
UNIT 3 EMPIRICAL METHOD

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

Earlier concepts of the existence of “innate ideas” were the subject of debate between the Continental rationalists and the British empiricists in the 17th century through the late 18th century. John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume were the primary exponents of empirical method. The empirical method held that all essential truths about the world were discoverable only by empirical experience i.e sense experience. It is a process of arriving at truth through experiential verification of perceived data. Hence in this method reason was substituted by experience. This unit examines the empirical method adopted by the three above mentioned philosophers.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The term method is derived from the Greek word “*methodos*” – road to. Etymologically the term refers to the way of doing something, the system of procedure to obtain or reach the end intended. It is a way of procedure from the known to the unknown, from the given starting point to final propositions in a determined field of knowledge. In sciences the use of correct methods is most important in order to make certain that the conclusions are correctly connected with the starting point and the foundation. Every scientific method is the road from the known starting point to a result. And one of the characteristic features of the discipline of philosophy is the existence of method. Philosophical method (or philosophical methodology) is the study of how to do philosophy. So a method of doing philosophy, or a *philosophical method*, is a systematic or patterned way of answering philosophical questions.

But within them the questions in philosophy are always local in the sense that they carry the flavour of their own peculiar time and circumstances as a result they do not remain quite the same over a period of time and the methods adopted

to obtain answers for them has also changed over a period of time. This is especially evident if we look at the evolution of philosophical methods in Western philosophy from the speculative, dialectical, empirical, rational method to that of analytical, phenomenological, transcendental method. This evolution and proliferation of different methods in Western philosophy seem to close links with the way science and philosophy began developing in the 17th century. When science started to develop quite fast due to the impetus received from the work of Galileo, Newton and others two powerful and influential methods in philosophy – rationalism and empiricism also quickly developed. Of course, it is not just *one* method that philosophers use to answer philosophical questions. But it is possible to draw some valid generalizations or common features that include while discussing philosophical methods.

3.2 COMMON FEATURES OF PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

Doubt: Notice doubts that one has about the meaning or justification of some common, everyday belief one has. **Formulate a problem:** Formulate the doubts in a philosophical problem, or question. Explain the problem very clearly and carefully. **Offer a solution:** Offer a solution to the problem: either something like a philosophical analysis or a philosophical explanation. **Argument:** Give an argument or several arguments supporting the solution. **Dialectic:** Present the solution and arguments for criticism by other philosophers, and help them judge their own.

3.3 EMPIRICAL METHOD

Empirical method is generally taken to mean ‘the collection of data’ on which to base a theory or derive a conclusion in science. The term “empirical” was originally used to refer to certain ancient Greek practitioners of medicine who rejected adherence to the dogmatic doctrines of the day, preferring instead to rely on the observation of *phenomena* as perceived in experience. An empiric is “one who, either in medicine or in other branches of science, relies *solely* upon observation and experiment. The empirical method is not sharply defined and is often contrasted with the experimental method, where data are derived from the systematic manipulation of variables in an experiment. Some of the difficulty in discussing the empirical method is from the ambiguity of the meaning of its linguist root: *empiric*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2nd Edition, 1989), empiric is derived from the ancient Greek for experience, *empeiria*, which is ultimately derived from *in* (in)+ *peira* (trial) or experiment. Therefore, empirical data is information that is derived from the trials and errors of experience. In this way, the empirical method is similar to the experimental method. However, an essential difference is that in an experiment the different “trials” are strictly manipulated so that an inference can be made as to causation of the observed change that results. This contrasts with the empirical method of aggregating naturally occurring data. In philosophy too an empirical method refers to a practice of knowledge derived entirely from sense perception or experience. It is a process of attaining truth through experiential verification of perceived data. It is a method which interprets philosophy from a world of experience. But in order to understand the entire process of empirical method

one needs to study first what Empiricism is and the philosophers who have contributed to this philosophical trend.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is a philosophical method?

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2) Define Empirical Method

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3.4 EXPOSITION OF EMPIRICISM

The modern philosophy can be generally classified as rationalistic and empiricistic as they accept reason or experience respectively as the source and norm of knowledge. According to the empiricist view, for any knowledge to be properly inferred or deduced, it is to be gained ultimately from one's sense-based experience. As a historical matter, philosophical empiricism is commonly contrasted with the philosophical school of thought known as rationalism which, in very broad terms, asserts that much knowledge is attributable to reason independently of the senses.

In philosophy empiricism holds the attitude that beliefs are to be accepted and acted upon only if they first have been confirmed by actual experience. This broad definition accords with the derivation of the name from the Greek word '*Empeiria*', which corresponds to the Latin '*experientia*' which in turn takes the English meaning 'experience'. Empiricism is a system of thought which believes that there are no inborn truths and all knowledge springs from sense perception or experience and there is no absolutely certain knowledge without experiential verification of the perceived data. Reason can yield only probable knowledge. Empiricism thus holds that our world of experience is the object of philosophy and all knowledge is ultimately based on experience. Experience so understood has a variety of modes – sensory, aesthetic, moral, religious and so on but empiricist concentrate on sense experience. It goes to an extent of affirming that there is no other knowledge except that which comes from experience.

There are two kinds of empiricism one is a stronger form and the other is weaker. Such distinction has to do with scope – whether the view takes all knowledge to be based on experience or restricts this claim to knowledge of

the physical universe, eluding, for example, mathematical and/or religious knowledge. **Material Empiricism:** The stronger form of empiricism is called material empiricism. It holds that the objectively existing in the outer world is the source of sense experience. It puts forward that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience. **Idealist Empiricism:** It is a weaker form which limits experience to the sum total of sensations. Sensation is a kind of physical state occurring as a result of direct influence of the objects on the sense experience. It is also of two types, namely, the external and the internal. External sensation is caused by any one of senses like sense of sight, touch, taste, sound and smell. Internal sensation is caused by reflection or psychical acts of human mind.

Characteristics of Empiricism

According to empiricism, human mind at birth is “tabula rasa” or a clean slate. The mind is being compared to a blank writing tablet, white paper and void of all characters. It is in original state a mental blankness. The mind is only potential or inactive before receiving ideas from the senses, sense experience as source of knowledge. Sensation and reflection, the outer and the inner sense experience, is the only windows through which the dark chamber of mind comes to be filled with light. Empiricism does not deal with universals. It holds that universal propositions can satisfactorily be explained by particulars. Empiricism denies intuition which enables us to grasp general truths about reality independently of experience as a result it accepts only inductive method which is a process of reasoning from a part to a whole, from particulars to generals, individuals to universals.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) What is the relevance of empiricism in the modern thought?
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- 2) Distinguish the difference between the weak and the strong form of empiricism
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- 3) Explain some of the characteristic features of Empiricism
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3.5 LOCK'S EMPIRICAL METHOD

John Locke was suspicious of the view that a thinker could work out by reason alone the truth about the universe. In response to the early-to-mid-17th century Continental Rationalism of Rene Descartes and Baruch Spinoza in the later 17th century John Locke (1632–1704) proposed in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), a very influential view wherein the *only* knowledge humans can have is a posteriori, i.e., based upon experience. All materials of human knowledge are derived from experience either of the external world through our senses or of our own mental life through introspection. He established that all our ideas derive from experience and that is the way we conceive the world (including ourselves). Therefore, he set the tone for the empiricist method by affirming the foundational principle of empiricism; “there is nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses.” (*nihil est in intellectu quod non antea fuerit in sensu*). All knowledge of the world must finally rest on human sense experience.

Thus Locke is famously attributed for holding the proposition that the human mind is a *Tabula Rasa*, a “blank tablet,” in Locke’s words “white paper,” on which the experiences derived from sense impressions as a person’s life proceeds are written. Through the combining and compounding of simple sense impressions or ideas (defined as mental contents) into more complex concepts the mind can arrive at sound conclusions. In his empirical method, Locke vehemently attacked the doctrine of innate ideas. According to him ideas are acquired, learned and obtained from our experience. They are immediate objects of our sensory awareness. They are sensory presentation of physical objects both external and internal. They are concepts that we gain through introspection of our own mental operations like meditation.

There are two sources of our ideas: sensation and reflection. In both cases, a distinction is made between simple and complex ideas. Simple ideas are those that result from pure passivity and consist of a single content. These are obtained through experience alone and are directly known as the contents of actual experience, eg, Colour, heat, extensivity, etc., Locke calls them as primary qualities. Those ideas which come from more than one sense organ (solidity, motion, number, shape...) and the secondary, those ideas that are from one sense organ and are the ways in which facts affect us (colour, smell, sound ...). Complex ideas are formed by the synthesis of two or more simple ideas. Here the mind is active. Mind has the power to repeat, compare, compound the simple ideas in endless variety and thus make complex ideas. This process of compounding and comparing are the operations of the mind. The number of ideas formed by compounding and comparing is almost infinite but they can be classified into Modes themselves, substance and relation.

Modes: Modes are the complex ideas that cannot exist by themselves they are represented by others. They are simple modes and mixed modes. The former are simple ideas without any mixture of any other, whereas the latter are components of simple ideas of various kinds put together to make a complex one. **Substance:** The existence of modes presupposes that of substance. It is the substratum as the cause for the unity of modes. **Relation:** Here mind gets certain ideas of relation by comparing one thing with another. The idea of cause and effect. Thus his empirical method establishes and holds that the mind is at

first a blank tablet, a passive receptor of its experience. The mind possesses innate powers but not innate ideas as cognition begins only with sensation.

3.6 BERKELEY'S EMPIRICAL METHOD

One of the aims of Berkeley's philosophy is to attack scepticism and thereby to defend common sense and to attack atheism and thereby to defend religion. Against them he held that the reality of the physical world is essentially spiritual for it manifests the activity of spirit and goodness of God's will. Mind or spirit is the only substance and that it is God who produces sensations or ideas in our mind. According to him secondary qualities are not objective. They change and are not perceived in exactly the same way by everyone. Therefore they are more in the mind than of the things.

As a result his empirical method is viewed by many as having some idealistic tenants as it teaches that reality consists of spirits and their ideas only. This is known as immanent idealism. According to this doctrine human mind can possess or acquire the knowledge of their own experiences. However he established this idealistic conclusion as the implication of his famous maxim "*esse est percipi*." Since there is nothing as an objective material substance it follows that for material things to be is to be perceived. *Esse* is act of being or literally to be and its *percipi* is nothing but to be perceived. It is not possible that they have an existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them. His method implies that our thoughts, passions, pictures of imagination do not exist outside the mind, they are in the mind and their existence consists in their being perceived or known by the mind. Objects exist in so far as they are perceived. In other words to be is to be perceived. The objects are existing because the finite minds perceive them. Even if the finite minds do not perceive the objects still they exist because an ever vigilant spectator perceives them all through. Such an ever vigilant spectator is none other than God (infinite mind or spirit). In short Berkeley points out all mental representations of supposed material substance are finally ideas in the mind therefore the existence of a material world external to the mind is unwarranted assumption. To do does not mean to be a material substance rather to be means to be perceived by mind.

3.7 DAVID HUME'S EMPIRICAL METHOD (1711–1776)

It was his great desire to establish a science of human nature. After all every science has to do with human nature in some way or the other, whether it is logic, mathematics, etc., man and it is he who ultimately decides what is true and what is false in these disciplines. Thus it is evident that human nature is the capital or centre of the various sciences and it should therefore serve as their focal point. Hume's aim was then to explain the principles of human nature so that all the various disciplines might be able to build upon the solid foundation. In order to do that he advocated experimental method to establish this science. This method is based on observation and experience. We must make a close and accurate observation of man's psychological processes and moral behavior and try to separate from these the various laws according to which man works – just as is done in the natural science. Thus rather than

relying on supposed intellectual intuitions of the essences of the human mind through introspection, one shall make use of the more scientifically solid procedure of induction. Thus his view is empirical in the sense that our knowledge has its source in experience.

He argues that all knowledge derives from sense experience. In particular, he divided all of human knowledge into two categories: *relations of ideas* and *matters of fact*. Mathematical and logical propositions (e.g. “that the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the two sides”) are examples of the first, while propositions involving some contingent observation of the world (e.g. “the sun rises in the East”) are examples of the second. All of people’s “ideas”, in turn, are derived from their “impressions”. There are two types of impression the outward impressions and the inward impressions. From such impressions all our knowledge is derived. For Hume, an “impression” corresponds roughly with what we call a sensation. To remember or to imagine such impressions is to have an “idea”. Ideas are therefore the faint copies of sensations. Thus according to Hume there is no absolute or certain knowledge of matters of fact. Our knowledge never reaches absolute certainty. We base our conclusion on experience. As a simple instance posed by Hume, we cannot know with certainty by inductive reasoning that the sun will continue to rise in the East, but instead come to expect it to do so because it has repeatedly done so in the past. Thus David Hume drove the empiricist method to its logical end making use of Berkeley’s insight at the same time turning towards modern secular skepticism. As an empiricist who grounded all human knowledge in sense experience, still Hume disagreed with Locke’s representative perception and Berkeley’s idealistic solution. Human experience is indeed of the phenomenal only and there is no way to ascertain what is beyond it.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) How are the ideas classified according to Locke?

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2) What are the implications of the maxim “esse est *percepti*.”?

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3) Compare and Contrast the similarities and the difference that exists in the method of Locke, Berkeley and Hume.

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3.8 LET US SUM UP

Empirical method paved way of very practical basis for philosophy. It said pure rationality or making use of reason as the only tool of knowledge will lead philosophy to a baseless ground. Therefore, one needs to start from the given form the sense perception or experience. Our mind cannot act, reason cannot perform its function unless something is carried on to it in and through the sense experiences. Truth or discovery of truth is basically through the a posteriori. Though the empirical method has its own drawbacks still it served a valid basis for demonstration of truth.

3.9 KEY WORDS

Tabula Rasa : word used by Locke to refer to the emptiness of the mind before experience

Innate ideas : refers to the inborn ideas

3.10 FURHER READING AND REFERENCES

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