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LOCKE, BERKELEY AND HUME: A BRIEF SURVEY OF EMPIRICISM

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ABSTRACT

During the seventh and eighteenth centuries, philosophy certainly had its fair share of rationalist thinkers, particularly of the Platonist variety. However, philosophy was soon dominated by an alternative and more scientific view that knowledge is gained primarily through the five senses. We see this presumption in Francis Bacon's statement that in our efforts to understand nature "we can act and understand no further than we have…observed in either the operation or the contemplation of the method and order of nature." Direct experience, therefore, is foundational for obtaining knowledge, and this position is known as empiricism. During the first half of the 18th century, three great philosophers namely, Locke, Berkeley and Hume, argued for this approach, thus forming a philosophical movement known as British empiricism. Contrary to the rationalist philosophers, these empiricists largely denied the role of innate ideas and deduction in the quest for knowledge. Instead, they argued that knowledge comes from sensory experience and inductive reasoning.

Keywords: Empiricism, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Knowledge, Idea

INTRODUCTION

Empiricism and rationalism are two main rivals with regards to origin or source and justification of knowledge. An empiricist theory of knowledge holds that all knowledge arises through and is reducible to experience, while a rationalist theory of knowledge holds that some rationally accepted knowledge must have a sufficient reason for its existence, the principle of sufficient reason being *a priori*.

As I observed elsewhere, empiricism is the view that all human knowledge is derived from (empirical) experience or the view that all knowledge are *a posteriori*.[1] Concepts are said to be "a posteriori" if they can be applied only on the basis of experience, and they are called "a priori" if they can be applied independently of experience. Beliefs or propositions are said to be *a posteriori* if they are knowable only on the basis of experience and *a priori* if they are knowable independently of experience. Thus, empiricism is the view that all concepts, or all rationally acceptable beliefs or propositions, are *a posteriori* rather than *a priori*. As a theory of justification, therefore, it views belief as depending ultimately and necessarily on experience for its justification. In both everyday attitudes and philosophical theories, the

[1] H.C. Ezebuilo, "The Rationalist and Empiricist Epistemological Strategies and their Implications in Ethics," *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol.6, no.4, 2020.

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experiences referred to by empiricists are, however, principally those arising from the activities of the sense organs.[2]

A posteriori knowledge is the knowledge that is gained through empirical experience. Knowledge acquired by means of any of the senses is a posteriori. This includes knowledge acquired through seeing objects, hearing sounds, tasting things, feeling something or smelling something. Most of our knowledge is of course a posteriori. However, I have pointed out elsewhere that the senses alone cannot furnish us with knowledge. It is reason that interprets our sense experiences and gives them meaning before they can become knowledge. Until reason performs this role, they are simply raw data without meaning.[3]

Rather than preserve what is thought to be an inaccurate distinction, empiricism recasts the distinction between *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge into the distinction between analytic knowledge and synthetic knowledge. Through this distinction empiricism denies the rationalist claim that *a priori* knowledge is superior to *a posteriori* knowledge. Indeed, the distinction provides the basis to argue the precise opposite. The statements that the rationalists cite as paradigmatic *a priori* knowledge include: A triangle has three sides, 3 + 3 = 6, and so on.[4] These, empiricists see as analytic statements.

An analytic statement is one where the statement analyzes the concept in question. Thus, the statement, "A triangle has three sides" does no more than analyze the concept, triangle; and the statement 3 + 3 = 6 does no more than analyze the concept, six. Moreover, the empiricist argues, these statements never do more than analyze the concepts in question. In a real sense then these statements provide no additional knowledge, all the knowledge that analytic statements contain is given within the original concept the statement analyzes.[5]

Synthetic statements, in contrast, do provide additional knowledge – knowledge that goes further than the original concept. Consider the statement: the temperature outside is 75^{o}. This is a synthetic statement since, while there has to be some temperature outside, there is no reason that it has to be 75^{o} rather than some other temperature. The concepts 'temperature' and 'outside' then have no intrinsic connection to 75^{o} (or some specific outside temperature), rather what the temperature depends upon are various other environmental conditions. So the statement such as "The temperature outside is 75^{o}," provides us with additional (and sometimes valuable) information. All synthetic statements then share the characteristics that, because there is no intrinsic or logical connection between the elements of the statements, these statements provide information about a connection or relation that is unavailable in the original concepts themselves.

Given that analytic statements reveal no additional insights, while synthetic statements do provide novel ideas and associations,[6] it should come as no surprise that empiricism argues that empirical knowledge is superior to *a priori* knowledge rather than the reverse (or to be more precise, that synthetic knowledge is superior to analytic knowledge). As I have noted

[2] C. Umezinwa (ed.), *Essays in Philosophy* (Enugu: Afro-Obis Publications, 2005), p.117.
[3] H.C. Ezebuilo, op.cit.
[4] Thomas I. White, *Discovering Philosophy* (Upper Saddler River: Prentice-Hall, 1996), p.199.
[5] Ibid. p.208.
[6] Ibid.

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elsewhere, with the focus on analytic truth, rationalism never quite reaches the real universe in the manner that synthetic statements are able to do, according to this analysis.[7]

The debate between rationalism and empiricism continues, and it is quite possible some issues will be impossible to resolve, at least given our finite human intellect. To the degree that it is possible to determine the correct solutions to these issues, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell concludes that the score is even. Russell argues that while it seems clear that the empiricists are correct that all knowledge must arise through experience, it also seems obvious that there is some knowledge that it is impossible to reduce to experience, that is, reason is able to use experience to produce knowledge that it is nevertheless impossible to prove through experience.[8]

This work is divided into seven sections. The first is the introduction where we used the empiricist synthetic-analytic distinction as a background of study. The section examines empiricism as an epistemological theory. The third, fourth and fifth sections attempt a representation of the empirical theories of Locke, Berkeley and Hume respectively. The sixth highlights some problems with empiricism, while the last section is the conclusion.

What is Empiricism

Empiricism is the view that all knowledge originates in experience, that all knowledge are about or applicable to things that can be experienced, or the belief that all rationally acceptable beliefs or propositions are justifiable or knowable only through experience. This definition accords with the derivation of the term 'empiricism' from the ancient Greek word *empeiria*, meaning experience. Empiricism is the knowledge acquired through sense perception, that is, through any of the five senses. Empirical knowledge is always knowledge of an individual object rather than knowledge of a class of objects. For example an empirical knowledge of a chair is of a particular chair – this particular chair that I am seeing or touching, etc, or these particular chairs, but not chairs in general. This, according to Omoregbe, is because the sense organs can only present us with particular concrete objects.[9] The senses bring us into contact with the empirical world through the act of sense perception.

But are the things we perceive exactly the way we perceive them; that is, do the qualities we perceive in things exactly exist in these things or are they products of our own minds. For instance, when I perceive a blue object, is the blueness really inherent in that object or in my sense of sight? According to Democritus and Berkeley,[10] the qualities we perceive in things are not really inherent in them; they only appear to have them but in reality these qualities come from our senses. Some philosophers (neo-realists) on the other hand have concluded that things are exactly the way they appear to us. They believe that there is contradiction in nature and therefore things have contradictory aspects in them – for instance, something can be both hot and cold at the same time.

[7] Ibid.
[8] Cf. H.C. Ezebuilo, op.cit.
[9] J. Omoregbe, *Epistemology: A Systematic and Historical Study* (Ikeja: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 1998), p.24.
[10] H.C. Ezebuilo, op.cit.

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Hence, Omoregbe noted that while, for example,[11] Democritus and Berkeley would say, "The wine tastes sweet to me tastes sour to you; therefore, I do not perceive that it is sweet and you do not perceive that it is sour, and the wine is neither sweet nor sour;" Protagoras would say, "The wine that tastes sweet to me tastes sour to you, hence, I perceive that it is sweet and you perceive that it is sour, and therefore, no boy can say absolutely either that the wine is sweet or that the wine is sour, and one can say relatively that whereas it is true for me that the wine is sweet, it is true for you that that the wine is sour." Some neo-realists would say, "The wine that tastes sweet to me tastes sour to you, therefore, one must say that there are contradictions in nature; one must say of the wine not only that it is both sweet and not sweet, but also that it is both sour and not sour."

These are extreme positions. It is however a fact, and here we agree with Chisholm that the way we perceive things depends to a certain extent on our own psychological and physiological conditions.[12] We know for example that if someone is suffering from acute malaria even sweet things taste bitter to such a one, while everything appears yellow to someone suffering from yellow fever. Aristotle, however, criticized the extremists' positions when he says:

> The earlier students of nature were mistaken in their view that without sight there was no white or black, without taste no sour. This statement of theirs is partly true partly false. Sense and sensible objects are analogous terms, i.e. they may denote either potentialities or actualities. The statement is true of the later, false of the former. This ambiguity they wholly failed to notice.[13]

Aristotle maintains that the qualities we perceive in things are properties actually inherent in them. It is because they have these properties that they appear to us the way they do. Hence a number of people viewing a tree under normal conditions, for example, would see it as green because greenness is one of the properties of a tree. It is in virtue of this that it appears to us as green. On the other hand, such terms as white, black, sweet, sour refer to the way in which things are perceived rather than the properties they have.[14] Thus, although things do really have these dispositions (or qualities) inherent in them, their appearing to us the way they do also depends on our psychological and physiological conditions.

This was well brought out by Omorogbe in line with Immanuel Kant.[15] For example, the direct object of the sense of sight is simply color. When we look we can only see color. That is all that the sense of sight can furnish us with. It is reason which tells us that what we are seeing is a tree, a table, a blackboard, an animal, etc. again, the direct object of the sense of hearing is sound. The ears do not tell us the sound of what it is or where the sound comes from. For example, we hear the sound of an aeroplane, the sound of a gunshot or that of

[11] Ibid.
[12] Roderick H. Chisholm, "Theory of Knowledge" *Foundations of Philosophy Series* (Englewood, Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966), p.72 cited in H.C. Ezebuilo, op.cit.
[13] Cf. H.C. Ezebuilo, op.cit.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

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thunder. It is our reason that tells us, for example, that the sound we are hearing is that of thunder and not that of aeroplane or gunshot. Our ears only register the sound without telling us the meaning of the sound. The sample applies to all the other senses. When a blind man touches something the sense of touch does not tell him what he is touching. It is his reason that interprets and tells him what he is touching. Sense perception requires the cooperation of reason in order to produce knowledge.

Empiricism denies the rationalist distinction between empirical and *a priori* knowledge. All knowledge, the empiricist argues, arises through, and is reducible to, sense perception. Thu, there is no knowledge that arises through reason alone. It is essential to be clear here: it is not the existence of reason that empiricism denies, or that reason has a role in knowledge acquisition, rather it is that reason has some special access to knowledge over and above the knowledge that experience provides. All empiricists acknowledge that human beings possess reason; reason is the instrument that allows us to manipulate and augment the knowledge that experience provides. Knowledge, however, has its origins in experience rather than in reason.

As Macann rightly noted, empiricism begins with the distinction between sense data and ideas.[16] Sense data represent the basic information that the senses present to the mind through our perceptual experiences, that is, sights, tastes, textures, sounds, and odors. To illustrate, suppose that one sees a blue glass. This sense experience is reducible to the visual act and the sense data (i.e., the information that the visual act contains). In this case the sense data/the information that the visual act contain are that there is a 'blueness' and a 'glassness'. At this stage there is no conscious recognition that one sees a blue glass, all there is, is the pure sense data that the senses present to the mind through the sense experiences. The mind processes and represents each individual sense datum as an idea, in this case the ideas are: blue and glass. The mind then associates and combines the ideas it creates through sense experience to create the conscious idea: blue glass.

To the empiricist, sense data represent the basic material that the mind uses to construct the ideas that comprise all our knowledge.[17] Thus, no matter what the idea is, it is possible to trace that idea to some sense experience(s). While the precise details differ, these are the basic cognitive mechanisms that the principal empiricist philosophers (John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume) all appeal to in order to explain the process through which sense data becomes knowledge. In this way they deny the existence of *a priori* knowledge.

Although empiricism denies the existence of *a priori* knowledge, as knowledge that depends upon no experience, there is still the recognition that some knowledge goes further than experience in the sense that it is not about experience. Nevertheless, empiricism argues that such knowledge is still reducible to experience.[18] Again, this is the crucial notion that it is possible to trace all knowledge, whether or not it is about experience, to some particular experience or experiences. Indeed, some of the empiricists argue that whatever knowledge that cannot be so *reduced* is nothing but nonsense.[19]

John Locke

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

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One of the greatest figures in empiricism was John Locke (1632-1704). Locke wrote on a range of subjects including politics, religion, economics and education. His fame as an empiricist philosopher, although, rests on his 1689 work *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* where he expounded the empiricist position that there are no innate ideas and all knowledge comes from experience. We will look at this in what follows.

No Innate Ideas

Throughout the history of philosophy it was common to hold that human beings are born with a special set of ideas – innate ideas – that guide us in our quest for truth and certainty. In ancient times, Plato held that we have an inborn knowledge of the perfect forms of things.[20] Descartes held that we have an innate idea of ourselves and of infinite perfection.[21] It is on this concept and long history of innatism that Locke lunched a powerful attack. For Locke, we simply have no innate ideas, and all notions that we have come to us through experience.

There are two types of innate ideas that philosophers commonly allege, which become Locke's immediate concern, namely speculative ones and practical innate ideas. Good examples of speculative innate ideas, he argues, are the foundational logical concepts that are sometimes dubbed "laws of thought" and associated with Aristotle. Chief among these is the law of identity which simply states that an object is the same as itself, or, in more formal terms, A=A. Next, there is the law of non-contradiction, which Aristotle himself states as follows: "It is impossible for the same thing to belong and not to belong at the same time to the same thing and in the same respect."[22] The point can be stated formally as "not (P and not-P)," that is, it is not the case that P and its opposite not-P obtain at the same time. It is impossible for the chair in front of me to exist and not to exist at the same time. The second type of alleged innate idea involves practical ones, that is, ideas that regulate moral practices.

Locke has two main arguments against the innateness of ideas, both speculative and practical. First, he argues that people in fact do not universally hold to these ideas, contrary to what defenders of innate ideas typically claim. This is particularly obvious with the laws of thought, which, according to Locke, children and mentally challenged people have no conception of whatsoever. He said:

> If therefore children and idiots have souls, have minds, with those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths. Which since they do not, it is evident that there are no such impressions. For if they are not notions naturally imprinted, how can they be innate? and if they are notions imprinted, how can they be unknown? To say a notion is imprinted on the mind, and yet at the same time to say, that the mind is ignorant

[20] Plato, *Five Dialogues*. J.L. Blau (ed.), (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981).
[21] Rene Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).
[22] J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 1.2.12.

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> of it, and never yet took notice of it, is to make this impression nothing.[23]

Locke's second argument is that it makes no sense to hold that such ideas lie dormant within us and then blossom when we reach the right age, contrary to what defenders of innate ideas commonly claim. Again, particularly with the law of thought, he noted that children reason perfectly well regarding identity and non-contradiction, yet at the same time, they are completely incapable of articulating those specific ideas. If these ideas were really innate, then children should be able to verbally express them. As Locke states it, "How many instances of the use of reason may we observe in children, a long time before they have any knowledge of this maxim, 'That it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be?'"[24] Also, it is obvious that many adults have reached the so called age of reason, such as the illiterate and those from primitive societies, and yet lack these ideas, he avers. These people "pass many years, even of their rational age, without ever thinking on this and the like general propositions."[25]

Simple and Complex Ideas

According to John Locke, then, we should completely reject the theory of innate ideas and instead look for the true source of our ideas within human experience. His basic position, which encapsulates the entire empiricist approach, is that the mind is from birth a blank slate (or sheet of "white paper" in his words), which gets filled with information through experience.[26] However, the process by which we form our ideas through experience has two main steps.[27] We first acquire simple ideas through experience, and then recombine those simple ideas in different ways to create more complex ideas.

Simple ideas are the building blocks from which all other ideas are formed, and, for Locke, there are two main sources of simple ideas.[28] The first and most obvious source is that they come from sensation, specifically our five senses which give us perceptions of colors, taste, smells, tactile solidity. The color of blue, the taste of sweetness, the feeling of smoothness, the sound of a high-pitched tune are all basic sensory experiences that are building blocks for our ideas about the external world. Second, there are simple ideas that come to us through reflecting on our mental processes; these are ideas of reflection or introspection as we now call them. I can shut my eyes and think about how my mind operates: how I perceive things through my senses, how I think about problems, how I doubt questionable ideas, how I believe reasonable ideas, how I will to perform actions, etc. according to Locke:

> This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself; and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] James Fieser, *The History of Philosophy: A Short Survey,* https://www.utm.edu/staff/jfieser/class/110/8-empiricism.htm
[27] J. Locke, opcit.
[28] Ibid. 2.1.3.

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> external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called internal sense.[29]

According to Locke, therefore, some of our simple ideas come to us solely through sensation without any introspective reflection, such as our perceptions of color, sounds and smells. Others come solely through introspective reflection. There is an especially interesting group of simple ideas that we can get either through sensation or introspective reflection. Pleasure or pain is good examples. I can feel physical pain through my senses as when a candle flame burns me; I can also experience emotional pain in my mind when a loved one dies. Other ideas that we get through both sensation and reflection are existence, unity, and succession.

According to Locke, there are innumerable simple perceptions that flood into our minds through sensation and reflection. But as we store these simple ideas in our memories, they combine mechanically in our minds to form new ones which he calls complex ideas. There are three specific mental processes that form complex ideas.[30] First, some are the result of simply combining together more simple ideas. For example, I can get a complex idea of an apple by combining the simple ideas of roundness, redness, sweetness, and moistness. Second, some complex ideas involve relations that we get from comparing two things, such as the ideas (or notions) of "larger" and "smaller" that I get when comparing two apples of different sizes. Third, there are complex ideas that result from the mental process of abstraction, such as when I arrive at the abstract notion of "roundness" by looking at an apple and stripping away all of its attributes except for its being round. As the mind then forms complex ideas from simple ones, the complex ideas will be of two types, namely ideas of substances and ideas of modes. Ideas of substances are those of individual objects such as rocks, trees, books, etc. ideas of modes are attributes of objects that cannot exist independently of them, such as roundness, hotness, etc.

Primary and Secondary Qualities

One of Locke's contributions to epistemology is his development of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities of objects. The issue involves a distinction between qualities of objects that actually belong to the object itself, and qualities of objects that we impose on them. Suppose, for example, that I made a list of the qualities that I perceived in an apple: round shape, red color, smooth texture, and sweet taste. It also has a particular size and weight. Some of these qualities are part of the object itself, and others are qualities that I am imposing o the apple.

According to John Locke, a primary quality is an attribute of a physical body that is inseparable from the physical body, and includes solidity, shape, motion, number. These are components that an object retains, regardless of how we might modify the object. He illustrates this by considering changes that we might impose on a grain of wheat:

> Take a grain of wheat, divide it into two parts, each part has still solidity, extension, figure, and mobility: divide it again, and it retains still the same qualities; and so divide it on, till the parts becomes inseparable; they

[29] Ibid.
[30] J. Fieser, op.cit.

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> must retain still each of them all those qualities. For division…can never take away either, solidity, extension, figure, or mobility from any body, but only makes two or more distinct separate masses of matter; all which distinct masses, reckoned as s many distinct bodies, after division, make a certain number.[31]

No matter how much we grind down the grain of wheat, the parts still retain the qualities of solidity, shape and others which were inherent in the original grain, of course in different ways.

In contrast with primary qualities, there are also secondary qualities that are viewer or user dependent.[32] We impose the qualities to objects, and these include colors, sounds, and tastes. According to Locke, color resides not in things but in the person. For example, there is something in the apple that makes it appear red to me, but the redness itself does not reside within the apple but instead is a function of my sense organs. The phenomenon of colorblindness is ample proof of this: while the structure of the apple itself might trigger the perception of redness in my mind, I need to have the appropriately designed eyes to have that perception. So too with other qualities of the apple like taste and smell: the specific sensations of taste and smell directly depend upon the construction of my tongue and nose,[33] or perhaps, upon my health and psychological conditions.[34]

Locke adds that there is a third type of quality of objects, tertiary qualities, which involves the power that an object has to produce new ideas or sensations in us.[35] For example, the mere sight of an apple may produce a feeling of hunger within me. Being near a fire may produce a feeling of warmth within me. Perhaps the main difference between secondary and tertiary qualities is that within secondary ones, we often mistake them for primary qualities of the objects themselves. For example, I might just assume that the redness of an apple is actually part of the apple when, upon reflection, I would see that it clearly is not; but with tertiary qualities we might be less apt to make this mistake, for example, I would never presume that my feeling of hunger resides in the apple itself. Or, by way of distinction, we may simply say that a primary quality imposes itself on the thing itself, a secondary quality is imposed by us on the thing itself, while a tertiary quality is imposed by the thing itself on us.

George Berkeley

Another major figure in philosophical empiricism was George Berkeley (1685-1753). In his twenties, he wrote his two main philosophical works upon which his fame rests today: *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713). He was later ordained into the Anglican Church of Ireland and received his Doctor of Divinity degree. Berkeley's empirical theory, while it builds on that of Locke, rejects the existence of material objects outside perception thereby

[31] J. Locke, op.cit. 2.8.9.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Cf. H.C. Ezebuilo, op.cit.
[35] Cf. J. Fieser, op.cit.

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taking the empieicist principle *esse est percipi* very seriously. Unlike Locke, Berkeley believed it is not material things themselves but God that feeds us sensory information.

Material Things Do Not Exist and All Reality Exists as Perception

The heart of Berkeley's philosophy is his theory of idealism, according to which he maintains that material things do not exist, and all reality exists as perception in the mind of the perceiver. The term idealism comes from the word "idea" insofar as the only things that exist are ideas in one's mind.[36] In that sense, a term like "idea-ism" might have better conveyed its meaning. A good way of understanding Berkeley's position is to see it as taking Descartes' evil genius hypothesis seriously. Consider again what Descartes suggested:

> For all I know, there is no material world whatsoever, and all of my experiences are hallucinations that are imposed into my mind by an evil genius. It might appear that I have a body and am sitting on a chair, but it could be that there is no three-dimensional world at all, and an evil genius is just making those things appear in my mind, while my mind itself floats around without any body.[37]

Descartes, we must note, did not actually believe this hypothesis, but only proposed it as a strategy for arriving at certainty about the world around us. Berkeley, however, does take this scenario seriously, although he rejects that there is anything sinister or deceptive about it. This is simply the way that God constructed the world; it is a virtual reality that consists of God continually feeding our minds sensory information in a very consistent way.

The main point for Berkeley here is the regularity and consistency with which God feeds our minds sensory data.[38] God stores all sensible perceptions in his mind and he feeds them to us at the appropriate time. Imagine that I perceive myself to be in a room conversing with five friends. For Berkeley, the reality is that I and five other spirit-minds are being consistently fed similar sense data by God. Drawing from the perceptions in his mind, God feeds all of us sense data of walls, tables and chairs within the room. I decide to speak to my friends and say "Did you hear the President's speech last night?" God then interjects sensory data into all of our minds that portray the image of my mouth moving with audible words coming out. One of my friends decides to respond and say "The President's speech was an insult to the intelligence of everyone in this country!" Another friend decides to say "I disagree, and think the President properly addressed the concerns of the nation." In each case, God reads the thoughts of my friends and interjects sensory data into all of our minds, thus portraying them speaking.

When we are done conversing, we decide to get up and leave the room. We might then ask what happens to the empty room since God is no longer feeding us sense perception of it. Does the room go out of existence? According to Berkeley, the room does not. God himself is still perceiving the sensory information about the room and it continues to exists in his mind.

[36] Ibid.
[37] R. Descartes, op.cit.
[38] Cf. J. Fieser, op.cit.

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Insofar as God still perceives it, the room still exists.[39] Berkeley expresses this point with the idealist motto that *to be is to be perceived***.** This is to say that external things exist only in our minds or in the mind of God.

The idealist position of denying material objects seems ridiculous. The vast majority of us believe that we live in a world of material objects that includes physical things. For Berkeley, the reverse is the case; it is belief in the existence of material objects that is ridiculous. He writes:

> It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing among men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects, have an existence, natural or ideal, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding. But, with how great an assurance and acquiescence soever this principle may be entertained in the world, yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question may, if I mistake not perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For, what are the fore-mentioned objects but the things we perceive by sense? and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? and is not plainly repugnant that any one of these, or any combination of them, shall exist unperceived?[40] (Principles, 4).

His point is that when I perceive something like a table, I am not really experiencing any physical thing, but instead, I am only receiving sensations. This sensory data is all that I really know, and it is a colossal fabrication to assume that some physical thing is the source of my perceptions of the table. Berkeley recognizes that there is indeed some external source of my perception of the table, but that source is God, not anything physical. So natural is this position, he argues, that it is backed by common sense:

> I am content…to appeal to the common sense of the world for the truth of my notion. Ask the gardener why he thinks yonder cherry-tree exists in the garden, and he shall tell you, because he sees and feels it; in a word, because he perceives it by his senses. Ask him why he thinks an orange-tree not to be there, and he shall tell you, because he does not perceive it. What he perceives by sense, that he terms a real being, and says it is or exists; but, that which is not perceivable, the same, he says, has no being…The question between the materialists and me is not, whether things have a real existence out of the mind of this or that person, but

[39] Ibid.

[40] James Fieser, op.cit.

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> whether they have an absolute existence, distinct from being perceived by God, and exterior to all minds.[41]

Now, given the fact that Berkeley does not believe in material objects, how then can he be classified as an empiricist? The answer is that the central point of empiricism involves gaining knowledge through the senses, rather than through innate ideas. And Berkeley completely believes that we do acquire all our knowledge through sense perception. The only issue involves what the source of those sense perceptions is. Whereas Locke believes that material objects feed us sensory information, Berkeley believed that God performs that role, not material things.

Argument from Primary and Secondary Qualities

As always with philosophy, it is one thing to simply propose a theory, but quite another thing to prove it. Berkeley rises to the occasion, though, offering an abundance of arguments for his position. We will look at the two main compelling of these. The first is his argument from primary and secondary qualities. According to Locke, the fundamental difference between the two types of qualities is whether they are viewer dependent or not. Primary ones are part of the external things themselves and not viewer dependent. On Locke's view, to believe n external material objects, then, requires a commitment to the reality of primary qualities that exist in things, independently of what a viewer might perceive.

Berkeley denies that there are primary qualities of objects in this sense, and he argues instead that all so called primary qualities are just as viewer dependent as secondary ones. In other words, all qualities of objects are really secondary (in the Lockean sense) and thus viewer dependent. Below is his main argument:

> They who assert that figure, motion, and the rest of the primary or original qualities do exist without the mind in unthinking substances, do at the same time acknowledge that colors, sounds, heat, cold and suchlike secondary qualities, do not – which they tell us are sensations existing in the mind alone, that depend on and are occasioned by the different size, texture, and motion of the minute particles of matter. This they take for an undoubted truth, which they can demonstrate beyond all exception. Now, if it be certain that those original [primary] qualities are inseparably united with the other sensible [secondary] qualities, and not, even in thought, capable of being abstracted from them, it plainly follows that they exist only in the mind. But I desire anyone to reflect and try whether he can, by any abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body without all other sensible qualities. For my own part, I see evidently that it is not in my power to frame an idea of a body extended and moving,

[41] Ibid.

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> but I must withal give it some color or other sensible quality which I acknowledged to exist only in the mind.[42]

His main point is that so called primary qualities are nothing beyond the secondary qualities that we perceive in things. Visual perceptions of shape, for example, are just patches of color, which are secondary.

To make his case, Berkeley examines several so called primary qualities and explains with each one how it is viewer dependent.[43] Take for example, the quality of extension, that is, three-dimensional shape. Our conceptions of an object's shape hinge directly on the perspective of the viewer. The leg of an insect, for example, appears exceedingly small to us; to the insect itself it would appear to be a medium sized thing, yet to an even tinier microscopic organism it would appear to be huge. The texture of an object similarly hinges on the perspective from which we examine it. From a distance insect's leg might appear to be smooth; through a microscope it might appear to be quite coarse. The point is that everything that we know about shape depends upon where we stand in relation to the things that we are perceiving; thus, all notions of shape are viewer dependent.

The so called primary quality of motion is also relative to the perceiver.[44] Imagine, for example, that a leaf is falling from a tree directly in front of a humming bird, a human, and a sloth. How would each of these creatures perceive the leaf's motion? To the humming bird the leaf's motion might appear to be so slow as to be almost frozen in time. To the human it would appear to be moving at a normal pace. To the sloth it might appear exceedingly rapid. According to Berkeley, speed and time are measured by the succession of ideas in our minds, which varies in different perceivers.[45]

Argument Based on the Principle of Simplicity

Berkeley's second argument against material objects is based on the principle of simplicity: there is no real need for the material objects, hence would be a useless creation. Everything we need to perceive (sensible qualities) is accounted for more efficiently through idealism: God directly feeds us sensory information without creating the material world as a useless middleman. He writes:

If therefore it were possible for bodies to exist without the mind, yet to hold they do so, must needs be a very precarious opinions; since it is to suppose, without any reason at all, that God has created innumerable beings that are entirely useless, and serve to no manner of purpose.[46]

In theory, we might think that God could have created the material world as a middleman if he wanted to, sort of an instrument to accomplish the task. But even that, according to Berkeley, is inconsistent with God's nature. Instruments are used only when there is a need. A hammer is a useful instrument since I cannot effectively pound on a nail with my bare

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 19.

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hands. My glasses are a useful instrument since I cannot see very well without them. However, God, who has infinite powers, has no needs and thus has no use of any instrument that might help him accomplish some task. Berkeley writes:

> We indeed, who are being of finite powers, are forced to make use of instruments. And the use of an instrument shows the agent to be limited by rules of another's prescriptions, and that he cannot obtain his end but in such a way and by such conditions. Whence, it seems a clear consequence, that the supreme unlimited agent uses no tool or instrument at all.[47]

From the above, it follows that God is capable of feeding us sensory information directly without the need for him to create the material world as an instrument.

David Hume

David Hume is a British empiricist who pushed empiricism to its skeptical conclusions. Educated in law at his family's direction, he quickly abandoned that career and devoted himself to the study of philosophy. One of his most important work is *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740). Hume hoped to work as a philosophy teacher at one of Edinburgh's universities, but the skeptical and anti-religious nature of his writings poisoned his efforts, and instead he took on temporary jobs in government and as a librarian.[48] With a steady flow of publications, branching out into history as well as philosophy, he became one of the most famous and controversial authors in Europe.

Origin and Association of Ideas

In his own day, as now, Hume had a notorious reputation as a skeptical philosopher, and in many ways he carried on the skeptical tradition forged in ancient Greece. Much of Hume's skepticism, though, results from pushing the empiricist agenda to its logical conclusion. There are two main building blocks upon which his empiricist philosophy is founded. The first of these concerns the origin of ideas. Thoughts and ideas flow through our minds endlessly – ideas of people, houses, music concerts, scientific discoveries, God, on and on.

Where do they all come from? Hume's answer is that all of our ideas come from two types of experiences, or impressions as he calls them: first, outward impressions through our five senses and, second, inward impressions through reflection on our mental operations. For example, the idea I have of the color red ultimately came from some outward sensory experience that I had of the color red that was stored in my memory. The idea I have of fear similarly came from an inward feeling of fear that I experienced in the past. He writes:

> Though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits…When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent

[47] Ibid.
[48] J. Fieser, op.cit.

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> ideas, gold, and mountain, with which we were formerly acquainted…In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment: The mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will. Or, to express myself in philosophical language, all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones.[49]

Hume offers two proofs for his position that ideas are copied from impressions. First, he says that if you take any idea you have and examine its components, you will find that it traces back to outward or inward one or more sensory experience or inward feeling. Hume gives as an example the idea we have of God a "an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being." This, he says, "arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind" and enlarging our human qualities of goodness and wisdom without limit. Second, he says that, if you go your entire life without having a particular type of sensation, then you would lack the corresponding idea of that sensation. For example, "a blind man can form no notion of colors."

On face value, Hume's view is innocent enough, and he seems to just be reiterating Locke's position that experience is the source of all our mental contents. What Hume does with this, though, is quite radical insofar as he transforms it into a theory of meaning. For my ideas to have any meaning, they must be grounded in some impression that I have had. An idea is meaningless, then, if I cannot trace it back to any impression. He writes:

> When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived*? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. Bringing ideas into so clear a light we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality.[50]

For example, if I have an idea of an all-powerful divine being, but I have never had any impression of something that is all-powerful or divine, then my idea is without meaning. Whatever idea I do have of God – regardless of whether God even exists – it must be grounded in impressions that I have had. It is this theory of meaning that leads Hume down the path of skepticism as he explores one philosophical theory after another. In fact, he believes that much of traditional philosophy and religion can be dismissed as meaningless since it fails this test.

The second building block of Hume's empiricism is his theory of the association of ideas. Suppose that I sit down on a couch and let my mind wander where it will. I think about the President, then Japan, then my car, then a telephone pole, then a railroad track, then an old apartment I lived in. it is tempting to thin that I am conjuring up these ideas spontaneously

[49] David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975)
[50] Ibid.

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without any organization behind them. Not so, Hume argues. Our flow of ideas is connected together by three principles of association.[51]

First is *resemblance*, where one thought leads to another because of resembling features that they have. For example, if I look at a photograph of a friend, I will start thinking about the friend. Second is *contiguity*, that is, one thing being in close proximity to another. For example, if someone says something about a store in a shopping mall, I might then think about the store located next to it. Third is *cause and effect*. For example, if I look at a scar on my arm, I immediately start thinking about the accident I had that caused me to get the scar. These three principles alone, according to Hume, are responsible for all mental association that our minds make in the normal flow of ideas.

With the above example, my thought about the President leads me to think about Japan since he recently visited there (contiguity); Japan is where my car was built (causality); my car is parked next to a telephone pole (contiguity); the telephone pole is covered with the same kind of black tar that is on railroad ties (resemblance); my old apartment was alongside a railroad track (contiguity). Hume says that "The more instances we examine, and the more care we employ, the more assurance shall we acquire, that the enumeration, which we form from the whole, is complete and entire."[52]

Hume analyzes the traditional notion of causality in the same way. Let us begin with a simple example of a cause-effect connection, which Hume himself uses: billiard ball A strikes billiard ball B and causes it to move. The traditional notion of causality is that there is an external power or force that causes ball A to strike and move ball B, independently of what you or I might perceive when we watch the balls move. That is, there is an objective *necessary connection* between the cause and effect. Applying Hume's theory of meaning, for this idea of necessary connection to be meaningful, we need to discover the impression which forms the basis of it.

One possibility is that we perceive an outward impression through our five senses that forms the idea of an objective necessary connection. But do we? Suppose that when ball A struck ball B, it produced a flash of light and a loud boom, and, in fact, that every causal connection we saw was similarly accompanied by a light flash and a boom. If that was the case, then, yes, we would have a very strong outward impression that would give us the idea of an objective necessary connection. But that is not what happens. When A strikes and moves B, all that appears to our eyes is the motion of two balls, and that is it. He writes:

> When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other. The impulse of one billiard-ball is

[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

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> attended with motion in the second. This is the whole that appears to outward senses.[53]

He next considers whether there is any inward impression that forms the idea of necessary connection. Locke had suggested one possibility: we experience a feeling of causal sequence where the cause is my mental decision and the effect is the raising of my arm. Since the causal sequence is taking place within my own mind, am thus capable of directly experiencing a feeling of causal power or necessary connection when I willfully raise my arm. But Hume rejects this as well, since we do not have a clear experience of how or where such willful bodily motion takes place. Indeed, I do mentally experience my willful decision (the cause) and I do see and feel my arm move (the effect), but I do not experience anything that links them. I do not feel a special electrical shock or anything unique to the necessary connection by itself.

In the absence of an appropriate outward or inward impression, we must then reject the traditional notion of necessary connection as an objective force or invisible explosion. Hume suggests an alternative, though. There is a more moderate notion of necessary connection that comes from an inward feeling of expectation that occurs when we repeatedly see A followed by B. consider again the example of billiard balls: it is only after repeatedly seeing ball A move B that our minds feel a transition from the cause to the effect. He writes:

> The first time a man saw the communication of motion by impulse, as by the shock of two billiard balls, he could not pronounce that the one event was *connected*: But only that it was *conjoined* with the other. After he has observed several instances of this nature, he then pronounces them to be connected. What alteration has happened to give rise to this new idea of connection? Nothing but that he now *feels* these events to be connected in his imagination, and can readily foretell the existence of one from the appearance of the other.[54]

In the end, it appears Hume does not completely reject the idea of necessary connection and causality. But he does reject the traditional idea of it being something like a primary quality within objects themselves. Instead, he suggests that necessary connection is like a secondary quality that viewers impose onto A – B sequences when we repeatedly see A and B conjoined. In this case, it is simply a habit of our minds, not a reality in the objects themselves.

Merits and Problems of Empiricism

As we have seen, empiricism is the claim that sense experience is the sole source of our knowledge about the world. According to the empiricists we have examined above, all knowledge comes from direct sense experience. Some of the strengths of empiricism that

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

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eminent from their thought are:[55] it proves a theory, gives reasoning, and inspires others to explore probabilities in science.

The first is that it proves a theory. Empiricists believe that only real knowledge is empirical. We learn from experiment and observation, and the direct knowledge we gain from them is empirical. The best way to know something is to have perceived it through the senses and to be able to prove it through repeatable observations or experiments. In fact, in this way, someone interested in gathering knowledge in a scientific mode of thought, will come up with ideas for observations and experiments to prove his hypotheses or to answer his questions. He will always seek empirical evidence first and trust in it most.

The second strength of empiricism is that it gives experimental reasoning. Experimental reasoning as well as past experiences and observations are the sources of knowledge for empiricism. However, the experimental reasoning, which is based on cause and effect reasoning, is not absolutely true as Hume's writing suggests. All can be subject to revision, just as all is subject to some doubt when predicting what would happen in an experiment. Hume states, "That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation that it will rise tomorrow,"[56] reason being that the past is not necessarily a direct causation of a future event. Because of this, science, an empirical tool set by mankind to explore the world around him and to learn more about himself, is only work in probability. It is safe, based upon a posteriori knowledge, that the sun will rise tomorrow, for it has always done so, and there has been no event to show that it might not rise tomorrow. Without this experimental reasoning however, empiricism is reduced to past experiences, and yet with it, one is able to make statements such as "the sun will rise tomorrow" with a great degree of certainty.

The third strength is that it inspires others to explore probabilities in science. The exploration of the unknown has always lured the curious. Exploring ways to improve our way of living has been the passion of the modern world. So knowing that we could learn a trait that could be used to uncover the unknown is a curiosity that is hard to resist. Empiricism gave the world a *direction towards* understanding everything around us, even when it seemed improbable. Indeed, we have used rational thinking and theoretical methods to ignite empiricist methods to direct us to solutions.

There is, however, a philosophical price to be paid as I have observed elsewhere.[57] While the empiricist gains additional insights and knowledge, there is a loss in certitude, since the empiricist still must deal with senses that (the rationalist is correct to maintain) are unreliable. The rationalist can be certain that 2 + 2 = 4, the empiricist, however, must accept that empirical knowledge is at best probable, never certain. The problem is that the empiricist has no real response to the claim that it is possible to doubt even the most persuasive sense impressions, since it is possible to doubt them without logical contradiction.

[55] Cf. William F. Lawhead, *The Philosophical Journey: An Interactive Approach* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), pp.55-56.
[56] Bruce Aune, *Rationalism, Empiricism, and Pragmatism: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1970), p.43.
[57] H.C. Ezebuilo, op.cit.

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In philosophical terms, the problem is that our sense perceptions undermine their causes.[58] In other words, a given sense perception has more than one explanation. Consider, for example, that one sees a white rabbit. What might explain this perception? The obvious answer is that one sees a white rabbit because there is a white rabbit there. It is also possible, however, that one has a rare optical disease and the rabbit is some other color, rather than white. It is also possible that one hallucinates or dreams the rabbit. As White will attest, these are all logical possibilities and the sense experiences in themselves provide no certain means to decide which explanation is correct.[59]

This suggests another potential problem that empiricism must address, namely how to explain mathematics and logic? Remember that empiricism maintains that *all knowledge is reducible to experience*. Thus, the empiricist must explain how it is possible to reduce sometimes arcane mathematical knowledge to common sense experience. This means that, since mathematical knowledge is thought to be certain knowledge, the empiricist must explain how it is possible to derive certain knowledge through a process of sense experience that provides knowledge that is, at best probable. Moreover, the empiricist must also explain how it is possible to prove mathematical statements through experience.

There have been numerous attempts to demonstrate how it is possible to derive mathematics and logic through experience.[60] Though commendable these attempts, all have had serious difficulties and so have met with little or no general acceptance. Even if it were possible to reduce mathematics to experience, the questions: whether experiences whose truth is probable can produce certain mathematical knowledge and, how it is possible to prove mathematical statements through experience, pose rather more serious difficulties.

Perhaps the easiest, though least intuitive, solution is to argue that there is no certitude in mathematics. This is John Stuart Mill's tactics. Mill, a radical empiricist, argues that, as with all other empirical statements, mathematical statements express mere possibilities. All that distinguishes them is that mathematical statements have undergone more extensive confirmation than other statements.[61] The disadvantage to this tactics is obvious: one must give up all claims to absolute truth in mathematics. Most philosophers (as well as mathematicians) consider this concession to be as difficult as it is undesirable and counterintuitive.

In contrast to Mill, less radical empiricists (like David Hume and John Locke) still want to maintain mathematical certitude.[62] This too, however, comes at a price. To preserve mathematical truths as absolute truths Locke argues that some perceptions, and the ideas that represent these perceptions, can be more certain than others. To be precise, he argues that, when reason operates on experience, the ideas, and the associations between ideas that it produces, result in knowledge that is either intuitive, demonstrative or sensitive. Locke maintains that intuitive knowledge and demonstrative knowledge are certain knowledge.[63]

[58] J.B. Schneewind, "John Stuart Mill," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967, p.503. https://www.2.onu.edu./-m-dixon/handouts/rationalism%20and20empiricism.html.
[59] Ibid. p.209.
[60] See H.C. Ezebuilo, op.cit.
[61] J.B. Schneewind, op.cit.
[62] Ibid.
[63] H.C. Ezebuilo, op.cit.

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His arguments here are technical and less than a complete success. To all intents and purposes, however, what Locke does in order to guarantee certain knowledge is rather too similar to the rationalist's *a priori* knowledge to please most empiricists.

Since empiricism argues that there is no knowledge that arises through reason alone, it should be obvious that empiricism also denies that there are innate ideas, that is, ideas that are in the mind prior to experience or that are built into the mind in some manner. A usual argument against innate ideas is that were there such ideas then all rational beings should possess and acknowledge them. Since it is obvious that there are neither universal ideas (i.e., ideas that all human beings possess), nor ideas upon which there is universal agreement, then, there are no innate ideas.[64] The empiricist considers the pre-experience mind to be a *tabular rasa* – a clean state, and it is true experience that knowledge comes to be written on this slate. Thus, the basic credo of empiricism is that where there is (or can be) no experience there is (and can be) no knowledge. Indeed, most of our knowledge is of course a posteriori. However, the senses alone cannot furnish us with knowledge. It is reason that interprets our sense experiences and gives them meaning before they can become knowledge. Until reason performs this role, they are simply raw data without meaning.[65]

CONCLUSION

This work is a survey of the empirical theories of John Locke, George Berekeley and David Hume. We defined empiricism as the view that all human knowledge is derived from (empirical) experience or the view that all knowledge are *a posteriori*. This is against the rationalist approach which claims that certain knowledge are *a priori* and can be justified independently of experience. As a theory of justification, however, empiricism views beliefs as depending ultimately and necessarily on sense experience for their justification.

John Locke asserts that we simply have no innate ideas, and all notions that we have come to us through experience. Locke has two main arguments against the innateness of ideas, both speculative and practical. First, he argues that people in fact do not universally hold to these ideas, contrary to what defenders of innate ideas typically claim. This is particularly obvious with the laws of thought, which, according to Locke, children and mentally challenged people have no conception of whatsoever. His second argument is that it makes no sense to hold that such ideas lie dormant within us and then blossom when we reach the right age, contrary to what defenders of innate ideas commonly claim. Again, particularly with the law of thought, he noted that children reason perfectly well regarding identity and non-contradiction, yet at the same time, they are completely incapable of articulating those specific ideas. If these ideas were really innate, then children should be able to verbally express them. Also, it is obvious that many adults have reached the so called age of reason, such as the illiterate and those from primitive societies, and yet lack these ideas.

According to Locke, therefore, the mind is from birth a blank slate which gets filled with information through experience. This is done in two ways: we first acquire simple ideas through experience, and then recombine those simple ideas in different ways to create more complex ideas. Nevertheless, our ideas about things are either in the things themselves

[64] See John Locke's *Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, and David Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature*.
[65] H.c. Ezebuilo, op.cit.; see also J. Omoregbe, op.cit. p.31.

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(primary ideas) or they are relative to the perceiver (secondary ideas). George Berkeley agrees with Locke that we cannot have true knowledge independently of the senses, but he rejects the existence of the material things themselves claiming that all reality exists as perception in the mind of the perceiver.

Given that Locke and Berkeley agree, albeit from different perspectives, that human mind is filled with knowledge by means of ideas, David Hume centers more on the question of the origin of ideas. According to him, all of our ideas come from two types of experiences, or impressions as he calls them: first, outward impressions through our five senses and, second, inward impressions through reflection on our mental operations. And he claims that our flow of ideas is connected together by three principles of association: resemblance, contiguity, cause and effect. He argues that this "association" has no necessary connection; it is simply a habit of our minds, not a reality in the objects themselves.

Generally, we highlighted some of the merits of empiricism to include the fact that it proves a theory, gives reasoning, and inspires others to explore probabilities in science. Nevertheless, empirical knowledge lack certitude and reliability. Indeed, the human knowledge is a product of both sense experience and reason. There is no doubt that some of our knowledge claims cannot be accounted for by experience, similarly there can be no doubt that some of our knowledge claims have their origin in senses experience. But even here, it should be noted that the senses simply gather some raw data and present them to reason which processes them and they become knowledge.

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