A priori intuition and demonstration

ON RATIONALISM
Empiricists argue that all matters of fact must be grounded on experience and the use of inductive reasoning (see the handout ‘Empiricism on the limits of knowledge’). Rationalists claim that we have knowledge of synthetic propositions that does not depend upon sense experience. They argue that there are two key ways in which we gain such knowledge:

- we know certain truths innately, e.g. as part of our rational nature and/or
- we have a form of rational ‘intuition’ or ‘insight’ which enables us to grasp certain truths intellectually.

Many rationalists add that the synthetic a priori knowledge we gain through reason or innately cannot be arrived at in any other way. They may also argue that is superior, for example by being more certain, to the knowledge or beliefs we gain through the senses.

In this handout, we look at the view that some claims can be grounded instead on a priori intuition and demonstration. We will look just at claims about what exists, and in particular, just at claims about the mind and physical objects. (Rationalists have also defended claims about moral values and about the existence of God this way.)

INDUCTION AND DEDUCTION
An inductive argument is an argument whose conclusion is supported by its premises, but is not logically entailed by them, i.e. if the premises are true, the conclusion is likely to be true. A letter with a French postmark was most likely posted in France, because most letters (all so far?) with French postmarks were in fact posted in France. This is induction through ‘inference to the best explanation’.

Another famous example of an inductive argument, induction through ‘enumeration’, is this:

Premise 1: This swan is white.
Premise 2: This other swan is white.
Premise 3: That third swan is white. …
Premise 500: That swan is white as well.
Conclusion: All swans are white.

A deductive argument is an argument whose conclusion is logically entailed by its premises, i.e. if its premises are true, the conclusion cannot be false. Here is a famous example:

Premise 1: Socrates is a man.
Premise 2: All men are mortal.
Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.
A PRIORI INTUITION AND DEMONSTRATION IN DESCARTES

What is ‘a priori intuition and demonstration’? ‘Demonstration’ is another word for ‘deduction’. A priori demonstration is deduction that uses a priori premises. It doesn’t start from premises derived from sense experience (or more often, the role of sense experience is very small).

What about ‘intuition’? When you consider a deductive argument, like the example above, do you see, we say, how the conclusion follows the premises? Do you understand why, if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true? (This is not to say that the premises are true!) In doing so, you use reason. But how is it that you can ‘see’ the conclusion follows? This takes us towards the idea of ‘rational intuition’, though it covers much more than deductive reasoning. At the heart of the idea of rational intuition, then, is the view that you can discover the truth of a claim just by thinking about it. It’s easiest to understand through examples. In this handout, we look at Descartes’ arguments. Other examples can be found in the handout on ‘A priori knowledge’.

Mind
In his *Meditations*, Descartes argues that we can establish the existence of the mind, the physical world and God through a priori reasoning. He begins his investigation into what we can know, and how, by attacking sense experience. You can doubt even those sense experiences that seem most certain. Suppose all our sensory experiences are produced in us by an evil demon who wants to deceive us – everything you think you experience is false. In a modern version, replace the evil demon by a supercomputer: suppose you were plugged into the computer, as in the film *The Matrix*. Can you tell if you aren’t, just from your sense experience? If, as Hume argues, sense experience is the foundation of knowledge about what exists, then we are in trouble, because we cannot know that our sense experience is a good guide to what exists.

Descartes then argues that there is one thing he can be completely sure of, even if the evil demon exists: that he thinks, and from this, that he exists. He cannot doubt that he thinks, because doubting is a kind of thinking. If the demon were to make him doubt that he is thinking, that would only show that he is. Notice that he has got to this point by pure reasoning. And this truth is ‘seen’ by intuition – we recognise that it is true just by considering it.

Descartes then notices that even though he cannot doubt that exists, he can continue to doubt whether he has a body; after all, he only believes he has a body as a result of his sense experiences, and so the demon could be deceiving him about this. So he knows he exists even though he doesn’t know whether or not he has a body. From this Descartes concludes that it is possible for him to exist without a body. So Descartes believes he established another truth about what exists, just by a priori intuition and demonstration – that the mind can exist separately from the body.

Body and God
But do bodies – do physical objects – exist? Of course, we might say: they cause our experiences. But Descartes has argued that we don’t yet know what causes our experiences – it could be a demon or supercomputer. Descartes later argues that there are only three options for what might cause these experiences: a real external world of physical objects, a demon, or God. If the cause was God, this would mean that God was
a deceiver because He would have created us with a very strong tendency to believe something false (viz. that a physical world exists). And if it was a demon, then if God exists, God is as good as a deceiver, since God is allowing the demon to deceive us. However, Descartes argues, God is perfect by definition. Because we know that God is perfect, we know that God is not a deceiver. So if God exists, then there must really be an external world.

Descartes offers two arguments, both a priori, for the existence of God – one is the Trademark argument and the other is the ontological argument (these are discussed in separate handouts). Since he believes he has demonstrated that God exists, he concludes that we know the external world of physical objects exists. Not because sense experience shows us that it does, but through a priori intuition and demonstration.

ASSESSING DESCARTES’ REASONING

Does Descartes’ a priori reasoning lead to the results he wants? For now, we’ll look just at his claims about the mind.

First, Descartes claims that ‘I’ am a thinking thing, a substance. Many philosophers have thought he means to show that I am the same thing from one moment in time to the next, a mind existing in time. The same ‘I’ persists from one thought to another. But how can Descartes be certain of this? All that we experience is only a succession of thoughts. Instead of ‘I think’, Descartes should have concluded ‘There is thinking (going on)’.

Second, many philosophers also object to his claim that to know that his mind exists independently of his body. Just because Descartes can think of his mind existing without his body, this doesn’t mean that his mind really can exist without his body. Or again, just because he knows he exists, but doesn’t know if his body exists, this doesn’t mean he can exist without his body. Perhaps there is some connection between his mind and body that would make this impossible that Descartes doesn’t know about. Descartes has used a test of what he knows and doesn’t know as a test of what is possible. But this is not a good test, and so he hasn’t shown that minds can exist independently of bodies.

IS A PRIORI INTUITION AND DEMONSTRATION RELIABLE?

What does this show about using a priori intuition and demonstration? Descartes has done his best find what he thinks, using reasoning, is certain. His arguments are supposed to be deductive, and his premises established by rational intuition. But philosophers have still been able to point out unjustified assumptions and inferences. If intuition and demonstration do not give us knowledge, then rationalism is in trouble.

Before we become sceptical about intuition and demonstration, we should ask this: how have philosophers come up with objections to Descartes? It certainly isn’t by using sense experience! So the objections themselves use the same kind of reasoning as Descartes. Only better reasoning, we hope. The objections cannot be objections to the way Descartes reasoned, only objections to the conclusions he drew.

Hume, however, argues that what can be established by a priori reasoning is very limited. Reason can only demonstrate analytic truths; there is no such thing as ‘intuition’ in how things are or what exists.