

Rationalism: Four Distinctive Features

1. The principle of sufficient reason (PSR)

Every fact has an explanation; there are no brute (inexplicable) facts. There is a reason (or cause) for everything.

[A] “For each thing there must be assigned a cause, *or* reason, both for its existence or for its non-existence. For example, if a triangle exists, there must be a reason *or* cause why it exists; but if it does not exist, there must also be a reason *or* cause which prevents it from existing, *or* which takes its existence away.”¹

[B] “Our reasonings are based on *two great principles, that of contradiction*, in virtue of which we judge that which involves a contradiction to be false, and that which is opposed or contrary to the false to be true. And *that of sufficient reason*, by virtue of which we consider that we can no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise, although most of the time these reasons cannot be known to us.”²

[C] “There are some (including, among the thinkers of long ago, Anaximander) who say that the earth stays where it is because of equality. For something which is established in the centre and has equality in relation to the extremes has no more reason to move up than it does down or to the sides; it is impossible for it to move in opposite directions at the same time, and so it is bound to stay where it is.”³

2. The priority of reason (or intellect)

This can be expressed in various forms:⁴

(a) We can know some propositions in a particular subject area by *intuition* alone, or by deducing them from intuited propositions.

[D] “Concerning objects proposed for study, we ought to investigate what we can clearly and evidently intuit [apprehend immediately, see ‘in a flash’] or deduce with certainty, and not what other people have thought or what we ourselves conjecture. For knowledge can be attained in no other way.”⁵

(b) Some knowledge (or some concepts) is *innate*: We know some truths (or concepts) as part of our rational nature.

(c) What we know by intuition and deduction, or what we know natively, we could not know through sense experience: reason is *indispensable* for knowledge.

(d) As a means to acquire knowledge in a subject area, reason is *superior* to sensory experience. What we can know is significantly independent of experience.

[E] “For example, there are two different ideas of the sun which I find in me. One of them, which is acquired as it were from the senses and which is a prime

1 Spinoza, *Ethics* IP11D

2 Leibniz, *Monadology*, ¶¶31–2

3 Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, 295b11–6

4 cf. Markie, P. (2004). *Rationalism vs. Empiricism*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu>

5 Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule Three, AT X 366 CSM I 13

example of an idea which I reckon to come from an external source, makes the sun appear very small. The other is based on astronomical reasoning, that is, it is derived from certain notions which are innate in me (or else constructed by me in some other way), and this idea shows the sun to be several times larger than the earth. Obviously both these ideas cannot resemble the sun which exists outside me; and reason persuades me that the idea which seems to have emanated most directly from the sun itself has in fact no resemblance to it at all.”⁶

[F] “Those who love looking [the ‘sight-lovers’] and listening are delighted by beautiful sounds and colours and shapes, and the works of art which make use of them, but their minds are incapable of seeing and delighting in the essential nature of beauty itself.”⁷

3. The possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge

A Kantian characterisation: we can acquire non-trivial (non-analytical) or substantial knowledge about the world in a way that is independent of, or prior to, experience (e.g., Descartes argues *a priori* that external bodies exist, *Sixth Meditation*, ¶10).

4. The importance of method

[G] “We need a method if we are to investigate the truth of things. [...] By a ‘method’ I mean reliable rules which are easy to apply, and such that if one follows them exactly, one will never take what is false to be true or fruitlessly expend one’s mental efforts, but will gradually and constantly increase one’s knowledge until one arrives at a true understanding of everything within one’s capacity.”⁸

Analysis. Showcase: Descartes’s *Meditations*. Working ‘backward’ to simple self-evident truths; no givens; proceed by immediate cognitive grasp of basic principles. “[I]f the reader is willing to follow it and give sufficient attention to all points, he will make the things his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it himself”⁹

Synthesis. Showcase: Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Working ‘forward’ in a series of deductive demonstrations to prove particular truths in *geometrical fashion*; begin with definitions, axioms, and postulates that make conclusion inevitable if the steps are valid: this “can be done even by the less attentive”, and “the reader, however argumentative and stubborn he may be, is compelled to give his assent”¹⁰

6 Descartes, *Third Meditation*, ¶11, AT VII 39 CSM II 27

7 Plato, *The Republic*, 476b

8 Descartes, *Rules*, Rule Four, AT X 371–2 CSM I 15–6

9 Descartes, *Second Replies* AT VII 155 CSM II 110

10 *op. cit.*, AT VII 156 CSM 111

