
UNIT 2 EMPIRICISM

Contents

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Attacks upon Descartes' Theory of Innate Ideas
- 2.3 Sense Perception: Impressions and Ideas
- 2.4 The Psychological Laws of Association of Ideas
- 2.5 Matters of Fact and Relations of Ideas
- 2.6 The Limits of Knowledge
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Key Words
- 2.9 Further Readings and References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall try to understand empiricism of John Locke, Berkeley and particularly David Hume. By the end of this unit one should be able:

- to have thorough understanding of rationalism and empiricism;
- to know the limits of *a priori* knowledge;
- to understand the influence of Locke and Berkeley in Hume's thinking; and
- to analyse the limitation of knowledge.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The fundamental principle of empiricism is that sense perception (including direct observation by the senses, indirect observation by use of instrumentation, and experimentation) is the only reliable method for gaining knowledge and for testing all claims to knowledge. Empiricism is basing knowledge upon the senses, upon the flux of the sensible world, which the rationalist Descartes rejected as an inferior way of knowing. Nowhere is this challenge taken up with more devastating result than in the work of David Hume (1711-1776), the eighteenth century empiricist and sceptic, who elegantly, and relentlessly, pursues Cartesian insights and premises to what he sees as their inevitable logical outcome. In this unit, we shall present an exposition and critical examination of Hume's thinking with the influence of Locke and Berkeley in his thinking. He was the most mercilessly destructive of all the British empiricists and he took delight in demolishing the claims of philosophy, shocking the defenders of religion and undermining the validity of scientific laws and the Enlightenment belief in progress.

2.2 ATTACKS UPON DESCARTES' THEORY OF INNATE IDEAS

John Locke (1632-1704) in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) criticizes Descartes' doctrine of innate ideas, and expounds the doctrine

of empiricism. The theory of innate ideas asserts that clear and distinct, self-evident ideas are innate in the sense that they are “born with us,” as Descartes said, they are imprinted upon the soul. Examples of innate ideas are the ideas of substance, cause, God, and the principles of logic. If there are innate ideas, says Locke, they must be equally present in all minds. But Locke contends that there are no such ideas, which are universally present in all minds. Children, savages, idiots and illiterate persons are quite unconscious of the so-called innate ideas such as causality, infinity, eternity, God and the like. If there are innate ideas in the mind, they must be the same in all minds. But the so-called innate ideas of God, morality and the like differ in different societies, in different countries, and in different ages. They differ in different persons even at the same time in the same society. Even if there were the same idea in all minds, it would not prove their innateness. All persons have the same idea of fire. But it is not an innate idea; it is derived by all from experience. Universality of an idea does not prove its innateness. The so-called innate principles are general truths, which are induction from particular facts of experience. They are not the primary facts of knowledge, but generalisations from particular facts, which are acquired from perception. Perception is experience. The so-called innate principles are derived from experience; they are empirical truths, and not innate and intuitive. They are not *a priori* or prior to all experience. Thus Locke disproves Descartes’ doctrine of innate ideas.

Locke maintains that the mind is a *tabula rasa* in the beginning. It is like a clean slate, blank white paper, on which experience writes, and this writing by experience is all the mind can know. Mind has no innate ideas. It receives ideas from experience. Experience is twofold; sensation and reflection. Sensation is external perception. Reflection is internal perception. Sensation is the source of our knowledge of external objects. Reflection is the source of our knowledge of the internal states of mind. There is not a single idea in the mind, which is not derived from sensation or reflection. The child gets his first ideas from sensation; then at an advanced age he reflects upon them. He cannot think before his mind is stocked with sensations. Descartes maintains that the mind always thinks even before it is furnished with sensations and that it can think independently of sensations. But Locke maintains that the mind cannot think before it has sensations. Sensations are the materials on which the mind thinks. The mind is passive in receiving sensations. But it is active in comparing them with one another, combining them into complex ideas, and forming general ideas out of particular ideas. It can form complex ideas out of simple ideas. “There is nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the sense.” This is the dictum of Locke. All knowledge is derived from experience; it is posterior to or after experience. Knowledge is inductive in procedure and not deductive as Descartes and Spinoza think. Knowledge starts with particular facts of experience, and makes generalizations from them. It does not start with some self-evident innate ideas or principles, and deduce other truths from them. This theory is called *a posteriori* theory of knowledge. It is called empiricism because experience is the only reliable source of knowledge and testing all claims to knowledge. Empiricism is thus basing knowledge upon the senses, upon the flux of the sensible world, which rationalism rejected as an inferior way of knowing.

According to Locke, we have sensitive certainty of the existence of matter; we have intuitive certainty of the existence of our own minds; and we have demonstrative certainty of the existence of God. We are compelled to assume

the existence of matter as the unknown and unknowable substratum, of primary qualities-extension, solidity, figure, rest and motion-which are real and known through sensation or external perception. The mind is the substratum of the powers of perceiving, thinking, feeling and willing. We infer the existence of God from the external world as its maker. We form the idea of the infinite by negation of the finite. Thus, Locke, an empiricist, believes in the existence of matter, mind and God and reaches the same metaphysical conclusion of rationalist Descartes.

Locke also takes over the subjectivism of Descartes, the view that what I know best is my own mind and its ideas. Thus there enters into empiricism the problem inherent in subjectivism which we found in Descartes: the chasm or gap between my own mind with its ideas and the physical objects and human beings to which my ideas refer, and which are external to me, in the physical and social world. How can I know them since I am confined to knowing with certainty only my own ideas? So George Berkeley (1685-1753) pushes ahead with the argument of empiricism and demolishes Locke's acceptance of the belief held by Descartes that physical substances exist. We can never have sensory experiences of material substances, says Berkeley. We can experience only sensory qualities. What is my actual experience of substance? It is only the experience of qualities. I perceive a tree as a certain size and shape, I perceive the diameter of its trunk, the length of its branches, the brown colour of its trunk and branches, and the green colour of its leaves; I touch its rough textures and smell its woody aroma- but I can never perceive its substance itself. All that I have perceived of the tree are its qualities. I have no perception of a substance. The existence of physical substances, Berkeley concludes, is only in their being perceived. Physical substances cannot be known to have any other existence than in the qualities we perceive. For Berkeleian empiricism matter -physical substance, the physical universe- do not exist. But he believed that mental substances exist, in the form of finite minds and also in the form of God as infinite mind. The laws of nature for Berkeley are only the regularities of our own perceptions or ideas. Berkeley assured us that with the help of God our perceptions are reliable and orderly and that we can therefore trust in the uniformity of experience and in the dependability of scientific laws. But Hume gleefully asks how does Berkeley know that mental substance exists? Under this attack we will see collapse the idea that there are mental substances.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) "It seems a near contradiction to say that there are truths imprinted on the soul....." Examine Locke's reaction to such 'truths'.

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- 2) How does Berkeley refute the existence of material substance in his philosophy?

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2.3 SENSE PERCEPTION: IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

David Hume's (1711-1776) exciting new philosophic outlook combined the empiricism of Locke and Berkeley, who argued that knowledge comes only from sense perception, with the moral philosophy of Francis Hutcheson, who argued that morality comes only from sentiment or feeling. Putting these two conceptions together, Hume began to move toward the shocking thought that our best knowledge, our scientific laws, are nothing but sense perceptions which our feelings lead us to believe. Therefore it is doubtful that we have any knowledge, we have only sense perceptions and feelings. Here in these thoughts of the young Hume was a radical, extreme scepticism, an extreme form of doubting the possibility that certainty in knowledge is attainable.

At the very outset of his book *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume holds, "All the perceptions of the human mind divide themselves into two different kinds, which I shall call Impressions and Ideas." It follows from the above citation that Hume accepts two basic premises of Locke. First, sense-perception is the only source of knowledge. Secondly, what we apprehend through sense-perception are impressions and ideas. Here, we may point out that what Hume calls 'impressions' are nothing other than the 'simple ideas' of Locke and 'ideas' of Berkeley. 'Ideas', for Hume, refer to the copies of impressions. It shows that all three of them—Locke, Berkeley and Hume, accept the Cartesian assumption, namely, the mind knows only its own ideas. Even with ideas as the immediate data of sense-perception, Locke attempts to establish materialism. Though Hume agrees with Locke that what the mind directly knows through sense-experience are ideas, yet as to Locke's materialism, he takes the side of Berkeley. Following Berkeley, Hume rejects Locke's abstract general ideas signifying material substances. On the ground that we cannot assert the existence of anything which is not 'given' through our sense-perception, Hume rejects not only the material substance of Locke, but also Berkeley's spirit or mental substance. He advocates the reality of impressions and ideas, alone. To quote him, "Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, it follows that it is impossible for us to so much as conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions." His implication is that as our concepts of matter and mind as enduring substances are specifically different from impressions and ideas, we cannot assert their existence.

Hume defines impressions and ideas in the following term, "Those perceptions, which enter with the most force and violence, we may call impressions, and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions as they make their first appearance in the soul. By Ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning." In this definition, Hume makes it clear that both 'impressions' and 'ideas' are 'perceptions' of our mind, and the difference between them lies not in kind but only in the 'degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind'. 'Impressions', in his view, are the lively perceptions. When we reflect on these lively perceptions, we receive 'ideas', which are less lively copies of these 'impressions'. In order to emphasise the mental character of 'impressions' and 'ideas', Hume maintains that the difference between them is a difference of feeling and 'thinking'. Thereby, he means that impressions are directly felt, strong and vivid perceptions, whereas 'ideas' are comparatively feeble perceptions acquired through recollection or imagination.

Thus, putting all the stress on the degree of vivacity with which 'impressions and ideas' are received by the mind, he says, "Everyone of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking." Here we notice the difference between Locke and Hume. According to Locke, the strength and vivacity of the simple ideas of sensation assure us of the presence of external material objects as the causes of these ideas. It is this fact of being caused by extra-mental reality which, in Locke's view, distinguishes the ideas of sensation from the ideas of memory and imagination. Hume however does not refer to any substantial reality, material or mental as the cause of our 'impressions'. By 'impressions', he simply means those mental awarenesses or 'perceptions' which are distinguished from 'ideas' in respect of the degrees of 'force and liveliness' with which they are felt. He does not distinguish between impressions and ideas by the manner of their production. To quote him "By the term impression I would not be understood to express the manner, in which our lively perceptions are produced in the soul, but merely the perceptions themselves".

Hume attempts to exhibit the priority of impressions through different examples. For instance, he argues that if we lack any one of our sense-organs, then in the absence of specific impressions, we cannot have the corresponding ideas also. "A blind man can form no notions of colours, a deaf man of sounds." To mention another example cited by Hume where he says, "We cannot form to ourselves a just idea of the taste of a pineapple, without having actually tasted it." He means that we cannot form the accurate idea of anything without the previous impressions of it. In these examples, we observe Hume's attempt to give a realistic interpretation of his epistemology and ontology. However, all these examples, in the process of showing the temporal priority of impressions, prove the existence of material objects also. Hence, it follows from Hume's own examples that the distinguishing feature of impressions is not vivacity or temporal priority but the fact that they are caused by objective reality which is lacking in the case of ideas. Whereas Locke emphasises the objective ground of the simple ideas of sensation, Hume puts all the stress on the subjective characteristics of 'impressions'.

Just like Locke's division of simple ideas into those of sensation and reflection, Hume draws a similar distinction within impressions: namely, impressions of sensations and impressions of reflection. An impression of sensation, in Hume's view, "arises in the soul originally from unknown causes". This view implies that there are existents other than impressions and ideas but because they are not given in our sense-perception, they are 'unknown' to us. This statement contradicts his view that "we never....can conceive any kinds of existence, but those perceptions..." Hence, it seems to us that two different interpretations of Hume's ontological position are possible. On the one hand, we cannot conceive any other existences than 'perceptions' i.e., impressions and ideas; on the other hand, his view implies that there are existences other than 'perceptions' but they are 'unknown' to us. Herein lays agnosticism in Hume. As according to Hume, we do not know either external material substances or identical mental substance, the origin of the impressions of sensation is unknown for us. Impression of reflection, in Hume's view, "is derived in a great measure from our ideas..." An impression leaves its copy i.e., idea in the mind, and reflecting on this idea, the mind may again receive a new impression like desire or aversion. Hume calls it the impression of reflection. As this kind of impression is directly derived from an idea, we observe that neither of Hume's two criteria, namely 'liveliness' or 'priority' is properly applicable to it.

2.4 THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LAWS OF ASSOCIATION OF IDEAS

Impressions and ideas, which constitute the matter of knowledge, are disconnected from one another. They are connected with one another by the laws of association. The laws of association are purely subjective. Discrete impressions and ideas are automatically combined with one another according to these laws. They do not require any innate ideas or a priori forms of reason to connect them with one another. Hume advocates through-going empiricism. Impressions or sensations are the first units of knowledge; ideas or images are their faint copies. They are combined with one another according to the laws of association to form complex ideas. Knowledge is composed of sensations and ideas combined by the laws of association.

Hume has said that our atomic (distinct and separable) ideas, which correspond to our impressions, are connected or associated by three laws of association, which are a gentle force or impulse leading us to associate one idea with another. The association of our ideas is based upon three qualities of our ideas, which tend to lead the mind from one idea to another, to connect or associate one idea with another. The first law is that ideas are associated or connected by the resemblance between ideas. The second law by which we associate or connect one idea with another is by contiguity, one idea being close to, or adjacent to, another in space or time. The third law of the association of ideas is by cause and effect. These three laws pertain to all our thinking, thus also to our scientific thinking. All our reasoning about matters of fact, says Hume, is causal reasoning. And our most important reasoning about matters of fact is scientific reasoning, with its causal laws of nature.

Hume claims that the relation of cause and effect is the crucial concept in all our thinking about factual matters. By necessary connection is meant the relation between cause and effect in which the cause necessarily produces the effect. Hume now asks the powerful question: From what impression, if any, does the idea of cause arise? The principle, that everything must have a cause that nothing is uncaused, that something cannot come from nothing was regarded by Descartes and by the scholastic philosophers before him and the rationalistic philosophers after him, as a self-evident truth that proves itself directly to reason. Hume concludes that there is no rational proof whatsoever of the causal principle. He says flatly: "Every demonstration which has been produced for the necessity of a cause is fallacious." If we believe in the causal principle, he says, it is only through habit or custom that we do so, there is no rational basis for it. Here in this astonishing conclusion we see the outcome of Hume's early breakthrough: his notion of combining empiricism with Hutcheson's view of morality as coming only from sentiment or feeling. This had led Hume to the startling thought that what is true of morality is also true of science: that our scientific laws have their source only in feelings.

Why do we think that a particular cause must necessarily have a particular effect? We cannot know this by reason. Hume comes up with the answer. We have the idea of a necessary connection between a particular cause and effect after we experience their conjunction repeatedly. He calls this *constant conjunction*. If repeatedly we have sensory impressions of fire as spatially contiguous to my fingers and temporally prior to my fingers' having a sensation of burning, "without any further ceremony," says Hume, "we call the one cause and the other effect."

Impressions of the constant conjunction, spatially and temporally, of the flaming match and the burning sensation in the fingers still do not provide an impression of necessary connection. If the idea of necessary connection has no corresponding impression, then on Hume's empiricist principle: no impression, no idea- the idea of a necessary connection between cause and effects is worthless as knowledge and is meaningless, a fraud, nonsense. Thus Hume's empiricist rule is not only a test of the worth of our ideas as knowledge (where there is no impression, the idea is worthless) but is also a test of the meaning of our ideas (where there is no impression, the idea is meaningless).

Since necessary causal relation does not come from sensory impressions, it must be subjective; it must come from the mind, and specifically from the psychological laws of association of ideas. The idea of necessary connection between causes and effects is not in the objects we observe, but only in the mind, he concludes. Thus the idea of necessary connection between particular causes and effects is derived not from rational self-evidence and not from any empirical sense impression, but only from the psychological association of our ideas. Hume has shown that causal necessity is not an objective relationship between things which scientists can observe, but is only a subjective compulsion to relate things by the psychological laws of association. There is no necessary connection between objects. There is only the psychological necessity of our associating ideas with one another. Hume says: "Objects have no discoverable connection together, nor is it from any other principle but custom...that we draw any inference from one...to the other." Hume's point is that the idea of necessary connection between cause and effect is something that experience can never give us. Each impression is a separate experience. Experience cannot guarantee that this effect is necessary. Thus Hume redefines the idea of the cause-effect relation. A cause is an object in constant spatial and temporal conjunction with another such that the experience of the one compels the mind to expect the other. This is all that we can mean by the cause –effect relationship.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Explain Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas and clarify its sceptical implications?

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- 2) What are the arguments given by Hume to deny the necessary connection between cause and effect? Discuss.

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2.5 MATTERS OF FACT AND RELATIONS OF IDEAS

For Hume all the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds of propositions, to wit, Matters of Fact and Relations of Ideas and they are mutually exclusive.

- 1) **Matters of Facts:** Here Hume attacks upon the validity of scientific knowledge. Propositions of matters of facts consist only in our impressions and ideas. There is no necessity that any particular impression will follow any other impression. The contrary of what usually occurs in observed constant conjunction is possible. How do you know, Hume asks, that the sun will rise tomorrow? No necessary causal law guarantees it. It is just as intelligible and without any logical contradiction to say "The sun will not rise tomorrow." There is no more logical necessity for the one than for the other. We can never know that a fact must be so, that a fact is necessary.
- 2) **Relations of Ideas:** Logic and mathematics, specifically arithmetic, geometry, and algebra, give us knowledge of the relations of ideas. This is the domain of certainty. The propositions of mathematics are either self-evidently or intuitively certain, or they can be demonstrated by deductive reasoning to have complete certainty. The truths of mathematics assert relationships between ideas, between abstract symbols. They are formal abstract truths. They tell us nothing about matters of fact, and on the other hand, matters of fact cannot refute them. It is true independent of any experience we might have. Mathematical propositions must pay a price for yielding absolute truth. Mathematics is not truth about anything which exists, about any matters of fact. Mathematics is only empty, abstract, formal truth, which tells you nothing about existence. No proposition which states a relation between ideas can establish any truth about existence.

Relations of ideas have certainty but no factual content, and matters of fact which have empirical content but no certainty. Even though Hume has conceded that logical certainty can be attained through demonstrative reasoning in the field of the relations of ideas, he has implied in the *Enquiries*, that such knowledge is only verbal, or tautologous. As the 'relations' are already contained in the ideas, they do not provide any new information. In the *Treatise*, he has brought the faculty of reason into question. As human beings are not infallible, he argues that there is a possibility of error even with regard to rational knowledge. Hume has thus resolved both empirical and rational knowledge into mere probability.

2.6 THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE

With regard to the idea of substance, when we ask, from what impressions does it arise, the answer cannot claim to be from an impression of substance, but only from impressions of qualities we experience, such qualities as size, shape, colour. Then the idea of substance is nothing but these qualities which we experience. We cannot, therefore, say that substances exist. We can know that something exists only if we have an impression of it, only if we have sensory experience of it. And so Hume destroys the claim that substance exist by showing that we have no impressions of physical substances. As far as our knowledge of the world of facts is concerned, we are limited to our atomistic impressions

and their corresponding ideas. These impressions and ideas appear repeatedly in our experience. We have no way of knowing what causes them. We have no knowledge that an external world exists, that physical substances exist, that a God exists. There is no God. There is no valid proof for the existence of God. We have no impression of God. We do not perceive Him, nor can we infer His existence. We wish to believe in God to fulfil our aspirations. So we believe in God. The idea of God is man-made. This is also the case for the idea of mental substance, and specifically for Descartes' claim that I am a thinking substance. There is no sensory impression to which the idea of thinking substance corresponds. On empiricist principles we cannot claim to have any knowledge of the self as a unity, as permanent and continuous, but only as a series of perceptions. Hume says "the rest of mankind.... are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement." This is Hume's famous "bundle of perceptions" theory of the self. Hume cannot claim that the flux of our perceptions have even the unity of a bundle. Hume is here getting close to the view of self as a stream of consciousness. Hume himself says, "The mind is a kind of theatre, where perceptions successively make their appearance, pass and re-pass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations." There is no continuity, no permanence, and no identity, in these appearances in the theatre of the mind. But suddenly Hume catches himself and says that, strictly speaking, there is not even a theatre that we can know anything about through a sense impression. And thus the outcome of Hume's driving, consistent empiricism, which requires that the basis for our knowledge be solely in sensory impressions, leads to the conclusion that we have no knowledge. Not only is metaphysics impossible, science is also impossible. The causal laws of science have been reduced by Hume to the psychological laws of association of ideas. Through animal instinct we have animal faith in the world of the senses, and thus we are able to function in the world, says Hume. Animal faith, not philosophy, governs our lives.

In the *Treatise*, Hume not only brings the certainty of geometry to question, but also expresses doubt with regard to the very capacity of reason. Hume argues that it is never possible to claim certainty about a chain of reasoning as a rational proof. First of all, our judgement about the proof is probable and not completely certain. Then, our assessment of this judgment about the proof is also probable. Further, the evaluation of our ability to judge our judgment is also probable. Thus, the process leads to an infinite regress. There is no guarantee of certainty even in the field of 'Relations of Ideas' and in the realm of 'Matters of Fact.' Thus for Hume, "all knowledge degenerates into probability" In Hume's view, probability is all that we can aspire for in our life.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Explain in your own words the distinction that Hume makes between "matters of fact" and "relations of ideas". Do you agree that these are different objects of knowledge?

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- 2) State and examine Hume's refutation of the notion of self as a substance.

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

David Hume's (1711-1776) exciting new philosophic outlook combined the empiricism of John Locke (1632-1704) and George Berkeley (1685-1753), who argued that knowledge comes only from sense perception, with the moral philosophy of Francis Hutcheson, who argued that morality comes only from sentiment or feeling. Putting these together Hume states that our knowledge is nothing but sense perceptions which our feeling lead us to believe. Hume's philosophy is an example of the method of abstraction in its extreme form. In the sphere of ontology, Hume is neither an idealist nor a materialist. He is generally known as a neutral monist. He rejects the existence of the self as well as of God. He also rejects the existence of the material substance. So what we are left with is the plurality of perceptions and impressions. Following the method of abstraction, Hume divides all knowledge into two kinds: (i) relations of ideas and (ii) matters of fact. These are two completely separate kinds of knowledge with no mediating transitions. One is analytic and the other synthetic. Knowledge of mathematics, physics, and geometry, according to Hume, are analytic because these are universal and necessary. In the *Treatise*, Hume not only brings the certainty of Geometry to question, but also expresses doubt in regard to the very capacity of reason. Hume has resolved both empirical and rational knowledge into mere probability.

2.8 KEY WORDS

Scepticism: A philosophical conception questioning the possibility of knowledge of objective reality. Consistent scepticism is close to agnosticism and nihilism.

Ontology: Ontology is the metaphysical inquiry into the nature of being in general.

Enlightenment: A movement in Europe from about 1650 until 1800 that advocated the use of reason and individualism instead tradition and established doctrines.

Causal Laws: Descriptive laws asserting a necessary connection between events of two kinds, of which one is the cause and the other the effect.

Causal Reasoning: Inductive reasoning in which some effect is inferred from what is assumed to be its cause, or some cause is inferred from what is assumed to be its effect.

Cause: Either the necessary condition for the occurrence of an effect or the sufficient condition for the occurrence of an effect, understood as the conjunction of its necessary conditions. The latter meaning is more common, and is the sense of cause used when we wish to produce something or event.

Necessary conditions: Necessary conditions for something are those factors without which that thing cannot exist, as breathing is a necessary condition for human life.

Substance: (1) An individual thing, a unity of matter and form; (2) by contrast with properties, qualities, attributes, a substance is that which possesses or has properties, qualities; (3) by contrast with properties, qualities, a substance is that which requires no other thing in order to exist.

Monism: Any view which holds that one principle is sufficient to explain reality.

Scholasticism: The philosophy of the medieval cathedral schools which attempted to support Christian beliefs with elements of Greek philosophy and with the use of syllogistic reasoning.

2.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCE

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