

Empiricism Versus Rationalism:
Understanding the Acquisition of Knowledge

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Abstract

Theories of knowledge, certainty, and skepticism in philosophy are of particular importance to learning, as these theories quite literally explain how we are able to perceive the world around us. Two specific theories have been identified as strong arguments in philosophy, the first is termed “Empiricism” and the second “Rationalism”. Using both materials provided in this course, as well as some external arguments that have been considered by Max Hocutt, Tom Stoneham, John Turri and Wesley Buckwalter, the arguments of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in regard to Anti-Skepticism and Skepticism, and Descartes’ skeptical, rationalist argument will be compared and contrasted. In this paper, I will consider the three empiricist conceptions on knowledge posed in Locke’s “Representational Theory of Perception”, Berkeley’s “Idealist Theory of Knowledge”, and Hume’s “Problem of Induction”, and how these perspectives relate and differ to one another, then I will consider Descartes’ rationalist approach illustrated in his Meditations. In addition, I will conclude by stating my opinion of these different theories and whether I believe Rationalism or Empiricism to be better, as well as why I consider one theory to be stronger than the others.

With consideration of the three empiricist conceptions on knowledge posed by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and Descartes' rationalist conceptions on knowledge, as well as external sources examining the various aspects of these theories, I believe that Empiricism is the most complete theory in regard to the source of knowledge. Securing such knowledge of the external world, Empiricism considers individual experience of the senses and perceptions to be the main source of knowledge, rather than rationalism's argument of innate knowledge, coming solely from the mind, discrediting individual experience. Although these differing theories both establish strong points within their ontological arguments, I believe that Empiricism better accounts for individuals experiences on Earth and all things around us as the main source when considering the source of knowledge; this point is a necessary one in my opinion, rather than disregarding the experiences we have as being the source of knowledge as Rationalism does. That said, it can be quite difficult to choose between these two theories, as they both establish important points when considering the acquisition of knowledge, but it is the element of experience through bodily sensations that I believe should be emphasized, in combination with the mind to create an inclusive theory as Empiricism does.

During my research I have been able to consider these two main theories outside of the sources reviewed in this course and identify some key arguments both for and against Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Descartes' views, including the analysis of embodiment, agency, the cartesian schism, and the problem of induction. Considering the posed arguments of Berkeley in regard to Empiricism, Max Hocutt argues that such a theory may be simplified to a game of "Now you see it; now you don't"¹, as evident in Berkeley's famously proclaimed quote, "To be is to be perceived"². Overall, Berkeley seems to agree that we directly perceive only the ideas in

¹ Hocutt, Max. "George Berkeley Resurrected: A Commentary on Baum's 'Ontology for Behaviour Analysis.'" *Behaviour & Philosophy*, 2018. 46 (January). 47-57.

² Ibid.

our mind, reasoning that we have no perceptual evidence for anything else; “talk of unperceived external objects would therefore be empirically meaningless”³, “for, since they and every part of them exist only in the mind, it follows that there is nothing in them but what is perceived”⁴.

There is significant consideration of agency, and in turn, embodiment in these arguments, specifically Berkeley’s view that we are chained to a body⁵, touched on in the works of Tom Stoneham. An analogy posed by Stoneham of an infant, that only knows to suckle or cry from experience can be illustrative here, exploring the ways in which this infant may or may not know that it can suckle or cry, and if this infant were to know, how does it⁶? Did the infant itself cause its first cry, without any prior perceptual evidence and experience to base this reaction off of⁷? Berkeley would have us consider his argument that “every idea of sense (except perhaps, when we perceive our own actions) are perceived by a finite mind and caused by a distinct mind, notably God’s”⁸. Following this, an infant can only see if its mother is close or far on the basis of experienced correlations of the ideas of sight and touch⁹; in other words, whenever we act upon the world through experience, or perceive objects, we act by moving our bodies, through actions and agency¹⁰. In addition, Berkeley makes it clear that even if there were external bodies outside of ours “it is impossible we should ever come to know it; and if there were not, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now”¹¹.

With consideration of Empiricism, Hume approaches this problem differently, first stating

³ Ibid.

⁴ Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge: Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. Open Court Publishing Company, 1986. 1-33.

⁵ Stoneham, Tom. “Action, Knowledge and Embodiment in Berkeley and Locke.” *Philosophical Explorations*, 2018. 21 (1). 41–59.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge: Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. Open Court Publishing Company, 1986. 1-33.

that “all the objects of human reason or enquiry”¹² can be divided into two categories of ideas, relations of ideas founded upon demonstrative reasoning, or matters of fact founded upon moral reasoning. In addition, he states that it is the foundation of cause and effect that matters of facts directly stem from, a process of reasoning known as induction. So, concerning Empiricism, Hume has us question how this process of induction can be justified, explaining that “we must enquire how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect”¹³; this is known as the Problem of Induction. It is important to note here that Hume does not believe that, in any instance, knowledge is attained “by reasonings a priori; but arises entirely from experience, when we find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other”¹⁴, as we will establish. Rather, the principal reason for Hume’s doubt of any justification in inductive reasoning is that this reasoning relies solely on the premise that the future will resemble the past, which in itself is not justifiable. Considering an object entirely new to an individual of “ever so strong natural reason and abilities”¹⁵, through “the most accurate examination of its sensible qualities”¹⁶, without consultation of past observations they would not be able “to discover any of its causes or effects”¹⁷. Instead, the mind would need to “invent or imagine some event, which it ascribes to the object as its effect”¹⁸, an entirely arbitrary invention. Hume further explains that the effect is completely different from the cause, meaning that cause cannot “be discovered in it”¹⁹. Hume has us consider the example of billiard-balls here, in which the motion in a second ball is established as being “a quite distinct event from motion in the first”²⁰. He then demonstrates the fact that if

¹² McLaughlin, Jeff. *The Originals: Classic Readings in Western Philosophy - David Hume: from An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Sect. IV, Part I, II). Pressbooks, 2017.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

we take a stone or piece of metal and raise it into the air, leaving it without any support, this object immediately falls, but in considering “the matter a priori”²¹, we must also examine if there is “anything we discover in this situation which can beget the idea of a downward, rather than an upward, or any other motion, in the stone or metal?”²². Hume further states, “may I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause?”²³; relating back to the motion of the two billiard balls he exclaims “may not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap off from the second in any line or direction?”²⁴.

Thus far, it has been established that “the nature of all our reasonings concerning matter of fact”²⁵ are founded on relations of cause and effect; Hume then asks, “what is the foundation of all our reasonings and conclusions concerning that relation? it may be replied in one word, Experience. But if we still carry on our sifting humour, and ask, What is the foundation of all conclusions from experience? This implies a new question, which may be of more difficult solution and explication”²⁶. According to Hume, the problem of induction is that we suppose “there is a connexion between the present fact and that which is inferred from it”²⁷, making this argument a viciously circular one. Hume notes that this connexion is not an intuitive one, instead it requires a medium, “which may enable the mind to draw such an inference, if indeed it be drawn by reasoning and argument”²⁸. Hume further demonstrates this rationale using the example of bread, stating that “our senses inform us of the colour, weight, and consistence of bread; but neither sense nor reason can ever inform us of those qualities which fit it for the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

nourishment and support of a human body”²⁹. “We always presume, when we see like sensible qualities, that they have like secret powers, and expect that effects, similar to those which we have experienced, will follow from them. If a body of like colour and consistence with that bread, which we have formerly eat, be presented to us, we make no scruple of repeating the experiment, and foresee, with certainty, like nourishment and support”³⁰. This inferred connexion between sensible qualities and secret powers is of importance here, where Hume poses the question, “on what process of argument this inference is founded? Where is the medium, the interposing ideas, which join propositions so very wide of each other?”³¹. Sensible qualities such as the colour and consistence of bread does not appear “to have any connexion with the secret powers of nourishment and support”³², otherwise we would be able to infer secret powers “from the first appearance of these sensible qualities, without the aid of experience”³³. Hume refers to this as “our natural state of ignorance with regard to the powers and influence of all objects”³⁴, explaining that “we expect like nourishment and support”³⁵ from something that is “of like colour and consistence with bread”³⁶. Essentially, when new objects that seem to endow similar sensible qualities are produced, the expectation is that they will contain similar powers; “the bread, which I formerly eat, nourished me; that is, a body of such sensible qualities was, at that time, endued with such secret powers: but does it follow, that other bread must also nourish me at another time, and that like sensible qualities must always be attended with like secret powers?”³⁷, according to Hume, this cannot be the case.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

The problem of induction has a difficult task, “to convince us that all the laws of nature, and all the operations of bodies without exception, are known only by experience”³⁸, that the future will resemble the past. Unfortunately in this regard, the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible, whereas the contrary of relations of ideas is not possible, so, according to Hume, because the future will resemble the past is a matter of fact belief, the contrary of this statement is possible. Thus, the consideration that the future will not resemble the past is just as plausible as its counterpart and must be acknowledged as such. So while we have stated that “all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect”³⁹, entirely derived from experience, “and that all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past”⁴⁰, such arguments regarding existence are ultimately going in a circle over and over. Hume does propose a skeptical solution to this problem of induction, stating that “even after we have experience of the operations of cause-and-effect, our conclusions from that experience are not founded on reasoning or any process of the understanding”⁴¹, instead, it is custom or habit that drives our conclusions; “custom, then, is the great guide of human life”⁴² on Hume’s view.

In contrast, as stated by Hocutt, Descartes approaches the issue of embodiment through significant consideration of sensation and imagination, known as his indirect theory of perception or “the way of ideas”⁴³. This, during his time, helped scientists understand how individuals had been mistaken in seeing the physical things, events, or processes they thought they had seen⁴⁴; instead, they had ‘seen’ images or ideas in their own minds and “mistaken these

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Hocutt, Max. “George Berkeley Resurrected: A Commentary on Baum’s ‘Ontology for Behaviour Analysis.’” *Behaviour & Philosophy*, 2018. 46 (January). 47–57.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

for effects of things whose real natures were being revealed by the new physical scientists”⁴⁵. In addition, as discussed by Stoneham, Descartes has become famously known for arguing that embodiment consists of more than being lodged in our bodies as a pilot in a vessel (similar to Berkeley’s to view), “but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity”⁴⁶. Descartes argument can be further understood through his analogy of a solid piece of wax, which is “capable of innumerable changes”⁴⁷ even though he knows that he is incapable of running through these innumerable changes by using his imagination. He then considers this wax being placed near fire, “what remains of the taste exhales, the smell evaporates, the color changes, its figure is destroyed, its size increases, it becomes liquid, it grows hot, it can hardly be handled, and, although struck upon, it emits no sound. Does the same wax still remain after this change? It must be admitted that it does remain; no one doubts it, or judges otherwise”⁴⁸; this leads to Descartes understanding that the piece of wax is perceived and known not through his senses but through his mind alone⁴⁹, where the “power of conceiving what is called a thing, or a truth, or a thought”⁵⁰ is “from no other source than my own nature”⁵¹, an essential argument to his development of Rationalism where the source of all knowledge is reason rather than senses.

While both Locke and Descartes believe that physical entities are perceived indirectly, first perceiving ideas in one’s mind and taking these for representations of physically external things⁵², Locke further defines his understanding of such perceptions, stating that “whatsoever

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ott, Walter, and Alex Dunn. René Descartes (1596–1650). *Modern Philosophy*, 2013.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Hocutt, Max. “George Berkeley Resurrected: A Commentary on Baum’s ‘Ontology for Behaviour Analysis.’” *Behaviour & Philosophy*, 2018. 46 (January). 47–57.

the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call idea; and the power to produce any idea in our mind, I call quality of the subject wherein that power is"⁵³. Locke illustrates this claim through the example of a snowball, "having the power to produce in us the ideas of white, cold, and round,- the power to produce those ideas in us, as they are in the snowball, I call qualities; and as they are sensations or perceptions in our understandings, I call them ideas; which ideas, if I speak of sometimes as in the things themselves, I would be understood to mean those qualities in the objects which produce them in us"⁵⁴. That said, as stated by Turri & Buckwalter, while Descartes claims that knowledge and practice are fundamentally separate, Locke claims that knowledge and practice are fundamentally united⁵⁵. Berkeley refutes this claim, stating that "all our ideas, sensations, notions, or the things which we perceive, by whatsoever names they may be distinguished, are visibly inactive--there is nothing of power or agency included in them. So that ONE IDEA or object of thought CANNOT PRODUCE or make ANY ALTERATION IN ANOTHER. To be satisfied of the truth of this, there is nothing else requisite but a bare observation of our ideas"⁵⁶.

The reviewed literature argues that Cartesians are right about some practical factors, in particular, stakes and how important a situation is, which have, at best, a modest indirect relationship to knowledge⁵⁷. However, it has been found that Lockeans are right in regard to actionability: whether a person should pursue a course of action is unquestionably very

⁵³ Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690. 1948.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Turri, John, and Wesley Buckwalter. "Descartes's Schism, Locke's Reunion: Completing the Pragmatic Turn in Epistemology." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2017. 54 (1). 25–45.

⁵⁶ Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge: Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. Open Court Publishing Company, 1986. 1-33.

⁵⁷ Turri, John, and Wesley Buckwalter. "Descartes's Schism, Locke's Reunion: Completing the Pragmatic Turn in Epistemology." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2017. 54 (1). 25–45.

powerfully and directly connected to knowledge⁵⁸, a primary argument we must consider as to why Empiricism is the stronger theory when compared to Rationalism and one that is of particular importance to me. While Descartes Rationalism finds reason in the mind alone to produce knowledge, Locke's Empiricism allows experience to account for all concepts and truths, with ideas stemming from sensation and reflection; this is known as Representative Realism, where both primary qualities and secondary qualities are considered in how the mind perceives. For example, referring back to Descartes wax analogy, if secondary qualities are assessed, then the understood powers of cause of sensations (such as the power of fire to melt wax) would render Descartes analogy to be insufficient, as Locke states “for the power in fire to produce a new colour, or consistency, in wax or clay, - by its primary qualities, is as much a quality in fire, as the power it has to produce in me a new idea or sensation of warmth or burning, which I felt not before, - by the same primary qualities, viz. the bulk, texture, and motion of its insensible parts”⁵⁹. Further, as Locke explains, at birth the mind is considered to be a blank piece of paper, “void of all characters, without any ideas”⁶⁰; so we must consider how this blank paper becomes furnished with knowledge. To this, Locke states that this blank slate will have “all the materials of reason and knowledge”⁶¹ through one means, experience. Here, Hume would have us consider the fact that assumed “qualities” of objects, as stated by Locke, are just a result of our circular, inductive nature founded upon past experience; a custom or habit to guide us in life. Berkeley disagrees with both Locke's and Hume's arguments, instead defining ideas as existing only in the mind, so, “it follows that there is nothing in them but what is perceived: but whoever shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflection, will not

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690. 1948.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

perceive in them any power or activity; there is, therefore, no such thing contained in them”⁶²; thus according to Berkeley, it “remains therefore that the CAUSE OF IDEAS is an incorporeal active substance or Spirit”⁶³, rather than experience as understood by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.

In the work of Turri & Buckwalter, Descartes’ assumption that knowledge is fundamentally separable from action and other practical concerns is referred to as the Cartesian schism, which considers with his illustration that there exists an evil genius supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving Descartes⁶⁴; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity; I will consider myself as without hands, eyes, flesh, blood, or any of the senses, and as falsely believing that I am possessed of these”⁶⁵. In contrast, Locke rejected this Cartesian schism as illegitimate, stating that “the notice we have by our senses, of the existence of things without us, though it be not altogether so certain, deserves the name of knowledge... For, our faculties being suited not to a perfect knowledge free from all doubt, but to the preservation of us, serve our purpose well enough, if they will but give us certain notice of those things, which are convenient or inconvenient to us, which is assurance enough, when no man requires greater certainty to govern his actions by”⁶⁶. Within the literature, this has been referred to as the Lockean reunion⁶⁷, where in his response to Descartes, Locke suggests that observations of how we speak and act are extremely relevant to a correct theoretical understanding of the relationship between knowledge

⁶² Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge: Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. Open Court Publishing Company, 1986. 1-33.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Turri, John, and Wesley Buckwalter. “Descartes’s Schism, Locke’s Reunion: Completing the Pragmatic Turn in Epistemology.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2017. 54 (1). 25–45.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

and practice⁶⁸, which is of the utmost importance in my decision regarding Empiricism and Rationalism. According to Turri & Buckwalter, we must consider the main question here of whether knowledge ordinarily understood is entirely constituted by the traditional truth-related factors that Cartesians identify, or whether it is also fundamentally and directly connected to the practical factors that Lockeans identify⁶⁹. The traditional truth-related factors here are truth, belief, and quality of evidence⁷⁰ while the practical factors are how important the situation is and how the agent should act⁷¹.

Results of my literature review suggest that although Cartesians are correct in their understanding of the relationship between stakes and importance⁷², and knowledge judgments⁷³, Lockeans are correct in their understanding of the direct relationship between how one should act (actionability) and knowledge judgments⁷⁴. While Descartes proposes that knowledge is fundamentally separable from action (innate) and other practical concerns⁷⁵, Locke rejects this and instead, proposes that knowledge is intimately linked to action (is caused by objects/experience), and that we enter the world with minds as blank slates, citing linguistic and behavioural evidence in this view's favour⁷⁶, while Berkeley believes the only things that can exist are ideas being perceived (most notably by God). Thus, rationalists claim that there are significant ways in which our concepts and knowledge are gained independently of sense experience (innate knowledge), while empiricists claim that sense experience is the ultimate source of all our concepts and knowledge. For these specific reasons illustrated above, it is

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Locke's argument which I find to be the most plausible, as Locke's contributions to the foundations of Empiricism including his incorporation of objects and experience, and definitions of both qualities and ideas are to me, of the utmost importance in consideration of the acquisition of knowledge. Without such considerations, the material world around us, and all that we know to be real, is utterly disregarded. To me, a theory that ignores such an immense part of what makes humans who they are (experience), such as in Descartes Rationalism, cannot be sufficient in our understandings here, and the reliance on God as our perceiver, as discussed by Berkely, is not substantial in the foundations of knowledge. Further, Hume's circular problem of induction is one that I only partially agree with, as the validity of cause-and-effect conclusions by way of experience continues to be questioned; although Hume does accept this process to be custom or habit, guiding us through life, I find it difficult to accept a theory that disregards reason in cause-effect relations. Thus, it is Locke's Representational Theory of Perception that I conclude to be the most well-founded in regard to the acquisition of knowledge.

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