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Subjectivism in Hume's Empiricism: Implications for Nigeria's socio-political life

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ABSTRACT

Empiricism stands in contrast to rationalism, realism, and various other views descended from Platonic realism. Empiricism's extreme form in the history of thought, especially the type found in Hume's philosophy ended in skepticism, secularism and individualism, which in turn led to subjectivism. Subjectivism in this context is personal, radical extension of empiricism. This paper argues that dragging empiricism to its logical conclusion as Hume did, has given rise to subjectivism, which has thrown out authority and bases truth on whether ideas can be effectively argued and proved with accepted rules of logic. We argue strongly that empiricism should be blamed for the ills and decadence in our society today. It is the root of moral decadence and corruption in Nigeria's socio-political life. It is our view, therefore, that we must go beyond the empirical if we are to curb decadence, squalor and corruption in the Nigerian nation and achieve genuine development in all sphere of our socio-political life.

Keywords: Empiricism, Political life, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the modern era, empiricism clashed with rationalism. These two traditions in philosophy, empiricism adopting the empirico-scientific method and rationalism adopting the mathematical method, followed the development of science and mathematics during the renaissance. The continental rationalists are Rene Descartes, Benedict Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. The British empiricists are John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume. In their ideologies both traditions seem to be at extremes in their claims regarding the source of knowledge. Innate ideas of the rationalists earned them dogmatism while sense experience of the empiricists produced much more devastating effects. It led to skepticism and individualism and gave birth to subjectivism. It is obvious that empiricism gained much more grounds because its principles are pragmatic and appeal more easily to man. Hence, the devastating effects of empiricism immediately cut across the shores of Europe, America and other parts of the world. Of course, the Nigeria of today has got it's share of this menace.

It is our objective in this paper, therefore, to ex-ray critically the subjective elements in empiricism with particular reference to the epistemology of Hume and its consequences on neo-colonial Nigeria. Indeed, we will look into its implications from the points of view of our socio-political, moral and religious life. Our point of emphasis is what effect has empiricism,

particularly the 'wholesale' empiricism of David Hume, on the present day Nigeria.

Hume's Empiricism: David Hume (1711-76) Scottish empiricist philosopher and historian, is commonly considered the greatest philosopher to have written in English. In his own day and ever since, Hume has been classified as an empiricist, a skeptic and secularizer, but he is most fundamentally a naturalist. For him, that we are like this is a fact we must accept, and can not explain. According to him knowledge is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our natures. The content of the mind he calls perceptions, and he divides them into impressions (sensations and feelings) and ideas (the copies or images of these). Modern empiricists look to Hume as the progenitor of their philosophy. This is so because Hume took empiricism seriously and endeavoured to develop a consistent empiricist philosophy, pushing the empiricism of both Locke and Berkeley rigorously to its logical conclusion. In the usual empirical style:

Hume denies all innate ideas and makes all knowledge and all contents of the mind come from experience. The human mind is nothing other than a collection of perceptions which are divided into impressions and ideas. If I look at my room, I receive an impression of it. But when I shut my eyes and think of my chamber, the ideas I form are exact representatives of the impression I felt; nor is there any circumstance of the one, which is not to be found in the other (Ochulor 90).

For Hume, impressions are the immediate data of experience such as sensations. They are the original perceptions that come to us when we hear, see, love, hate, desire, will etc. Impressions, for Hume, include sensations of pleasure, pain, awareness of qualities and relations. The immediate, non inferential, non interpretative sense datum presented to consciousness, or which appears in consciousness are also impressions. Direct, irreducible and primitive experiences are equally aspects of impression for Hume. Ideas on the other hand are, for Hume, those less intense and vivid images or copies of sense impressions retained in memory. Faintly remembered images of impressions formerly experienced are ideas, according to Hume. Ideas also include vague copies of impressions that linger as content or residue in our memory and imagination. For Hume, ideas and impressions appear always to correspond to each other. Impressions being original, are more vivid than ideas and impressions always precede ideas. To every idea, there is a corresponding impression, and without impressions there can be no ideas. Every idea, even the idea of God must be subjected to the test: "From what impression is this or that supposed idea derived?" In this direction, it must be emphasized that:

Hume also subjected the ideas of substance, the self and God to his principle of empiricism, to his empirical criterion and emerged with a total denial of the existence of all substantial reality whether material or spiritual. Substance cannot be derived from our impressions of sensation. We have no idea of the self. The universe is an empirical fact, but we cannot deduce from it the existence of God. Hume, it is evident, could not deny the existence of substance and God, and then keep metaphysics. He also denied metaphysics and even ordered that all metaphysical books be committed to the flame (Ochulor 94).

Hume started as an empiricist but ended as a skeptic. For him, beyond the relationships of ideas, no knowledge is possible. The only knowledge possible is knowledge of what is directly experienced, observed, sensed or perceived. About things existing behind our impressions, such as substance or God, no knowledge can be had. As an empiricist he maintained that thinking or reasoning are "species of sensation" and as such, our thinking cannot extend beyond our immediate experiences. Reason, for him therefore, is the slave of the passions. Inductive reasoning, Hume opines rests on the unjustifiable

assumption that natural events will occur in the future as they have always occurred in the past and that the future will be similar to the past. This underlies the foundations of the method of modern science. Beliefs, he says, have neither rational nor empirical justification. There are, nevertheless, some beliefs that we are bound to accept in the everyday course of affairs, such as the existence of the external world, of other minds etc. it is according to Hume, on beliefs, assumptions, opinions, emotions and not on reason that life is based. Though Hume landed in skepticism, he finally makes the telling point that "to whatever length anyone may push his speculative principles of skepticism, he must act and live and converse like other men.... It is impossible for him to persevere in total skepticism or make it appear on his conduct for a few hours". This self criticism of the Humean thesis that real things are impressions or ideas in the mind, by Hume himself, confirms the popular saying that life is larger than logic.

The key problems of empiricism include avoiding a picture according to which the subject knows nothing but through experience, demarcating the legitimate basis of theory in observation, defending the view that observation is itself free of non-empirical elements, describing legitimate ways of using observation in building a picture of the world and explaining knowledge that appears to have no basis in experience, notably metaphysical, mathematical, logical, or apriori knowledge. Indeed, Locke and Berkeley were obviously inconsistent in their empiricism. Locke at a point turned rationalistic by projecting intuitive knowledge over and above sensitive and demonstrative knowledge. Locke distinguishes three kinds of knowledge namely sensitive, demonstrative and intuitive knowledge. Sensitive knowledge is knowledge of specific or particular things external to us and acquired through sensation. It assures us of the actual existence of particular things. This, according to Locke, is the lowest degree of knowledge. Demonstrative knowledge, acquired through experimentation and demonstration, is scientific knowledge, and is preferable to sensitive knowledge in order of certainty. Intuitive knowledge is, for Locke, immediate knowledge acquired by direct intuition without any intermediary. It is, according to him, the knowledge with the highest degree of certainty and is highly indubitable. Such knowledge include mathematical knowledge, knowledge of our own existence, knowledge that we think and that a sound is not a colour, that white is not black, that a circle is not a triangle etc. Berkeley, on the other hand,

posited a spiritual substance that has no compatibility with empiricism. Like any other empiricist, Berkeley rejects all noise about the existence of innate ideas. For him, all knowledge comes from sense perception. That was empirical enough. But Berkeley was to leave the question of knowing and step into the question of being. He was to move from epistemology to metaphysics. This philosophical floundering he expresses as the cornerstone of his philosophy; "Esse Est Aut Percipere Aut Percipi" (To be is either to perceive or to be perceived):

He was of the view that unless a thing perceives or is perceived, it cannot be regarded as existing; and then since what some earlier philosophers refer to as material substance can neither perceive nor be perceived, then it cannot exist. He, however, accepted and argued for the existence of spiritual substance. This stems from his belief that "thinking or spiritual beings exist" (Ochulor 28).

This is how Berkeley came to reject Locke's theory of material substance or substratum in which the primary sense qualities inhere. For Locke, this substance exists and is known indirectly by inference. But for Berkeley, it does not exist at all since it cannot be perceived. The qualities, however, exist because they are perceived. But Berkeley takes for granted the existence of spiritual substance or minds known by intuition, and other minds or spirits, known by inference. For him, too, then secondary qualities exist, but only in the mind. Hume's empiricism is the most consistent and is stretched to its logical conclusion, creating one of the greatest challenges in the history of knowledge. His epistemology sends knowledge to despair. It manufactured total skepticism, secularism and profound individualism which led to utter subjectivism in all spheres of life.

No doubt the pragmatic nature of empiricism easily turned around the society. It certainly led to scientific and technological inventions, which created room for rapid development in the society. However, it was devoid of morality. It invented a godless generation. Science gradually becomes the god of man and the scientist her prophet because the 'God' earlier known by man as the 'Almighty God' and philosophized for proofs and existence at the medieval era has no impression that will lead to such idea in ordinary experience. So with this criterion of Hume such 'God' does not exist.

This misnomer was ushered into Nigeria via colonialism and neo-colonialism. It is obvious that

today colonialism and neo-colonialism have broken down our customs and the typical African, especially here in Nigeria, has become more European than the Europeans themselves. The Nigerian is now encultured with the ills of skepticism, profound individualism and secularism which lead to subjectivism. Their root can be traced to empiricism. Moral rectitude is no longer tied to our rich customs and traditions rather it is now subjective. The ordinary Nigerian feels his liberty is absolute in so far as it does not cause harm to another. And some don't even care whether it harms anybody or not. Corruption has infected the top to the bottom. Those who have political powers misappropriate funds and place value only on enriching themselves and empowering their ethnic groups. The capitalist class cheats and exploits the poor. Youths in the Niger Delta region who feel cheated find it right to resort to oil bunkery and kidnapping for ransom. All these subjective values can be traced to extreme empiricism, especially the one of David Hume.

The Concept of Subjectivism: Encyclopedia Americana defines subjectivism as "A philosophical tenet that accords primacy to personal experience as fundamental measures and laws" (Williams 876). In line with this, Webster's Dictionary of English Usage sees it as "The philosophic theory that all knowledge is subjective and relative". In a different context, Nagbanton Patrick projects it as "An ethical theory holding that personal attitudes and feelings are sole determinants of morale and aesthetic values". (Nagbanton 12).

Analytically, from the foregoing, we can deduce that subjectivism is a theory that restricts knowledge by limiting external reality to what can be known or inferred by subjective standards of truth. This subjective disposition applies in such areas as values, morality, aesthetics, law, epistemology etc. In the narrowest sense, subjectivism goes to the logical extreme of denying that the mind can know objects outside itself. This form of subjectivism is known as solipsism (Coventry 32).

Subjectivism in Hume's Philosophy: Empiricism is a theory of knowledge which asserts that knowledge arises only from experience. Empiricism is one of the several competing views about how we know things. It emphasizes the role of experience and evidence, especially sensory perception, in the formation of ideas, while discounting the notion of innate ideas (Bailey and O'Brien 16). In the philosophy of science, empiricism emphasizes those aspects of scientific knowledge that are closely related to evidence,

especially as discovered in experiments. It is a fundamental part of the scientific method that all hypothesis and theories must be tested against observations of the natural world, rather than relying solely on *apriori* reasoning, intuition, or revelation. Hence, science is considered to be methodologically empirical in nature (Noonan 21).

The Scottish philosopher David Hume added to the empiricist view point an extreme skepticism that challenged, in many respects, the accumulated arguments and counter arguments of Descartes, Locke and Berkeley, among others. Hume argued, in keeping with empiricist tradition that all knowledge derives from sense experience. In his skeptical arguments, Hume maintained that all knowledge, even the most basic beliefs about the natural world, cannot be conclusively established by reason. Rather, he maintained that our beliefs are a result of accumulated habits, developed in response to accumulated sense experience and not a product of reason (Hume 86). Among his many arguments, Hume added an important slant to the debate on scientific methodology namely, that of the problem of induction. Among Hume's conclusions regarding the problem of induction is the view that there is no certainty that the future will always resemble the past. Thus, according to Hume, we cannot know with certainty, through reasoning, that the sun will rise tomorrow but instead we expect it to do so because it has repeatedly done so in the past (Coventry 140).

Hume concluded that such things as belief in an external world and belief in the existence of the self are not rationally justifiable. According to him, such beliefs are to be accepted nonetheless because of their profound basis in instinct and custom. He as well argues that the usual arguments in favour of the existence of the Christian God are unfounded. Hence, Hume's lasting legacy was that his skeptical arguments cast severe doubts on knowledge beyond experience, the legitimacy of inductive reasoning and belief in God; allowing many skeptics who followed him to cast similar doubts. This empirical skepticism gave rise to secularism and individualism which shaped the mental framework of most people in the society leading them to subjectivism.

Implications of Subjectivism for Nigeria's Socio-Political Life: In our attempt to expose the implications subjectivism has on Nigeria's socio-political life, we will examine nationhood, cultural values/morality, religion and the educational system in Nigeria.

Nationhood: The influence of subjectivism has profound implications for the oneness and independence of Nigeria. Independence has subjective and different meanings for the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. As early as 1956 when Anthony Enahoro moved the motion for independence, the Northerners were not in support because they were obviously unprepared for that responsibility at that time, and feared Southern domination (Ayodeji 32). Even when independence finally came, there were still varied views of its conception by the various regions and ethnic groups. In the North for example, the notion of independence was rooted in their religious heritage. It meant freedom from the rule of the non-Muslims and the establishment of an ideal Muslim state. Jeremy Hinds aptly opines:

When, therefore, by late 1950s the Southern regions of Nigeria were speaking and agitating for independence, the ruling class in Northern Nigeria was looking forward to a hand over of power to the heirs, Anglo-Fulani hegemony. For them independence meant freedom from the rule of the non-Muslims and the establishment of an ideal Muslim state (11).

Hence, for the Hausa-Fulani, until this Muslim state is achieved, there is no independence. Their hope, however, for the formation of an ideal Muslim state was heightened when Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa became the first Prime Minister. He saw himself as a Muslim who must first and foremost owe allegiance to the Sokoto Caliphate before the Nigerian state. When, therefore, on January 15, 1966, a coup was fomented and Maj. Gen. Aguiyi Ironsi, a non-Muslim and non-Hausa was brought to power, the Northerners perceived the end of their Nigerian independence, and hence the counter coup and eternal struggle of Northern Muslims for the political leadership of Nigeria (Udoidem 40). The Igbos under the leadership of Dr. Azikiwe had a vision for an independent one Nigeria. Because of this vision, a University established at Nsukka, in the heart of Igbo land, during the independence era was named University of Nigeria Nsukka and till date, the catchment area of that University remains the entire nation of Nigeria. When the rump of late Prime Minister Balewa's government, as a result of the coup of 15th January 1966, invited the military to form an interim military government, Major General Aguiyi Ironsi was brought to power, because he was, as at then, Nigeria's most senior military officer. Ironsi's commitment to the notion of one Nigeria led to his

selecting Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner, as the Army Chief of Staff. When Ironsi was killed in the counter-coup of July 1966, Lt. Col. Ojukwu, the Military Governor of the Eastern region, and other senior Igbo army officers insisted that Brigadier Ogundipe, from Western Nigeria—who was next to Ironsi in rank, should take over the military leadership of Nigeria. But the Northern officers in the army insisted on Gowon succeeding Ironsi and they eventually had their way. The counter-coup of July 1966 was followed by painful massacre of the Igbos in Northern Nigeria, a development which forced the Igbos into defending their tribal interest. This mayhem led to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of 1967-1970, during which the Igbos made a determined attempt, in the battle field, to become the sovereign state of Biafra.

Among the Yorubas, according to Udoim, independence meant expulsion of the colonial masters, and the ascendancy of the Yoruba bureaucrats whom opportunity of early university education and professional training had given unprecedented advantage over other parts of Nigerian. As long as the Yorubas control the media, the middle and higher level manpower, both in industry and governance, there is independence (42). Among the minorities, the emergence of a Nigerian government, with Nigerians at the helm of affairs, gave the hope that justice, fair play, fair-hearing, and equity would be the essential ingredients of the new found independence. But to their disappointment these were not to be. For the minorities, therefore, as long as there is no political and economic justice in the distribution of natural resource, there is no independence, hence the constant agitation and struggle for survival within the oil rich Niger Delta, Udoim argues (43). As we interact with various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, we find that there is no shared agreement on what nationhood and independence mean. Indeed, this subjectivism in the grammar of independence has in a way resulted to neo-colonialism. This is because our perpetual disagreement has given the colonial masters the opportunity to continue to dominate us politically, economically, culturally and ideologically.

Cultural Values and Morality: Neo-colonialism no doubt gave Nigeria a new way of life. The good cultural values have given way to the integration of European culture. The once African communalism which brought people together in love, sharing and oneness has been thrown overboard and replaced with individualism. African communalism stresses

collectivism which emphasizes that communal, community, group, societal, or national goals should take priority over individual goals. Though individualism stresses independence and self reliance, it leads to anarchism-lawlessness in our society. Individual judgment and opinion now seem to take precedence over the whole society.

Consequently, the respect for tradition and values as inherent in our customs now give way to European mode of life. There is total equality of every individual and hence the usual reverence given to an elder and his opinion is no longer obtainable. Hence 18 year old has become an age of liberation in Nigeria and such person could take decision as it affects him/her alone without resort to family or parents or family members. Suddenly, individualism has gripped Nigeria. The principle behind individualism in this context is that an individual's liberty is absolute, in so far as he/her does not cause any harm to another or the society. By this individualistic subjective principle, one can maximize as much pleasure as one wants, in so far as it does no harm to another. One who dresses half naked claims to have committed no offence, arguing that such action has no direct harm on any individual. The effect of individualism is gradually making lesbianism, homosexuality and gay marriage popular in Nigeria.

Religion: Before the advent of Christianity, religious practice in Africa, inspite of its fetish aspects, had deep moral undertone. It upheld peace and good neighbourliness. It preached fidelity in marriage, although mostly on the side of women. It also frowned at promiscuity and encouraged virginity. Conversion to Christianity helped to a greater extent in building a deeper faith and creating greater moral awareness. As Uduigwomen aptly opines:

At conversion both the soul of man and his conscience are converted. The change in conscience is often a gradual process as the converted individual is taught more perfectly the will of God. The new birth does not oppose conscience but rather re-establishes normal order. Conscience seems a burden to the unconverted. Christian perfection is God's standard for man's conscience (183).

However, conversion to Christianity has coincided with globalization and secularism which caused a shift in moral consciousness. Empiricism, in its pragmatic approach has revolutionized science. Almost everything seems to be possible with science. Man may no longer seek for spiritual healing in the

church for health problems but rather now embraces orthodox medication in hospitals and clinics. Human beings are now cloned to preserve some overwhelming personalities and intelligence. The world suddenly becomes a global village with fast interconnected communication. Consequently, religion is almost thrown overboard because the work of the scientist does seem not only to challenge the work of God but also his existence. Scientio-technological imperative now becomes the 'god' of the modern man while the scientist becomes her prophet. In Africa, particularly Nigeria, vulnerability to this trend has become highly compliant. This is because of our pragmatic and uncritical outlook. A typical Nigerian becomes more European than the Europeans. There is now total godlessness. Religious practice becomes a quest only to fulfill the inner drives of man and not necessarily a sincere practice or belief in God. This explains why the proliferation of churches today is synonymous with increase in crime, immorality and godlessness. In fact, most crimes today in Nigeria are perpetrated in the guise of religious practice. We can deduce that Nigerians spontaneously imbibed the doctrine of skeptical empiricism faster as against the religious faith they claim to practice so much so that they no longer believe in the biblical '*day of reckoning*' even when they sing it in their worship songs and preach it in their sermons. Religion becomes a mere fashion worn to promote business, to project corruption, to proclaim self-righteousness, and to belong to a class in the society.

Education: One may wonder if skeptical empiricism helped to damage Nigerian educational system. It becomes worse here because this is where we get our orientation; it is the place where we are formed socially, developed intellectually, and improved morally. But what is the best we can get from globalization, neo-colonialism, secularism and profound individualism which lead to subjectivism and whose mother-empiricism has bequeathed to our society? Every one from the top to the bottom seems to have a share in the blame. In the first place, the government in their subjective act of nepotism appoints their kinsmen who are incompetent as educational policy formulators. Consequently, the policies that are formulated lack focus. Udoidem decried this in his inaugural lecture: that some of the policies were formulated in the morning and changed in the evening (23). There is no continuity in the system. The case of the crabbled 6:3:3:4 system and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) which is presently under serious debate is a case in point.

These naïve educational policy formulators in Nigeria have not considered funding of our primary and post primary schools as part of their policy formulation; this is the reason why the infrastructures in these schools remain in squalor with poorly equipped teachers with very low income earning, administering them. Hence pupils leave both primary and secondary schools without the basic academic backgrounds. What do we expect of them at the university level? Indeed, those who eventually succeed and cross to the university are mostly those who had cheated at Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) and Joint Admissions Matriculations Board (JAMB). The post UME aptitude test conducted by all the Nigerian Universities in the recent years has confirmed this. This attitude is carried forward to institutions of higher learning. In the end, it is either one cheats all through the university or bribes his/her way through. Eventually one graduates empty without preparing for the challenges of the future.

Again, policy makers have not considered equipping the higher institutions. In them, libraries are empty or full of obsolete and outdated books. Laboratories are unequipped and most professors are preoccupied with survival needs such that they can scarcely have time for research, because of the poor take home. The lifestyle on campus clearly shows that individualism has gripped the average Nigerian youth. Hence, on campus they engage in cultism, promiscuity, indecent dressing, bribery (sorting) and other related crimes and ills associated with youthful exuberance. When we trace the taproot of these entire misnomers, we discover that they are caused by skeptical empiricism. It is the mother of individualism, secularism, and globalization. They manufacture subjectivism.

Evaluation and Conclusion: It is sad that skeptical empiricism has given birth to ills that have today sent Nigeria to despair. It has eaten deep into the fabric of her system so much so that there seems to be no solution. Things go from bad to worse everyday. We have already indicated how empiricism, especially the wholesale empiricism of Hume, wrecks the foundation of knowledge and science. We exposed his criterion of every impression corresponding to idea for knowledge to have been established and discovered the havoc he and other empiricists have caused to the society. His extreme position leads to individualism, it moulds secularism, and finally they produce subjectivism.

Indeed, we have scarcely said anything good about empiricism as if it is the root of everything that is evil in the society without resort to the fact that it has made great and wonderful contributions to the society. If we do not pause and acknowledge its positive sides in the society, we may also without knowing join the cue of the skeptics and the subjectivists. Obviously, its empirical outlook led to science the fundamental source of development in our modern world.

But there are some empiricists who were either not consistent in their empiricism or totally ended in total skepticism like Hume. Locke for instance, at a point turned rationalist and projected intuitive knowledge over and above sensitive and demonstrative knowledge. Berkeley posited a spiritual substance that has no compatibility with empiricism. In our own view, both Locke and Berkeley may have started informally the dialogue between empiricism and rationalism without following it logically.

However, Kant's view reconciles both rationalist dogmatism and skeptical empiricism; his position seems to be more objective. We have already said that Nigeria must go beyond the empirical, if we must curb subjectivism in the Nigerian political life. The position of Kant will help the Nigerian situation. He agrees with the empiricist that though all knowledge arises from experience, it does not follow that all arises out of experience. He succeeded in merging both experience and reason together and went ahead to assert the existence of God. In the categorical imperative, he acknowledged that the moral universe compels us to postulate the existence of God as the ground for the necessary connection between virtue and happiness. He opines that "*it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God*". In the words of Uduigwomen:

Kant's argument is a good example here. For him, the idea of a lawgiver presupposes moral reasoning. In effect, God is needed to reassure the just that he will flourish and the unjust suffer, without which practical reasoning would be impossible (53).

The position of Kant keeps us in the middle position where Socrates said virtue lies. His acknowledgement of God's existence will solve the problem of secularism. His mediation between

reason and experience will curb individualism thereby restoring the values lost to subjectivism in Nigeria, if applied.

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