Rationalism and Empiricism: Rationalists:
Empiricism as a theory of knowledge asserts that knowledge arises through experience of sense. It lies under the epistemology. It puts much emphasis on the evidence and experience more so on sensory perception.

The major proponents of this school of thought include Empedocles. He was came before Socrates and was a great poet and philosopher. He is renowned for founding of cosmogenic theory. He also contributed to the doctrine of reincarnation, on purification, on nature, love and strife and perception and knowledge.

Aristotle was a major contributor to empiricism school of thought. He was taught by Plato and served as a teacher to Alexander the Great. He has major contributions in the fields of Poetry, physics, metaphysics, music, theater, rhetoric, government, logic and ethics. He also has major contributions in the western Philosophy. This was in the areas of morality and aesthetics, science and logic, metaphysics and physics.

Both Rationalism and Empiricism present independent views regarding the philosophy of nature, sources and limits of knowledge. This branch of philosophy is called epistemology. The point of departure between rationalism and Empiricism in epistemology emerges largely from the way each approach the basic question of how is knowledge gained? Or rather, what are the sources of knowledge? The view by Empiricists is that the definitive source of concepts and knowledge is sense of experience. Rationalists on the other hand argue that knowledge is gained without any sense of experience.

The argument by rationalists is twofold: They observe that, in some cases, sense of experience can not provide the substance of knowledge. They also came up with an explanation as to how additional information can be availed by reason. On the other hand, empiricists view the issue in a different angle, claiming that the information cited by rationalists can only be provided through experience. To this extend, Empiricists would maintain that in the event that experience does not provide the particular information being cited by rationalists, then that kind of information does not exist at all, a view that has been termed skepticism. In order that we clearly understand and critically evaluate these approaches, let’s briefly discuss some details regarding the views as put forward.

Heraclitus brought in ontology into philosophy hence threatening to overturn the works of his predecessors on cosmological systems. This saw the rise of Parmenides of Elea. He rejected the doctrine of flux as proposed by Heraclitus. He insisted on no change and that what Heraclitus calls change is mere illusion. Parmenides argues that thinking cannot happen without an object, as such none can think about nothing and also one cannot think a thing not being. Thus one cant think of change hence not speak of it as such the natural philosophy was nonsense.

Rationalism argues along three different theses: First, the Intuitive/deduction thesis holds that through intuition, some propositions can be known, and through deduction, more propositions can be known. Secondly, the Innate Knowledge theses, which like the Intuition/Deduction thesis, maintain that we have a priori knowledge, though the source of that knowledge is not intuition/deduction. They argue that knowledge is already present as part of one’s rational nature and experience does not provide it, but only prompts consciousness of the knowledge (Reeve and Miller 96). According to Reeve and Miller Plato presents an early version of the Innate Knowledge thesis in the Meno as the doctrine of knowledge by recollection. The doctrine is motivated in part by a paradox that arises when we attempt to explain the nature of inquiry. How do we gain knowledge of a theorem in geometry? We inquired into the matter. Yet, knowledge by inquiry seems impossible (Meno, 80d-e). We either already know the theorem at the start of our investigation or we do not. If we already have the
knowledge, there is no place for inquiry. If we lack the knowledge, we don't know what we are seeking and cannot recognize it when we find it. Either way we cannot gain knowledge of the theorem by inquiry. Yet, we do know some theorems (198).

Lastly, “the Innate Concept thesis maintains that some of our concepts have not been gained from experience; they are instead part of our rational make-up. Experience simply triggers a process by which we consciously grasp them,” (Kenny 16). Following this argument, it is clear that the focus of these thinkers revolves around fact that the substance of some concepts is beyond anything that can come out of experience. Descartes classifies our ideas as adventitious, fictitious, and innate. Adventitious ideas, such as a sensation of heat, are gained directly through sense experience. Fictitious ideas, such as our idea of a hippogriff, are created by us from other ideas we possess. Innate ideas, such as our ideas of God, of extended matter, of substance and of a perfect triangle, are placed in our minds by God at creation. Consider Descartes’ argument that our concept of God, as an infinitely perfect being, is innate. Our concept of God is not directly gained in experience, as particular tastes, sensations and mental images might be. Its content is beyond what we could ever construct by applying available mental operations to what experience directly provides,” (Reeve and Miller 203).

Several people who support the notion of rationalism argue that, “it is possible through intuition/deduction, to tell that God exists and created the world, that our mind and body are distinct substances, and that the angles of a triangle equal two right angles, where all of these claims are truths about an external reality independent of our thought” (Descartes 28). According to Descartes, certainty is a vital requirement by knowledge, yet providing certainty about the external world is beyond ability of empirical evidence.

It is not possible for us to be certain that our sensory impressions are not part of a dream or a massive, demon orchestrated, and deception. Only intuition and deduction are able to give an assurance of the knowledge required, and since we have some basic understanding of the external world, then the Intuition/Deduction thesis is true. All knowledge is certain and evident cognition and when we review all the actions of the intellect by means of which we are able to arrive at a knowledge of things with no fear of being mistaken," we "recognize only two: intuition and deduction" (Descartes 41).

Critics of this kind of view have argued that it is rather costly to assume that knowledge requires certainty because it does not consider most of what we know in common in the ordinary situation. They also argue that certain knowledge can not always stem from intuition. Furthermore, we cannot always be sure about our empirical beliefs since there might be possibility of a deceiver. Another problem stems from what Descartes contentment that deductions heavily depend upon fallible memory (Reeve and Miller 264).

The innate knowledge thesis has been criticized for failing to convincingly define or illustrate just what innate knowledge is. Similarly, for the innate concept theses, it has been argued that it is not easy to explain just what it is for someone to have an innate concept.

To conclude, it is important to underline that when Rationalism and empiricism are analyzed relative to a specific subject, they may not clash. They only clash when applied to the same subject. Therefore, a philosopher can belong to both these categories at the same time. In addition it is possible that we can be rationalists in mathematics and at the same time empiricists in physical sciences. For instance, Locke does not agree with rationalism in whatever form. However, he concurs with the
thesis of Intuition/Deduction based on our acceptance of the existence of God. (Loeb 11).

A poem on rationalism:
Did good judgment go with the winds?
No and yes is the answer that many respond with
With this answer one is left asking where surety is.
The word please has been left where it would have served
Today, it is no longer a command that opened hearts.
Instead it has been overtaken and replaced with irritating keys.
Faster than soil erosion, rational has gone and is going down stream
Today all have missed the target and mark of honesty
Because every tongue is lying
We eagerly want to receive and yet unwilling to give
This we all do, time and again.
The most intriguing part is when we don’t accept
Correction from such practices and so kill rational the more.

Works Cited