

maintain that nothing apart from oneself exists; that if anything exists, it is unknowable; and granting it even to exist and be knowable by any one man, he could never communicate it to others. He believed that there were unbridgeable gaps between objects and the mind, and between the mind's knowledge and any language by which to express this knowledge; and that therefore each individual was shut up within the walls of his own life. This extreme view of subjectivism came to be known as Solipsism, the view that one's own experience is the only fact that can be reliably verified.

David Hume (AD 1711-1776), though regularly classified as an empiricist, is said to have admitted to subjectivism on a number of occasions. He held that the only knowledge we have consists of our sense impressions, and that we can infer nothing beyond them.

(4) Rationalism

This view embodies the belief that knowledge derives from the mind. Reasoning and universal ideas and categories of the mind are the source of knowledge prior to experience (a priori knowledge).

Plato (427-347 BC) clearly distinguished two kinds of apprehension: opinion and knowledge, which are based on two kinds of objects: particulars and forms. Particulars are particular acts or things; forms are the perfect ideals of which the particulars are the more-or-less imperfect instances. For example, there is but one form we call a circle, but there are are myriads of approximately circular drawings and objects. Plato taught that "opinion" is judgment based on particulars, whereas "knowledge" is the discernment of forms.

But how does knowledge arise? Does the form exist only in the particulars, so that one may discern the form "circle" only by experiencing a number of particular circles and abstracting the form from them? Or does the form exist totally apart from the particulars so that one may discern the form "circle" only by intuition, as an object of thought? Plato taught that the latter is correct: the perfect, unchanging form exists per se, in itself, and it is the source and object of true knowledge by means of intuition. The perfect, unchanging form does not exist, per se, in the imperfect, changing particulars, and therefore it can never be induced from them.

Opinion is thus the result of induction from particulars, whereas knowledge is the result of intuition from forms. Since particulars are imperfect, changing approximations of forms, but forms are perfect, unchanging reality, it follows that opinion at its best is a matter of probability, while knowledge at its least is entirely sure.

In the modern period in western philosophy (AD 1600 to the present), Rationalism came into its own through the work of three men -- Rene Descartes (1596-1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) and Gottfried von Leibnitz (1646-1716).