

Resume and Critical Appraisal of Empiricism

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Introduction

Empiricism holds that only sense knowledge is valid, for it alone securely rests on the impressions of the thinking subject. Hence the question arises: Can an objective metaphysics be established through the analysis of sense modifications? We shall examine this problem in the philosophical teachings of those philosophers called the Empiricists.

Influences of Rationalism, Idealism and Francis Bacon on Empiricism

“British” Empiricism refers to the 18th century philosophical movement in Great Britain which maintained that all knowledge comes from experience. Continental Rationalists maintained that knowledge comes from foundational concepts known intuitively through reason, such as innate ideas. Other concepts are then deductively drawn from these. British Empiricists staunchly rejected the theory of innate ideas and argued that knowledge is based on both sense experience and internal mental experiences, such as emotions and self-reflection. 18th century British Empiricists took their cue from Francis Bacon who, in the very first aphorism of his *New Organon*, hails the primacy of experience, particularly the observation of nature:

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Humans, who are the servants and interpreters of nature, can act and understand no further than they have observed in either the operation or the contemplation of the method and order of nature. Although British Empiricists disavowed innate ideas, in favor of ideas from experience, it is important to note that the Empiricists did not reject the notion of instinct or innateness in general. Indeed, we have inborn propensities which regulate our bodily functions, produce emotions, and even direct our thinking. What Empiricists deny, though, is that we are born with detailed, picture-like, concepts of God, causality, and even mathematics.

Like Bacon, British Empiricists also moved away from deductive proofs and used an inductive method of arguing which was more conducive to the data of experience. In spite of their advocacy of inductive argumentation, though, British Empiricists still made wide use of deductive arguments. Commenting on the use of induction in the history of philosophy, 19th century Scottish philosopher James McCosh argues that induction is more representative of later Scottish philosophy than it is of earlier British Empiricism, specifically that of Locke.

British Empiricism: An Overview

Whereas Galileo and Descartes emphasized the role of *deductive reason* in the acquisition and defense of knowledge, Francis Bacon [1561-1626] emphasized the *experimental and observational* methodology of induction for the acquisition and defense of knowledge. In his *The Great Instauration* [1620], he tries to provide "...a total reconstruction of sciences, arts, and all human knowledge, raised upon the proper foundations." According to him, ...what the sciences stand in need of is a form of induction which shall analyze experience

and take it to pieces, and by a due process of exclusion and rejection lead to an inevitable conclusion. While Bacon contends that *ordinary sensory experience* is not to be trusted, he posits a 'new organon'. (or experimental method) which can correct the errors of ordinary experience: for the subtlety of experiments is far greater than that of the sense itself, even when assisted by exquisite instruments; such experiments, I mean, as are skillfully and artificially devised for the express purpose of determining the point in question. To the immediate and proper perception of sense therefore I do not give much weight; but I contrive that the office of the sense shall be only to judge the experiment, and that the experiment itself shall judge of the thing. And thus I conceive that I perform the office of a true priest of the sense (from which all knowledge in nature must be sought, unless men mean to go mad) and a not unskillful interpreter of its oracles...."

Those however who aspire not to guess and divine, but to discover and know; who propose not to devise mimic and fabulous worlds of their own, but to examine and dissect the nature of this very world itself; must go to facts themselves for everything. Nor can the place of this labor and search and world-wide perambulation be supplied by any genius or meditation or argumentation; no, not if all men's wits could meet in one. This therefore we must have, or the business must be forever abandoned. But up to this day such has been the condition of men in this matter, that it is no wonder if nature will not give herself into their hands.

Bacon is an early example of the second major 'school of thought' in the Early Modern period: the British Empiricists. These empiricists hold that most of our knowledge is empirical (or *a posteriori*). Like the Continental Rationalists, they have a faith in human

reason, but it they have a different conception of the nature of 'reason'—one based upon sensory experience rather than upon *a priori* reasoning. Whereas the Continental Rationalists hold that deductive reason acting upon innate principles or ideas reveals the fundamental truths about the world, the British Empiricists maintain that deductive reasoning "...can only reveal the logical connections between our ideas; it never increases our knowledge of what exists; it only results in claims like 'All triangles have three sides.' There are, of course, many other possible sources of knowledge: revelation, testimony, memory, authority, etc.

We must be careful as we attempt to initially characterize empiricism here, however. It is often said that empiricists assign a central role to experience. This broad characterization is insufficient—when someone says that everything is based on experience (or justified by appeal to experience, or originates in experience, etc.), we must know what concept of experience is being appealed to (atomistic, Romantic, religious, etc.). As Thomas Grey points out in his critical review of several books on Oliver Wendell Holmes:

One must always read Holmes's scientific pronouncements remembering that he was also a Romantic. His skepticism was of the Wordsworthian kind that revels in the sublimity of the unknown, and when he said law had been and likely always would be based largely in 'experience,' he was invoking the Romantic historicist idea of a collective unconscious made up of custom and tradition that could never be fully captured by articulate reason.

As the above discussion of Bacon should illustrate, 'empiricism' in the sense in which we will be using the term refers to philosophers who assign a central role to

sensory experience. It should be noted, however, that there are a variety of distinct ways in which such experience could “play a central role.” Some of these can be usefully distinguished by noting the differences between the following claims:

- a) that human ideas, understanding, or knowledge have their source in sense experience;
- b) that they have their sole source in sense experience;
- c) that human understanding or knowledge, have sense experience as their object, or
- d) that human understanding or knowledge arises when sense experience is (properly) used to test propositions (or hypotheses, or theories), or ideas.

Whichever version of empiricism one adheres to; however, there is a clear-cut contrast with Continental Rationalism. Whereas the rationalists seek to derive knowledge from *a priori* axioms (truths which are held to be ‘indubitable’) by means of strictly deductive procedures; the British Empiricists assign a fundamental role to sensory experience (whether as the source of, object of, or justificatory check upon our knowledge claims). Thus they contend that our knowledge is fundamentally *a posteriori*—as noted above, the empiricists tend to believe that deductive reasoning can only reveal logical connections between our ideas and can not reveal truths about what exists—the latter requires inductive procedures.

Like the Continental Rationalists, the British Empiricists begin with our ideas, but where the rationalists begin with *a priori* innate principles or ideas which are self-evident and form the basis for deductive knowledge, the empiricists ‘begin with’ sensory ideas which form the

source or basis for (or object of, or test for) *a posteriori* knowledge.

Three principal philosophers are associated with British Empiricism: John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume. Occasionally 19th century philosopher J.S. Mill is added to this list. But even restricting the British Empiricist movement to the above figures is somewhat misleading. Until the rise of English idealism around 1850, all British philosophy after Locke bears the marks of his empiricism. More than any other philosopher, Locke was cited as an authority by philosophers, philosophical theologians, and political thinkers.

John Locke (1632-1704)

It should be noted that Locke, while in error on many points regarding the traditional philosophical questions, made a major contribution to the development of modern political philosophy. For instance, Locke holds that rights can be determined from the relations that exist between an infinitely intelligent being (God) and a rational but dependent being. The moral norms are hence rational, and are identified with the divine right and then with natural right. Moral laws must have a due sanction (rewards and punishment) which is imposed on the will in such a manner as to restrain man from diverging from the tendency that leads to his own well-being.

Locke also opposes Thomas Hobbes' theory of society by holding that in the state of nature man did not live in a wild condition, in which right was force. Men even at this time were rational and had the notion of the fundamental rights of life, of liberty, property, and so forth. From man's natural condition to the state of society, there is a progression; but no innovation is involved. The sovereign who fails in his obligation to defend the rights of his subjects is no longer justified in his

sovereignty and may be dismissed by his subjects. Locke is considered the founder of classical liberal politics, and his influence during the centuries following his lifetime has been great, including his philosophical contributions to the founding of the American Republic. Locke had the characteristics of most of the articulate university men of his day: a petulant rejection of Scholasticism without understanding it; a self-confident notion of doing philosophy all over again from the ground up; a readiness to speak with an air of finality upon subjects imperfectly mastered.

Now, the desire to see philosophical doctrines so clearly expressed and proved that none may doubt them is human and natural and even admirable. But the assumption that all philosophy can be reduced to the clarity of A-B-C is fantastic. And the further assumption that all philosophers of past times have been woolly-minded blunderers is ignorance and intolerable "cheek." The old impatience, the old want of humility, which brought in Humanism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and all the other thin veneering which tried to pass for truth are evident in Locke as they are evident in Francis Bacon, René Descartes, and nearly all the philosophers who abandoned an authentic commonsense realism.

Locke had doubtlessly in mind the recasting of philosophy, for he was not wholly pleased with Bacon's plan for empiricism. Still, he seems to have had no detailed plan of his own. Indeed, he did not feel the need of any plan. He was convinced that, once the human mind had learned to grasp things clearly, once it knew its own powers and recognized its true limitations, once it was sure of the nature and extent of its knowledge, the developing of philosophy would be sheerly natural growth. Thus, Locke's special interest was the epistemological question, and he wrote of it in his famous Essay.

Keen as he was on clarity of knowledge, Locke did not escape the fatal confounding of sense-knowledge with intellectual knowledge. And so he proceeded to make confusion more confounded, so that one may take not only different, but opposite, doctrines from the premises his theories afford. Follow him in one set of principles and develop these to the end; you find yourself in idealism, the dream-philosophy which turns reality into shadow. Follow him in another set of thoughts, and you will be involved in sensism and positivism which takes the reality around us as the only thing there is, and denies value to the intellect and to reasoning (even to the reasoning by which you have reached this dull conclusion). This impossible agglomeration of conflicting theories was proposed, explicitly or implicitly, by a man of undoubted mental gifts who was thwarted at the outset by his muddling of the basic question of all philosophy, the epistemological question.

The Epistemology of Locke

Locke strenuously opposed Descartes' doctrine of innate ideas. All knowledge has its origin in experience, in sense-perception. The elements of knowledge are the ideas, and Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, explains the idea in the following manner: "It being that term which, I think, serves best to stand for whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species, or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking."

Descartes placed all sense-perception in the spiritual mind, thus identifying sense-perception with spiritual activity; Locke here does the reverse, by reducing ideas, at least in part, down to the level of sense-perception (phantasm, species). By thus arbitrarily blurring the

nature of the idea so as to include sense-perception, he laid the foundation for sensism, where all thinking is nothing but a form of sensation. Another important feature of this definition of “idea” is, that the “idea” is the object of our understanding, instead of the reality of things being the object of our knowledge.

Ideas, according to Locke, are derived from two sources — sense-perception and reflection; and all knowledge is restricted to ideas.

“Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant about them. Knowledge, then, seems to me to be nothing but the perception of the connection of an agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas. In this alone it consists.”

This means, of course, that we do not really know objects or things-in-themselves, but ideas or conscious states of the mind; and this is the standpoint of Descartes and idealism. Locke, however, did not deny the existence of material substances, such as bodies, nor of spiritual substances, such as the soul and God; but substance is unknowable to us, whether material or immaterial. However, there must be something there, because otherwise the sense experiences that are dropped on the blank sheet could never be analyzed. This type is where all knowledge of objects in the physical world originates. Locke does not take into consideration innate capacities as being something a priori in the mind. Locke states there are three degrees available to the human mind, intuitive knowledge, demonstrative knowledge, and sensitive knowledge. The first type, compounding, is simply the combination of two or more simple ideas to form a more complex idea. John Locke’s work *An Essay*

Concerning Human Understanding was said to usher in the Enlightenment. It is important to realize that he did not claim that his philosophy could discover all certainties, but that it could discover those things that were certainly beyond our comprehension. For Locke this type of knowledge is the most certain, and provides the foundation of all other knowledge. For Locke all ideas are classified as either simple or complex. These are formed by comparing one idea to another. Locke answers this question by stating that, ideas will only resemble external objects in the world to the degree God wills it. Demonstrative knowledge is the degree of knowledge we can know by revealing through a process of logical steps, certain certainties. These ideas are formed by three different activities of the mind, compounding, relating, and abstracting. Simple ideas according to Locke are the most fundamental mental particles. The idea of a grape would be formed by the simpler ideas of roundness, red, and soft.

“Our idea of substance is equally obscure, or none at all, in both; it is but a supposed I-know-not-what, to support those ideas we call accidents...By the complex idea of extended, figured, colored, and all other sensible qualities, which is all that we know of it, we are as far from the idea of the substance of the body, as if we knew nothing at all.”

While Locke, therefore, admits the existence of material and spiritual ‘substances,’ he asserts that they are unknowable; ‘accidents’ or ‘phenomena’ alone are knowable; he is in last instance an empirical phenomenalist. Locke was an analytical thinker. His main interest was in illuminating knowledge, examining its validity. The metaphysical factors of mind were of less account as a problem to him. He was the first to give logic for Empiricism. Granted this, it would be impossible

to construct metaphysics of objective realities. But Locke, prescinding from what he had established in the question of knowledge, attempts a demonstration of the existence of God, of the world, and of the knowing subject.

Primary and Secondary Qualities

Locke is remembered for his distinguishing of primary and secondary sense-qualities in bodily things. In his study upon the nature of knowledge, he had constantly to face such questions as: are sense-objects really what they appear to be; is the grass really green; is the whirling wheel actually in motion; is the stone truly solid? Locke decided that there are certain qualities common to all bodies (impenetrability, extension, shape, rest, motion) and these are primary qualities which exist as objective things. He said that there are also other qualities not found in all bodies alike (color, sound, taste, odor, temperature, resistance) and these are secondary qualities which are largely subjective, that is, not so much objective things as the perceivings or feelings of the person who senses them.

Locke's distinction of sense-qualities as primary and secondary may serve us as a mere convenient list. But his theory of their objective reality cannot stand. For we are wholly unaware of the primary qualities except through the medium of the secondary. And if the secondary be unreliable (being largely subjective) we have no reason to put any trust in the actuality of the primary qualities. Locke's theory of sense-qualities points the way to the self-contradiction of complete skepticism.

Berkeley [1685-1753]

John Locke had constructed a theory of knowledge in which the subject was closed up within himself. The object of such knowledge was consequently ideas

(subjective impressions) and not things. If ideas are the immediate object of our knowledge, is it ever possible to admit an external reality corresponding to such ideas?

George Berkeley denied this theory and reduced the reality of the external world to the existence of finite spirits and the infinite spirit (God). There is no material world. For Berkeley, even Locke's concept of substance was merely a name devoid of reality. There exists only the world of spirits, dominated by God, the Supreme Spirit.

In order to show why the philosophy of Berkeley results in an immaterial spiritualistic world, it must be kept in mind that his philosophical meditations were concentrated on solving the religious problem. He sought to restore spiritual and Christian values in the society of his time, in which the so-called freethinkers, relying on Locke's theory of knowledge and on his concept of primary and secondary qualities, fell into incredulity and actual immorality.

Berkeley tried to prove to these materialists that in Locke's theory of knowledge there is no place for their idol — matter — and that hence their whole philosophy is vain. All that exists of reality is a communion of spirits to whom God is revealed immediately, and to whom He communicates the ideas they possess.

Berkeley's starting point in philosophy is Locke's theory of language. According to Locke words have meaning by standing for ideas, and general words such as sortal predicates, correspond to abstract general ideas. The ability to form such ideas is the most importance between humans and dumb animals.

Berkley extracts from Locke's Essay two different accounts of the meanings of general terms. One, which

we may call the representational theory, is that a general idea is a particular idea which has been made general by being made to stand for all of a kind, in the way in which a geometry teacher draws a particular triangle to represent all triangles. Another, which we may call culminative theory, is that a general idea is a particular idea which contains only what is common to all particulars of the same kind: the abstract idea of 'man' eliminates what is peculiar to Peter, John and James, and retains only what is common to them all.

Theory of Knowledge

The most interesting and original part of Berkeley's thought is his theory of knowledge. He accepts the Empiricist teaching of Locke that the immediate object of our knowledge is ideas (subjective impressions) but rejects the distinction of Locke regarding primary (objective) and secondary (subjective) qualities.

The primary qualities (time, space, motion) are not perceptible separately from the secondary qualities (color, sound, tactile qualities, etc.). Indeed we know the primary qualities only in conjunction with and through the secondary qualities. If we know means to perceive subjective impressions, such impressions cannot be divided into two categories, one subjective and the other objective; all must be impressions felt by the subject, and hence all are subjective.

Furthermore, Berkeley refuses to accept Locke's concept of substance as a mysterious objective substratum which would be the cause of our impressions. Berkeley asks whether such a material substratum, separate from our sensations, can exist. If it is separate from our impressions, then it is not perceptible, is reduced to a term void of significance, and is unknowable and inconceivable. If it is connected with our impressions as

a support of those impressions, then it resides in the subject and material substances are cognitive phenomena and hence are subjective.

It is impossible, therefore, that matter be something existing in itself, objective, inert, devoid of thought. When we say that a thing exists, we mean nothing more than that such a thing is perceived by us. The being of things consists in this act of perception: "Omne esse est percipi." (To BE is to be PERCEIVED.)

Primary or secondary qualities, substance and impressions are nothing other than acts of perception, that is, mental facts; and their existence signifies their being perceived as mental acts. Berkeley's theory of knowledge thus reduces all reality to phenomena: The material world exists only as a cognitive act, produced and existing in a mental act, and hence is subjective and not objective.

Berkeley denied general or universal ideas. The mind cannot represent a general color which would be neither red nor white nor any determined color, such as the universal concept of color must be. Hence, only particular, determined ideas exist. The so-called universal ideas are names, not ideas, and exist neither in the mind (because they are not ideas) nor outside the mind (because it is absurd that there be a color which is not determined).

Berkeley's nominalism is more radical than Locke's in so far as he denies all value to general and abstract ideas, whereas Locke had only imposed restrictions upon them.

The Nature of the Universe

Berkeley, while denying the existence of a material world and reducing it to a phenomenon of knowledge, did not deny the existence of the world of spirits. He believed

that he had proved the existence of the subjective spirit from the very presence of ideas, for ideas can be produced only by a spirit. Having thus assured himself of the existence of his own spirit, Berkeley devoted himself to determining its nature: the spirit is both active, a producer of ideas, and passive, a receptacle for ideas. Its activity is revealed in the imagination and in the memory, with which we produce or recall ideas, but more still in the coordination of ideas. Passivity, as we have said, is revealed in the fact that the spirit receives ideas that it has not produced. For example, it is not within my power to see or not to see the objects that are in my room.

The passivity of the spirit gave Berkeley the means of proving the existence of other finite spirits, independent of his own, and the existence of God. In fact, he asked, what is the origin of these ideas that are imposed on my spirit and of which I am not the origin — for instance, the objects I mentioned before as being present in my room?

They are produced by the will of other spirits, since I perceive, besides my own spirit, other particular agents like myself, who participate with me in the production of many ideas. Besides, there are ideas that I perceive which are not only not produced by my spirit, but are not produced by any finite spirit — for instance, the regularity of natural phenomena. Fire always burns, independently of any will. Such ideas presuppose a cause superior to all finite spirits — God, who exists, whose infinite will produces the order and harmony and constancy of natural phenomena.

Having thus demonstrated the existence of God, Berkeley believed that he had solved all the difficulties that could be raised against his idealistic phenomenalism. If, for example, one asks whether the objects in my room exist

when I am outside and there is no one in my house, Berkeley answers in the affirmative; because if the objects are not perceived by a finite spirit they are perceived by God. If one should inquire about the difference between real fire and painted fire, why one burns and the other does not, Berkeley would have answered that God, the producer and supreme ruler of all ideas, unites to the first (real fire) the idea of burning, and denies it to the second (fire depicted in a painting).

In a word, the phenomenal world of Berkeley is not unlike the phenomenal world that everyone knows, with this difference: While commonly it is believed that natural phenomena are the product of a physical, material world, for Berkeley this material world does not exist. That which we attribute to matter, he says, must be referred to God, the exciter and revealer of ideas corresponding to material things. We are on the ground of the occasionalism of Malebranche: God presents to our souls — produces in them — the ideas that impress us. The constant relationship with which God determines the ideas of our spirits are the so-called laws of nature. They are the language with which God reveals Himself and speaks to us. Thus Berkeley believed that he had carried out the work he had set for himself: to justify theism against the attacks of incredulity; and to point out the emptiness of materialism by proving that the world as conceived by the materialist does not exist.

But did Berkeley really attain his goal? The existence of the (finite) spirit as something distinct from ideas implies the concept of spiritual substance; the activity and passivity of the spirit imply the concept of cause; the affirmation of the existence of God implies both the concepts of substance and of cause. Now, all these concepts should have been established in a preliminary metaphysical study; this Berkeley did not do, and because

of his empiristic position, he could not do it. The development of Empiricism toward complete phenomenalism stops halfway in Berkeley.

It was David Hume who drew the logical consequences from Empiricism, and affirmed complete phenomenalism not only in reference to matter, as Berkeley had done, but also in reference to spiritual substance, the concept of cause, and the concept of God.

Berkeley feared to allow universals any validity. He denies universals and axioms when there is no necessity for this denial. The weakness of his philosophical doctrine is that it leaves too much to be explained, especially the explanation of the outer (external) world. Berkeley's fundamental premise — the mind can know only its own ideas — has been called the "egocentric predicament." This is the predicament of one trying to imagine something unknown. Two lines of thought proceed from Berkeley's philosophy:

From his weaker side — the denial of universals, leads to David Hume.

From his stronger side — the supremacy of the spirit, leads to and ends in German idealism, Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hegel.

David Hume [1711-1776]

For Hume, custom and tradition provide structure to the mind by guiding the manner in which experiences are organized and synthesized. Commonsense concepts embody the accumulated sum of experiences assimilated by prior generations new generations may supplement them, but must not ignore them. Custom and tradition, however, have no greater authority than the experiences they summarize. Should entirely new kinds of experience

emerge (for example, as a result of new instruments like the electron microscope or new technologies like magnetic resonance imaging), and then customary habits of thought would require appropriate modification. Most Empiricists sharply distinguish facts and values. Value judgments derive from “irrational” elements of the mind such as feelings, emotions or attitudes, which lack experiential validation. Purely descriptive and verifiable, facts are statements that allegedly conform to experience. Many Empiricists insist that evaluative claims cannot be derived from mere facts; they are emotional reactions to facts, which may readily differ for different persons. Only if ethical claims could be reduced to peoples’ actual desires or to the maximization of actually experienced pleasures could Empiricists find them defensible. This is why later empiricists e.g., J. S. Mill and James, gravitated toward utilitarianism in moral theory. Empiricists generally interpret the mind to be passive, imprinted with representations of real objects. Reason’s major function is to discover similarities and differences among representations. In this way it creates concepts through grouping similarities into types and modest generalizations noting constant conjunctions to better organize future experience.

Causation

If we look for the origin of the idea of causation, Hume says, we find that it cannot be any particular inherent quality of objects; for objects of the most different kinds can be causes and effects. We must look instead for relationships between objects. We find indeed, that causes and effects must be contiguous to each other and that causes must be prior to their effects. But this is not enough: we feel that there must be a necessary connection between cause and effect, though the nature denies that whatever begins to exist must have a cause

of existence. If there is no absurdity in conceiving something coming into existence, or undergoing a change, without any cause at all, there is a fortiori no absurdity in conceiving of an event occurring without a cause of some particular kind. Because many different effects are logically conceivable as arising from a particular cause, only experience leads us to expect the actual one.

Paradoxical as it may seem, it is not our inference that depends on the necessary connection between cause and effect, but the necessary connection that depends on the inference we draw from the one to the other. Hume offers not one, but two definitions of causation. The first is this: a cause is an object precedent and contiguous to another and where all the objects resembling the former are placed in a like relation of priority and contiguity to those objects that resemble the latter. In this definition, nothing is said about necessary connection, and no reference is made to the activity of the mind. Accordingly, we are offered a second, more philosophical definition. A cause is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it in the imagination that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other.

It is noticeable that in this second definition of cause the mind is said to be determined to form one idea by the presence of another idea. The originality and power of Hume's analysis of causation is concealed by the language in which it is embedded, and which suffers from all the obscurity of the machinery of impressions and ideas. But we can separate out from the psycho-logical apparatus three novel principles of great importance.

- a. Cause and effect must be distinct existences, each conceivable without the other

- b. The causal relation is to be analyzed in terms of contiguity, precedence, and constant conjunction.
- c. It is not necessary truth that every beginning of existence has a cause.

Each of these principles deserves, and has received, intense philosophical scrutiny. Some of them were as we shall see, subjected to searching criticism by Kant and others have been modified or rejected by more recent philosophers. But to this day the agenda for the discussion of the causal relationship is the one set by Hume.

Given Hume's theory of causation we may wonder what right 'give rise to' has to appear in this definition. Yet if we replace 'we knowingly give rise to any new motion, with any new motion is observed to arise' the definition no longer looks at all plausible. Given Hume's official philosophy of mind and his official account of causation, there seems to be no room for talking of 'secret springs' of action. In fact, his thesis that the will is causally necessitated is difficult to make consistent either with his own definition of the free will or with his own theory of causation.

Hume's doubts about causation, induction and the self can also be directed to the "laws" of logic and to the sanctity of the individual. The exact status of logical laws vexed Empiricists. They should regard them as generalizations from actual thought processes which are frequently flawed, but logic's certainty seems more deeply rooted than this. Skepticism about the foundations of logic also threatens the legitimacy of scientific reasoning. Also, since causation is essential to the mechanistic world-view, Hume's skepticism threatened this as well. Similarly, Hume's doubts about the existence of distinct personal selves threaten the legitimacy of individual rights and the entire first-person standpoint.

Hume has been much studied and imitated in the twentieth century. His hostility to religion and metaphysics, in particular, has made him many admirers. But his importance in the history of philosophy depends on his analysis of causation, and on the intrepidity with which he followed the presuppositions of empiricism wheresoever they led.

Hume's vague philosophy has a very modern sound: a collection of impressions collected nowhere; contents of a mind which is not a container. Here we have the smug unintelligibility of the modern antirealist's definition of mind as "a cross-section of the environment." Hume holds that the only thing that can be said, with full certainty, to exist is our perceptions (impressions and ideas). In and among these perceptions there is no causal connection; indeed, there is no knowable causality anywhere. If things outside us really do exist, there is no proof of their existence available to us. His theoretical empiricism concludes with the collapse of all rational understanding; it lead inevitably to Skepticism and, of course Subjectivism and Relativism, the twin scourges of modern and recent philosophy.

Conclusion

Empiricism defended the assumptions of and methods of science and developed a complimentary theory of mind. Oddly, as scientists made significant strides in explaining nature, empiricist philosophers became more skeptical about the foundations of scientific thought. Hume, for example, came to doubt whether causes really exist and whether induction could be legitimated. He believed that humans attribute causation to regularly recurring events that are constantly conjoined. The only defensible empirical claim is that one event typically follows another (rather than being caused by it). Similarly, there could

be no experimental assurance that future conjunctions of sensations will resemble past ones. At best, this could only be contingent fact. Likewise, he came to doubt the existence of a self that unifies experiences because he could not discover it in experience. (Later Hume reversed himself, suggesting that experience does not always speak with one voice.) Hume's skepticism epitomizes the entire Empiricist movement.

Three claims define empiricism: all knowledge derives from experience- typically from sensory experience; the mind is a 'blank slate' prior to experience so that concepts emerge via abstraction from and association among sensations; and sensations are atomic and simple or at least can be reduced to atomic and simple elements. By grounding all knowledge in sensory experience and suggesting that experience may only represent or mirror the external world, empiricism reinforced Descartes' first-person stand point and his conception that persons have privileged access to their own sensations. However, by denying the existence of innate ideas, Empiricism departs from Descartes by limiting the importance of reason. 'Concepts' derive from associations of similar experiences. If certain concepts-such as causality or the self – are not directly experienced, then they may have no genuine application. Empiricism generally assumes that the mind's structure derives from experience; since it lacks structure prior to experience, different cognitive organizations may result from different arrays of experience. Different cultures and civilizations thus may acquire different concepts because they interact with different environments. The only explanation for similarities in cross-cultural concepts is a common material world that engenders experience. If this common world were lacking, then intercultural and even interpersonal understanding might become impossible. The third claim – concerning simple, atomic 'ideas'

(raw elements of experience) – denies that experience possesses any organic wholeness. Relationships among experiences must be established externally by comparison with previous experiences. Close attention to experience, however, may reveal essential interconnections, especially when experience is broadened to include imagination, desire, emotion and volition. This atomistic analysis is often extended to social theory by interpreting individuals to be the fundamental social atoms of society and taking all social relationships to be the result of explicit contracts. Although this individualistic position can ground fundamental human rights, it often remains oblivious to the need for strong institutions to guarantee such rights.

Continental philosophers often claim that Empiricists overlook the temporal unity of and internal relations among experiences, and that they presuppose an arbitrarily limited conception of experience and of their possible combinations. Phenomenologists, for example, discover a directedness (or intentionality) in experience and a complex nested structure among conscious states. These features are rarely acknowledged in Empiricism. They also insist on examining the full range of experiences, including emotions, intentions, valuations, and imagination, and on exploring the inter-subjective sources of experiential unity which are only minimally foreseen in Hume's notion of custom.

Because Empiricism produces skepticism about its own greatest achievement, science, some continental philosophers develop an alternative to conception of systematic knowledge. Hegel, Marx, phenomenologists, structuralists and others explore alternative conceptions of a 'scientific System', requiring an expanded rationality and revealing structural relations among phenomena that are neither causal nor conceptual. Continental

philosophers also resist the sharp Empiricist posture that appearances represent reality and thus actual things in themselves cannot be directly known, many continental philosophers reject this division. They insist that experience reveals reality as it is, or at least genuine features of and perspectives on it.

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