

An Examination of Modern Western Empiricism

Abstract

Rationalism dominated the philosophical thinking in Europe for more than hundred years. It was an attempt to justify the philosophy as a science by using the deductive methodology of mathematics. Rationalism was nourished by Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. Later with the publication of 'An Essay concerning Human understanding' John Locke established the foundation of Empiricism. Empiricism was a rising against the theory of innate knowledge which was the spirit of rationalism. John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkley (1685-1753) and David Hume (1711-1776) were the primary exponents of the modern Empiricism in the 17th and 18th century. John Locke is normally known as the founder of Empiricism as such in his work, 'An Essay concerning Human understanding' Locke first time gave the view that human knowledge can only be posterior or can be achieved only through the experience. In this write up our attempt is to encircle the basic features of the empiricism and to see how the empiricism turned out to be scepticism. This research paper deals with the conceptual discussion of modern western empiricism along with the development of empiricism and its conversion into scepticism.

Keywords: Locke, Berkley, Hume, Empiricism, Experience, Ideas, Knowledge, Cause, Scepticism.

Introduction

Empiricism was a revolution against the Rationalists' rigid philosophy where all knowledge was accepted pre existed in human mind in the form of innate ideas but John Locke declares human mind as 'a blank tablet' or *tabula rasa*, where everything is written through experience and whatever is written through experience, we call that knowledge. But Locke could not free himself from two prejudices. First one was when he accepted the existence of materialistic world and secondly he could not free himself from the postulation of God. After Locke, Berkley claims knowledge through the Sensibility, which is the only source of getting knowledge. We cannot establish the existence of the materialistic world. Only ideas can be true and only those can be proved. No outer world is existed there. In his philosophy whatever we know are just the ideas of our mind. He also claimed the existence of God as the source of those ideas which are not the ideas of our mind. Because Berkley was a priest so he also could not free himself from the postulation of God. After Locke and Berkley, David Hume raised the Empiricism at its peak and reached at the conclusion of scepticism. Hume hanged over all the traditions, all kinds of knowledge, all the assumptions and principles in a sceptic state. He declares that no knowledge is possible as certain and universal and whatever can be said certain and universal i.e. mathematics, is the knowledge only of ideas therefore no existence. Therefore no knowledge can be free from scepticism.

In this research paper we are trying to examine the theme and fundamentals of the Empiricism in which we includes three philosophers; John Locke, George Berkley and David Hume. We shall also analyse the problems which they raised after their philosophical theories. We have divided this research paper into three sections where in first section we shall deal with the empirical philosophy of John Locke. Here we shall also take his account of those assertions which contradict his own philosophy i.e. distinction of primary and secondary qualities and acceptance of God. In the second section we shall discuss upon the philosophy of Berkley where we shall put his criticism to John Locke and his refutation of general ideas along with the problems he created as subjective idealism and existence of God without experience. In the third section we shall elaborate the sceptical philosophy of David Hume. Here we shall deal with his



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discourse on scepticism and the refutation of causal relation. In the final section we shall conclude how far these philosophers proved to be empiricists and the difficulties with their theories along with the impact they left in the history philosophy

Section: (I) John Locke

Rationalist thinkers Descartes, Spinoza and Leibnitz tried to prove knowledge intuitive in the face of innate ideas though they all used different methodologies and got different conclusions. Their philosophy is called 'Rationalism'. They did not give any importance to experience. Descartes used mathematical method, Spinoza tried geometrical method and Leibniz applied logical method of analysis and synthesis. Using three different methods they got three different conclusions as Descartes concludes Dualism of mind and body, Spinoza concludes Panentheism of world within God and Leibniz concludes Pluralism of monads. Among them all no one tried to examine whether the experience has any role in the process of knowledge. That was their prominent mistake. Though they claimed their method deductive and they tried to generalize their all conclusions. But they have their own conflicts as Descartes reached at the dualism, Spinoza reached at the conclusion of pantheism and Leibniz reached at the pluralism of monads. So when Locke tried to establish Empiricism he faced these prominent issues.

1. Innate Ideas
2. Experience
3. Objective world
4. Simple and complex Ideas

Locke rejected the innate ideas and advocated the experience based knowledge. He made the concept of innate ideas itself, the canon to criticise the rationalism. Locke gives these arguments against the theory of innate ideas.

1. If there are innate ideas they should also be known to children and idiots but it is not so. "It is evident that all children and idiots have not the least apprehension or thought of them."¹ Locke objects that if the knowledge is innate or it is given already before the birth then the idiots and children should also have knowledge similar to us but it is not so that means experience affects the human cognition and therefore knowledge cannot be said innate.
2. The ideas of moral values are treated differently in the different regions of the world so they also could not be absolute otherwise they would be same for all and they would not be effected by the time, place and conditions. We see different moral principles in different society and tribes. If the moral ideas were innate they would be absolute and in that case they would not be different in different religion, races, tribes, societies and countries but it is not so therefore ideas or knowledge cannot be said innate.
3. Locke objects that how it could be possible that the ideas are innate but they revealed through the experience. They must be before experience but it is not so. If they are before the experience then they must be complete in themselves or they

should not seek for the experience to explore themselves. In other words knowledge could not be said a priori if it is revealed through experience because logically, in that case, it is proved to be a posteriori.

4. If the ideas were already existed in the mind then teaching and learning would be impossible. There is no any reason to be educated because in that condition we already know everything. We know that all which we teach and learn through the experience and if the learning and teaching is possible then the claim of innate knowledge is proved impossible.

Locke said that knowledge cannot go beyond experience. He says, "The ultimate source of our knowledge is, 'sense experience' 'in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself."² With me says Locke, "To know and to certain is the same thing, what I know that I am certain of.....and what comes short of certainty, I think cannot be called knowledge."³ He divided the qualities of object of knowledge into primary and secondary and found himself compelled to accept the existence of the real things as the base of primary qualities. According to Locke because of the limitations of the human knowledge we cannot know the substance but it must be there otherwise what would be the object of ideas. According to the Locke, "As to the real essence of substance, we only suppose their being without precisely knowing what they are."⁴ He said about the substance that he knows not what. He defined six kinds of primary qualities as solidity, extension, form, motion, rest and quantity (bulk, number, figure, and motion). He explained sensible qualities like colour, taste, sound, touch and all other besides primary as the secondary qualities. According to Locke the primary qualities are there in the things but secondary qualities are contingent depend upon the perception. With the distinction of the qualities Locke divided the world into two classes which was criticised later by Berkley. He also classified the ideas into simple and complex. Colour, taste and smell of an apple are simple ideas and idea of an apple is complex. Locke accepted the existence of god as the cause of universe and limitations of human knowledge though God cannot be experienced.

Section: (II) George Berkley

After Locke when we come to the Berkley we find that Berkley was rigid to establish the existence of God. He criticized Locke's primary and secondary qualities thus-

1. How can we accept the existence of the external world if we cannot experience it? Further if the matter is not experienced but the ideas are the only subject matter of experience then there is no question for the distinction of primary and secondary qualities.
2. The qualities that are categorized primary by Locke can easily be proved secondary. For examples the same thing can be solid for a young one but it remains not so solid for a child. The stick seems curved in the water but out of water it is state. The same thing looked small, from a long distance but when it comes near the size and

shape are great. If water seems hot and cold to different hands in different conditions as Locke says similarly why not mobility and shape are secondary qualities because at different distances the things seems different in size.

3. Berkley claims that the primary qualities of Locke are nothing more than the secondary qualities. He argues that all knowledge is achieved through the sense perception and if we have no other source of knowledge rather perception than the primary qualities are also dependent upon perception. We cannot know anyhow the primary qualities without perceiving them as mobility of object is also perceived by senses therefore they have no existence without their perception.
4. Berkley also criticized Lock's concept of abstraction. He claims that abstraction is impossible because every experience is particular and individual. He questions that how we can include the different qualities of thing in one abstract idea of that thing. How can an abstract idea of a man be possible which includes the different qualities of man at the same time like how can be a man great and small, white and grey, clever and fool etc. at the same time?

So there are no primary qualities as there is no external world existed. Berkley rejected the independent existence of objects because our senses provide us ideas only. Ayers quotes Berkley, "There is not any other substance than spirit or that which perceives."⁵ A matter should be understood an inert, senseless substance, in which extension and motion do actually subsist. At this very moment Berkley gives his famous statement '*esse est percipi*' e.g. what can be perceived and what can be known is existed and we can perceive and know merely ideas therefore only ideas are existed. It is our mind which creates the world of objects and things within us by using the idea therefore existence is only in our mind. For this statement later Berkley was much criticized by asking 'do we eat or drink ideas'. Berkley said yes if we have no other option. When he was asked about the things that are never experienced by any creature? Berkley treated this question by the concept of God. Berkley states, "Sensible things really exist; and if they really exist, they are necessarily perceived by an infinite mind or God. This furnishes you with a direct and immediate demonstration from a most evident principle of being of God."⁶ He divided the mind into finite and infinite. Human mind is finite and God is infinite mind. So the ideas that are not experienced by anyone are the ideas of infinite mind or of God. According to the Berkley, "The ideas imprinted on the senses by the author of the nature are called real things."⁷ Here Berkley did a mistake. He accepted the existence of God even God cannot be experienced.

Thus Locke as the foundation of ideas accepted the existence of external world and Berkley accepted the existence of God. They both could not free themselves from the shackles of reason and got wrong conclusion applying the empirical method. This theory of Empiricism later becomes the weapon for Hume used it to demolish the arch of philosophy.

David Hume

Hume rejected innate ideas because they were formulated by rationalists misusing the deductive method but this method can be applied only in the mathematics not to define the behaviour and existence of human beings and the world. Hume also rejected the concept of general ideas and matter as senses and mind can know only impressions. Hume used Epirico Inductive method in its extended and strict sense and rejected all kinds of existence. He clarifies, "We never can conceive any kinds of existence, but those perceptions."⁸ He proclaimed that nothing can be proved existed. According to Hume, "We can't say whether impressions arise immediately from the object, or are produced by the creative power of the mind, or are derived from the author of our being."⁹ According to Hume two kinds of knowledge is possible; matters of fact and relations of idea. Knowledge of matters of fact is provided through the sense perception which creates impressions upon our senses. Hume first time uses this term impression in this regard. Knowledge which is given through these impressions is empirical and cannot be claimed certain and necessary because a lot of illusions are there which challenge the certainty, necessity and universality of this knowledge which is the knowledge of matters of fact. Second kind of knowledge is relations of idea. Ideas in Hume's philosophy are faint images of impression which are left in mind by the repetition of impressions. Knowledge of mathematics and logic is the knowledge through the relations of idea. Knowledge of mathematics and logic is certain, necessary and universal but only abstract and being a hard core empiricist Hume denies it as no objective reality is possible therefore no experience possible.

Hume caught a big mistake that had been done for the centuries by all the philosophers even the Locke and Berkley who also were Empiricist, caught in that mistake and the mistake was *cause and effect theory* that means every effect is an necessary result of an certain cause. This assumption had been taken as the absolute principle. Nothing happens without a cause. Everything has a cause and that cause is essential with the same effect every other time. If one says without cause nothing can be happened Hume does not have any problem with it but when one says there is an essential and necessary cause behind every effect and people try to make predictions upon the theory, Hume firmly stands against this determinism. He objects, "When we look about us towards external objects and consider the operation of causes, we are never able a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality which binds the effect to the cause, and renders one an infallible consequence of other."¹⁰ One cannot say that the sun must rise in the east always; one cannot say that the fire must burn or harm the hand. Hume states, "Knowledge and probability are of such contrary and disagreeing natures, that they cannot well run insensibly into each other."¹¹ Again Hume says, "All knowledge degenerates into probability."¹² If I found one thousand rupees on the road and I get very happy, it cannot be predicted that the thousand rupees is a

necessary cause of happiness. The predictions are possible in analytical judgements as in mathematics but when we talk about the synthetic judgements nothing can be predicted. A.J Ayer quotes, "That food nourishes, sleep refreshes and fire warms us...all this we know, not by discovering any necessary connection between our ideas, but only by the observation of the settled laws of nature"¹³ There is notorious statement by Hume regarding this confusion as 'reason is the slave of passions.' Actually we look two things with each other and two or more things in a linear succession every other time and accept a symmetrical relation between them. That is a principle of analytical judgements and it cannot be applied as necessary principle of empirical knowledge. In the words, to quote R.H Popkin, "Hume tries to establish that we can never have adequate rational evidence for claiming a chain of reasoning to be a legitimate proof."¹⁴ Further, the experiences of synthetic world are always particulars and when we try to conclude a general conclusion from those particular examples that always remains doubtful. Look at this example-

1. Party 'A' politicians are corrupt.
2. Party 'B' politicians are corrupt.
3. Therefore all politicians are corrupt.

Here on the basis of corruption of some politicians (Not all because we cannot examine all in synthetic world) if we conclude all the politicians corrupt, that cannot be certain and necessary and in that case our enquiries always remain doubtful. We cannot examine all men whether they are honest or corrupt or not and in synthetic world formulation of a universal, certain and necessary social or moral principle is impossible. If we say $2+2=4$ it is always true because we get the same result every time and because these are the analytical conclusions. But this deductive method cannot be applied for the synthetic judgements.

Aims of the study

This research paper aims at the elaboration of the significance and specifications of the modern western empiricism, a critical era in philosophy after the rationalism. For the better understanding we have pointed out following issues as the objectives of this research paper.

1. To draw a brief sketch of empiricism in modern western philosophy.
2. To point out and analyse some fundamental issues of knowledge in the philosophy which were not dealt in earlier philosophical theories as whether knowledge is possible or not and if yes then how and what kind of knowledge is possible.
3. To exhibit the development of the empiricism from Locke to Hume or from empiricism to scepticism.
4. To explore the specifications and characteristics of modern western empiricism in order to make an outline of this philosophy.

Review of Literature

I made a review of the following literature before and during the writing of present research paper.

Primary and Secondary Qualities by Charles Kaijo <http://www.fresnostate.edu/artshum/philosophy/documents/Kaijo-CUPR1-1.pdf>

In the above study author made a comparative analysis between Locke and Berkley regarding their views on the distinction of primary and secondary qualities. In this study the author concludes that the refutation of primary and secondary qualities by Berkley sounds better than the distinction of these qualities by Locke. Locke made a wrong interpretation of the sensible objects that they have two kinds of qualities but it revealed that the qualities depend upon the sense perception if they have qualities. In conclusion author agreed with Berkley by giving his own view.

A Critical Analysis of Empiricism by F. M. Anayet Hossain, Department of Philosophy, University of Chittagong, Chittagong, Bangladesh.

In the study given above author has discussed about the source of knowledge, objective and subjective reality of knowledge within the criteria of modern empiricism. The author found that it is true that we have no other source of knowledge besides perception and according to agnostics if sense perception is consistent with reality then knowledge is true and if it is not inconsistent with reality then knowledge is false. The author also finds that empiricism leads to the subjectivism and that the empiricism cannot be acceptable completely because it divides the world into two classes of entity.

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Conclusion

Thus in this study while we analysed the distinction of primary and secondary qualities by Locke and refutation of this distinction by Berkley we find that Berkley's position is better than Lock but it does not mean that Berkley's entire philosophy was in correct direction. Charles Kaijo in his article on this issue argues, "Given an examination and analysis of real world examples, there indeed does not appear to be a distinction between primary and secondary qualities, we cannot know if qualities such as extension, figure, solidity, or motion, exist within the object itself because like secondary qualities, our perception of those things can change under certain conditions, change in position being an example."¹⁵ we find that Berkley also dispersed from his basic principle of empiricism in his philosophy which was elaborated very critically by David Hume later on. Using Empirico inductive method Hume raised a lot of questions in philosophy and raised the Empiricism to the scepticism. When Hume proved the determined

theory of cause and effect just a co-incident the whole philosophical empire felt shaken with its roots. Later his scepticism becomes the base of Kant's critical philosophy and transcendental method. So Empiricism has a very important place in the history of philosophy which paved up the philosophy. It was a rising against the misunderstanding, misuses and the misleading of deductive method, absolutism, idealism and rationalism. The Empiricism later became the fundamental concept of Pragmatism through Immanuel Kant's philosophy.

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