning as a means of understanding the world. Finally, Kantian transcendental idealism holds that what we perceive is not real at all, but rather the appearance of objects, ideas, or other entities that transcend our own reality; I do not agree that our world is quite so complicated as that. It seems to me that none of these approaches truly solve the mind/body problem because they are dependent on dualism. Instead, I agree more with a monist idea of how the mind and body are formed and relate to each other. As a result of this monism (and perhaps my views on the social sciences), I instead hold to a type of physicalism combined with structuralism. Physicalism essentially states that the mind is made up of physical matter and organized a specific way as to create human consciousness. This does away with the entire mind/body philosophical problem, since according to this view they are one and the same; the mind is simply a result of physical processes and structures that work together. As a result of this view, it also seems that there are other, more structural, issues to be discussed - a fact that none of the theories above seems to appreciate.