

### History of Rationalism

Rationalism is a philosophy that appeals to human reason as a way of obtaining knowledge and has a philosophical history dating from ancient times. Rationalism is an intellectual, cultural, social and political movement that exists to promote the role of reason in approaching and finding solutions to the wide range of issues and problems that confront us in public life. It holds that our beliefs and conduct should be based on a combination of experience and reason. To a large degree it is the legacy of ideas and values that came together in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, supplemented by the resulting progress in various sciences over the past two centuries.

Whilst Rationalism did not dominate the Enlightenment, it laid critical basis for the debates that developed over the course of the 18th century. As the Enlightenment centred on reason as the primary source of authority and legitimacy, many philosophers of the period drew from earlier philosophical contributions, most notably those of René Descartes (1596-1650), a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist.

Descartes was the first of the modern rationalists. He thought that only knowledge of eternal truths (including the truths of mathematics and the foundations of the sciences) could be attained by reason alone, while the knowledge of physics required experience of the world, aided by the scientific method. He argued that reason alone determined knowledge, and that this could be done independently of the senses. For instance, his famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum*, or “I think, therefore I am,” is a conclusion reached *a priori* (i.e., prior to any kind of experience on the matter). The simple meaning is that doubting one’s existence, in and of itself, proves that an “I” exists to do the thinking.

There are three pillars of Rationalism and they are naturalism, humanism and rationality.

**Naturalism:** the natural world is the only world there is and the key questions of human existence are to be found only in that natural world.

**Humanism:** as humans, we are responsible for our own lives, and must take responsibility for being good and doing good.

**Rationality:** the best way for humans to improve their lives is through use of the scientific method, the systematic observation of the natural world and the use of the human capacity to reason.