

Empiricism versus Rationalism: Understanding the Acquisition of Knowledge

A PHILOSOPHICAL
PRESENTATION BY
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Getting to Know the Theories

EMPIRICISM

The main source of knowledge is experience.

John Locke – Representational Theory of Perception

George Berkeley – Idealist Theory of Knowledge

David Hume - The Problem of Induction

RATIONALISM

The main source of knowledge is the mind alone.

Rene Descartes - Meditations on First Philosophy

Rene Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy



Let us meditate on this together.. (literally!)

According to Descartes, the mind alone is the source of all knowledge

Descartes has become famously known for arguing that embodiment consists of more than being lodged in our bodies as a pilot in a vessel; **“but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity”**.

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”. This, during his time, helped scientists understand how individuals had been mistaken in seeing the physical things, events, or processes they thought they had seen; instead, they had **‘seen’ images or ideas in their own minds** and **“mistaken these for effects of things whose real natures were being revealed by the new physical scientists”**

Descartes' Wax Analogy

Descartes argument can be understood through his analogy of a solid piece of wax, which is **“capable of innumerable changes”** 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”**

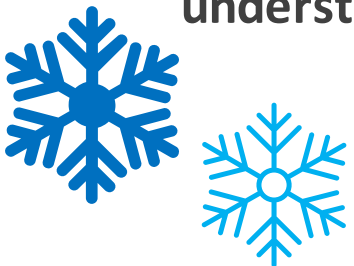
This leads to Descartes understanding that the piece of wax is perceived and known not through his senses but **through his mind alone**, where the **“power of conceiving what is called a thing, or a truth, or a thought”** is **“from no other source than my own nature”**.



John Locke's Representational Theory of Perception

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 things, Locke further defines his understanding of such perceptions, stating that **“whatsoever 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”**.

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”**.

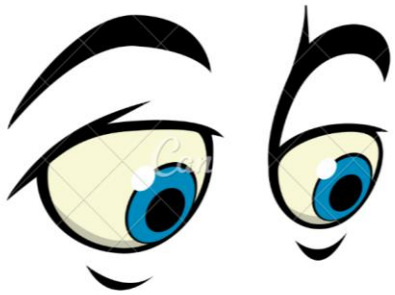


George Berkeley's Idealist Theory of Knowledge

"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**. 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**: but whoever shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflexion, will not perceive in them any power or activity; there is, therefore, no such thing contained in them."

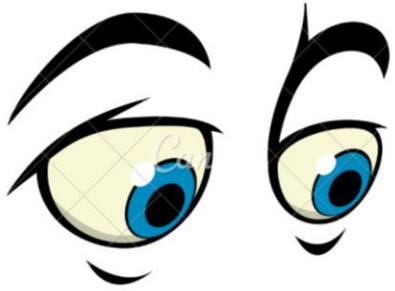
To Be is to Be Perceived



"I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure, and vary and shift the scene as oft as I think fit. It is no more than willing, and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy; and by the same power it is obliterated and makes way for another. This making and unmaking of ideas doth very properly denominate the mind active. **Thus much is certain and grounded on experience; but when we think of unthinking agents or of exciting ideas exclusive of volition, we only amuse ourselves with words.**"

"But, whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by Sense have not a like dependence on my will. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other senses; the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my will. **There is therefore some other Will or Spirit that produces them.**"

To Be is to Be Perceived Cont.



According to Berkeley, “**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**”.

Whenever we act upon the world through experience, or perceive objects, **we act by moving our bodies, through actions and agency.**

Following this, considering the analogy of an infant and mother, the infant can only see if its mother is close or far on the **basis of experienced correlations of the ideas of sight and touch.**

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**” .

David Hume's Problem of Induction

We suppose **"there is a connexion between the present fact and that which is inferred from it."**

"all the objects of human reason or enquiry" 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.

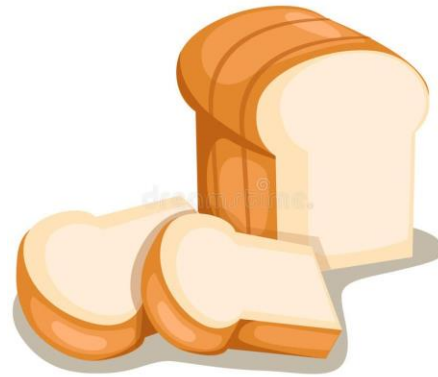
So, concerning Empiricism, Hume has us question how this process of induction can be justified, explaining that **"we must enquire how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect"**; this is known as the Problem of Induction.

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”**.

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 nourishment and support of a human body”**.

“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”.

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?”**.



Hume's Skeptical Solution to This Circular Argument

While we have stated that **“all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect”**, entirely derived from experience, **“and that all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition that the future will be conformable to the past”**, 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”**, instead, it is custom or habit that drives our conclusions; **“custom, then, is the great guide of human life”** on Hume’s view.

Which Theory Do I Believe to Be the Strongest, and Why?



While **Descartes** proposes that knowledge is **fundamentally separable from action and other practical concerns (is innate)**, **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 favour. **Hume** accepts the **process of induction built on cause-and-effect relations** and that our **conclusions drawn from custom/habit** 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**.

Locke's Representational Theory of Perception

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 Berkeley, 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.**

It is **Locke's Representational Theory of Perception that I conclude to be the most well-founded in regard to the acquisition of knowledge.**

Thank You!

I hope you, too, take some time to ponder empiricism and rationalism and choose which theory you believe to be the strongest!

Have a great day.



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