

David Hume's Empiricism: Some Critical Reflections on Contemporary Issues

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Abstract

David Hume's theory of knowledge is very instrumental in the history of British empiricism. His ideas were so profound that they woke Immanuel Kant from his dogmatic slumbers. What ideas did David Hume advance? How did these ideas surpass those of his British colleagues on the subject of knowledge? How did he demarcate the gap between impressions and ideas, on the one hand, and simple and complex ideas on the other hand? Through the employment of the method of critical analysis, this study investigates the ideas of Hume on the origin and association of ideas. Taking the thoughts of Immanuel Kant as our cue, we maintain that indeed, David Hume and his British epistemology predecessors began on a wrong footing advancing that the mind is passive in the process of knowledge acquisition. Hume's analysis on the subject of causation, has several implications, one of which is absolute skepticism. This essay employs the ideas of J.S. Mill and J.S. Mackie on the subject not only to show the problems with David Hume's analysis but to also offer other instances on the same subject. On the whole, this study submits that in spite of the difficulties that one may discern in Hume's analysis on knowledge, his verdict on the place of causality and how same informs the scientific method of induction underscores the continuous relevance of Hume's ideas even in the contemporary times.

Keywords: causality, David Hume, empiricism, contemporary issues, western philosophy

Introduction

The aim of this study is to do a critical examination of David Hume's thoughts and ideas on knowledge acquisition. There is no doubt that his philosophy is deep, encyclopaedic and well-organized, as it also contains far-reaching consequences and higher level of development vis-a-vis the thoughts of his colleagues in the British empiricist tradition. In this essay, we shall investigate such questions as to: how do we know? Are our senses fortified with the requisite bases for knowing?

In order to realize the objective of making a critique of the ideas of David Hume, this essay employs the method of critical analysis. Before we proceed however, it would be helpful to commence this exercise with a very brief overview of Hume. This is in fulfilment of the principle that no philosopher thinks in a vacuum. There is an interaction between a philosopher's mind and his/her environment. The next section offers Hume's thoughts on

knowledge. In this connection, we shall be specifically concerned about his response to his predecessor (in this case, John Locke) and then his own seemingly advanced alternative. The third section concerns a critical appraisal of his theory of knowledge and its contemporary relevance to the discourse on induction as a viable scientific method. The fourth part of this essay concludes the discourse.

David Hume died of cancer at the age of sixty-five. In the face of his own death, he retained his composure and cheerfulness, having achieved the goal of the ancient skeptics, *ataraxia* (unperturbedness). It may be questioned, though, whether his calm good nature resulted from his skepticism, for apparently, he exhibited this trait of personality throughout his life. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, of a “good family,” as he said in his autobiography, Hume was encouraged to study law but “found insurmountable aversion to everything but the pursuits of philosophy and general learning.” Before he was thirty, he published *A Treatise of Human Nature*, one of the most important philosophical works ever written. Yet, at the time, Hume’s *Treatise* “fell dead-born from the press,” as he put it, “without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots.” Convinced that the failure of the work was due more to form than content, he recast parts of it anew in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. The latter work, in Hume’s opinion, was incomparably his best. Hume’s last philosophical work, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, was published posthumously in 1779. There are differences between Hume’s *Treatise* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, his two works in epistemology, and philosophers disagree about the merits of each. Although during his lifetime, Hume was primarily known as a historian rather than a philosopher, his impact on subsequent philosophy, especially in Great Britain and other English-speaking countries, and on Kant was significant (Moore & Bruder, 2011:131). In this vein, this study proceeds to examine his ideas on knowledge.

David Hume on Knowledge and Its Acquisition: An Overview

In a way, it is safe to say that the epistemology of David Hume commences as a direct reaction to the thoughts of John Locke. We shall not bother with the ideas of Locke in this study. Rather, we shall proceed to David Hume’s theory of knowledge and merely hint at the connection between the thoughts of the duo.

Locke, like Descartes, had used the vague word ‘idea’ for ‘whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks’ (Hume, 2007, Sect I. i. 8). Thus according to Locke, anyone who sees the blue sky or feels a pain

has in his mind an idea of that colour or of that sensation, and likewise anyone who merely thinks about the sky or contemplates pain also has in his mind corresponding ideas. Hume, however, considers this broad usage to be inappropriate, for it conflates together two quite distinct mental operations—namely the awareness of sensations or feelings, and the consideration of thoughts—and only the latter, in his opinion, can properly be called ‘ideas’ in the conventional sense. The *Treatise of Human Nature* begins by dividing the contents (‘perceptions’) of the mind into two classes: impressions and ideas; instead of following Locke in calling them all ‘ideas’. Impressions are more forceful, more vivid, than ideas (Ofuasia, 2016). Impressions include sensations and emotions, ideas are what are involved in thinking and reasoning. It is never quite clear, in Hume, what is meant by vividness: it seems to be a matter sometimes of how much detail a perception contains, sometimes of how much emotional colouring it has, sometimes of how great an effect it has on action. The notion is too vague to make a sharp distinction, and the use of it to differentiate thought and feeling makes each appear too like the other (Kenny, 2006:256).

Hume, therefore, restricts the scope of ‘idea’ to refer to thoughts alone, coining the new term ‘impression’ to refer to sensations and feelings, and the term ‘perception’ for the general class of objects of the mind, comprising impressions and ideas together (so Lockean ‘ideas’ become Humean ‘perceptions’). Ideas, Hume says, are copies of impressions. This looks at first like a definition, but Hume appeals to experience in support of it. From time to time, he invites the reader to look within himself to verify the principle, and we are told that it is supported by the fact that a man born blind has no idea of colours. Whether it is a definition or hypothesis, the thesis is intended to apply only to simple ideas (Anthony, 2006:256).

In general, and had been hinted above, impressions are more ‘forceful and vivacious’ than ideas, though this rule can break down if ‘the mind be disordered by disease or madness’ (Hume, 2007: Sect 2.1): a madman’s thoughts could be as vivid to him as his sensations, in which case, he would presumably be unable to tell the difference. Presumably the particular ideas of colour, taste, etc. are understood to be simple ideas, while the idea of the apple is a complex idea that combines them, but in the *Enquiry*, Hume gives no such clear examples of complexes composed of simples. Instead, he gives two instances of complex ideas, namely that of a golden mountain and that of a virtuous horse, each itself composed of two further complex ideas (Hume, 2007: Sect 2.5). This might suggest that he no longer wishes to commit himself to a view about which ideas, if any, are absolutely simple, though he later hints that ideas of colour seem to be (Hume, 2007: Sect 2.8).

We can construct a complex idea of the 'Eko Atlantic City', without ever having seen any such city. But in the case of simple ideas, Hume says, the rule holds almost without exception that there is a one-to-one correspondence between ideas and impressions. The meaning of 'simple' turns out to be as slippery as that of 'vivid'. But whenever he wishes to attack metaphysics, Hume puts the principle 'no idea without antecedent impression' to vigorous use.

Hume tells us that there are two ways in which impressions reappear as ideas: there are ideas of memory and ideas of imagination. Ideas of memory differ from ideas of imagination in two respects: they are more vivid, and they preserve the order in time and space of the original impressions. Once again, it is not clear exactly what distinction is here being made. Are these differences supposed to distinguish genuine from delusory memory? The second criterion would suffice to make the distinction, but of course no one could ever apply it in his own case to tell whether any particular memory was genuine. Or are the criteria meant to distinguish would-be memory, whether accurate or mistaken, from the free play of the imagination? Here, the first criterion might be tried, but it would be unreliable, since fantasies can be more obsessive than memories.

When Hume talks of memory, he always seems to have in mind the re-living in imagination of past events; but of course, that is only one, and not the most important, exercise of our knowledge of the past. If 'memory' is a word that catches many different things, 'imagination' covers an even wider variety of different events, capacities, and mistakes. Imagination may be, *inter alia*, misperception ('is that a knock at the door, or am I only imagining it?'), misremembering ('did I post the letter, or am I only imagining I did?'), unsupported belief ('I imagine it won't be long before he's sorry he married her'), the entertainment of hypotheses ('imagine the consequences of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan'), and creative originality ('Blake's imagination was unsurpassed'). Not all these kinds of imagination necessarily involve the kind of mental imagery which Hume takes as the paradigm.

When imagery *is* involved, its role is quite different from that assigned to it by Hume. He believed that the meaning of the words of our language consisted in their relation to impressions and ideas. According to him, it is the flow of impressions and ideas in our minds which ensures that our utterances are not empty sounds, but the expression of thought; and if a word cannot be shown to refer to an impression or to an idea, it must be discarded as meaningless.

He then suggests that all of this associative behaviour reduces to the operation of three relations or principles of connexion among ideas, namely,

resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause or effect. The section ends rather tamely, with Hume stating that although he can find no other principles of association besides these three, nevertheless, he cannot prove that his enumeration is complete. This does not seem to be of great concern to him, presumably because nothing of great consequence hangs on it in what follows. Indeed, the only significant role of the association of ideas in the *Enquiry* is to provide an analogy with the operation of custom. In Part II of Section V (Hume, 2007: Sect 5.20), Hume suggests that custom, an instinctive mechanism that underlies all of our factual reasoning, operates in a somewhat similar way to the association of ideas. We proceed with a critical reflection on the ideas of David Hume.

Hume's Theory of Knowledge and the Scientific Method of Induction

As we had hinted at the earlier parts of this essay, David Hume, though favours indirect/representationalist approach to knowledge and perception, is still skeptical as to whether we can know realities. Immanuel Kant is one of the most popular thinkers who took Hume up in this direction only for him (Kant) to also end up being skeptical about the noumenal world. What arguments were employed by Immanuel Kant?

Kant compared himself to Copernicus (1473–1543), who developed the heliocentric theory of planetary motion, which eventually replaced the old view that the sun and planets circle the earth. Before Copernicus, people assumed that the apparent motion of the sun was its real motion. Copernicus realized that the apparent motion of the sun was due to our motion, not the sun's motion. Kant had a very similar idea, known sometimes as the Copernican revolution in philosophy. According to this idea, the fundamental properties or characteristics of objects in the world outside the mind are due to our minds, not to the objects themselves (Unah, 2004). What Kant meant is perhaps best illustrated by thinking of a person wearing blue glasses. The person sees everything in blue. Why? This is because the glasses 'impose' blueness on the person's sensations (Moore & Bruder, 2011:136). Likewise, all of us experience the world as consisting of external objects. Not only that, we see the objects as existing in space and time and as related to one another causally. Why? Because, Kant theorized, our minds impose these forms on our sensations. Our sense-data are processed by the mind in such a way that we have the sort of experience we do, just as the sense-data of Mr. Blue Glasses are processed by his glasses in such a way that he has the sort of blue experience he does. Kant's revolutionary theory - hat sense-data are processed by the mind in such a way that we have the sort of experience we do have -ex-

plains how we can be sure of many of the things we are sure of. For example, according to Hume, we cannot be absolutely certain that the next flame we encounter will be accompanied by heat (maybe the flaming stuff will be some odd, new synthetic substance). Nevertheless, we can be certain that the flame will be in space and time. This knowledge could not be derived from experience, because experience informs us only of the way things have been so far, not of the way they must be. We can have this certainty that any flame we encounter will be in space and time, Kant said, only if space and time are 'imposed' on our sensory data by the perceiving component of the mind. He avers that:

...time has only one dimension; different times are not simultaneous but successive (just as different spaces are not successive but simultaneous). These principles cannot be derived from experience, for experience would give neither strict universality nor apodeictic certainty. We should only be able to say that common experience teaches us that it is so; not that it must be so. These principles are valid as rules under which alone experiences are possible; and they instruct us (Kant, 1965).

Just think of an electric door or a TV camera. Data enter into the device, but it does not experience anything. The device is sensitive to light - it has 'sensations' - but no experience. Likewise, for our sensations to qualify as experience, they must be processed in certain specific ways. First of all, these sensations must be subject to spatial-temporal shaping. That is, the perceiving part of the mind must perceive them as objects existing outside us in space and time. Second, they must also be conceptualized - brought under concepts. For raw sensory stimulation to qualify as experience, it must be organized and recognized as a person or car or strawberry or whatever. Sensory stimulation that is not conceptualized is "blind," Kant said. Further, Kant held, to qualify as experience, sensory stimulation must be unified in a single connected consciousness. If it were not unified, it could never qualify as experience. In addition, he said, unification and conceptualization must conform to rules of cognition, just as perception must conform to spatial-temporal shaping. Thus, sensory stimulation must be organized as the experience of objects in space and time; but, likewise, it must be organized as the experience of objects that conform to cause and effect and other relationships. Change, for example, must be experienced as the change of a permanent substance whose quantity in nature remains constant. This theory explains nicely, Kant said, how we know that we will never experience uncaused change. The only way to explain such certain knowledge is to assume that the mind 'imposes' causation on experienced change. To qualify as experienced, a change must be

subject to causation - just as to qualify as seen, a thing must be blue to the person who is forced to wear blue glasses.

In substance, then, this was Kant's response to the challenge David Hume put to epistemology. Hume was partially correct. He was correct in thinking that knowledge begins with experience. But he was not correct in thinking that knowledge is derived from experience. It is better to say that the mind is awakened by experience. But once awakened, it does not simply receive and store stimulation as would a camera. It actively processes it according to underlying principles and categories, which can be disclosed by careful examination. However, and this is a big 'however', according to Kant, our knowledge is limited to phenomena, or experienceable objects - things that could be the subject of experience. For only things that are experienced are subject to the categorizing and unifying activity of the mind. To be experienced, objects must be in space and time, related to one another by cause and effect, and otherwise subject to the principles of cognition; but we cannot apply these categories and principles to things "as they are in themselves" - noumena, or things that exist outside experience.

Concerning this 'noumenal world' beyond experience, the world of the thing-in-itself, *das Ding-an-sich* (Kant, 1965), skepticism is unavoidable, for Kant. When rules that apply to the world of experience are applied to a reality-beyond-experience, contradictions and mistakes result. Kant was willing to say that three "ideas of reason" - God, world, self - at least point to possibilities in the noumenal realm, but we can have no knowledge of the realm. Kant's epistemology limits legitimate metaphysical reasoning to this world. Hume's theory of causality may not be spared as well. For his ideas of causality implies that we may not have knowledge of how things really operate and this is, in essence a form of skeptical conclusion. Is David Hume right in this connection? Let us peruse the responses from J.S. Mill and J.L Mackie on the same subject.

The first hammer falls on the conviction on the idea that for Hume, (2007) events, including causes and effects are logically independent of one another. Hume here seems to be convinced from the logical point of view that causes and events are distinct events that do not depend on each other. There is no doubt that there is a flaw in this argument. Who says logic is the standard or praxis for the relation between cause and event? In other words, is there anywhere written that logic is the model for whether a cause and effect are distinct events? The essay responds in the negative and points out that from the biological perspective, it is not in doubt whether the product of an embryo is caused by the union of an ovum and a sperm cell. In other words, sperms and eggs are the causes of embryos. Both of these even beat the no-

tion of logical relations that Hume seem to be looking for. From the biological angle, it is clear that where sperms and eggs do not meet, it would be close to impossibility talking about a foetus (whether it be artificial or natural). To even strengthen our objection of David Hume on this subject, it is glaring and the case that the sperm-egg relation is not limited to humans alone but cut across the realm of non-human animals as well.

In a similar response to the Humean challenge, the British scholar John Stuart Mill (1843) argues as that contra Hume, we can discover cause-effect relations to things in different circumstances. He enunciates five of them as: method of agreement; method of difference; method of agreement and difference; method of concomitant variation; and method of residues. Mill was strongly convinced that each of these may be applied to situations and one can come out sure and be convinced that there was a cause-effect relation between events.

Another position on causation which seems to question the finality of the work of David Hume comes from the angle of John Mackie (1974). Mackie even went farther than Hume, Kant and Mill on the subject and introduced logic which Hume had denied to be existent in causal relations. Let us consider how Mackie raised his objection shortly.

Sentences having the form, "If A, then B," are called conditional statements. They say that if the condition A is present, then, the consequence B will also hold. In this case, A is called a sufficient condition of B. For example, in the title of an old song – "If you've got the money, honey, I've got the time" – your possession of money is sufficient for the availability of my time. Another kind of conditional statement has the form, "If not A, then not B." In this case, it says that if the condition A is not present, B will not hold. In this case, A is a necessary condition of B. B will not occur unless A does. The concluding line of the aforementioned song is, "If you run out of money, honey, I'll run out of time" (Salmon, 2002:25). This says that your possession of money is necessary for the availability of my time. If both of these statements are true, we say that A is a necessary and sufficient condition of B. According to the song, then, your possession of money is necessary and sufficient for the availability of my time.

Conditional statements of the foregoing sorts are often construed as generalizations, i.e., the symbols "A" and "B" are taken to refer to classes or types of events. Given this interpretation, to say that A is a sufficient condition of B means that in every case in which an event of *type A* occurs, an event of *type B* will also occur. Similarly, to say that A is a necessary condition of B means that whenever an event of *type A* fails to occur, no event of *type B* will occur. For example, having one's head cut off is a sufficient condition of dy-

ing; it is not a necessary condition because there are many other causes of death besides decapitation. Having oxygen to breathe is a necessary condition for staying alive. In the absence of oxygen, a person dies. But having oxygen to breathe is not a sufficient condition of life; without food and water as well a person cannot continue to live.

A philosophical account of causation according to which causal relations can be analysed entirely in terms of sufficient conditions, necessary conditions, or any combination of such conditions is a *regularity theory*. Those who hold regularity theories understand such conditions as generalizations, and they usually require that if an instance of *A* is a cause of an instance of *B*, it precedes that instance of *B*. Hume's theory, as explained above, makes his view a regularity theory. In addition to temporal priority and constant conjunction, he also requires spatio-temporal contiguity (Mackie, 1974:25).

Mackie (1974: 62) adopts the acronym INUS – standing for an Insufficient but Non-redundant part of a condition that is Unnecessary but Sufficient – to designate such causal factors as the careless tossing of the cigarette. The complex of conditions containing the improper disposal of a burning cigarette is a sufficient, but not necessary, condition of the burning of the barn; the dropping of the lighted cigarette does not, by itself, constitute a sufficient condition for the burning of the barn, but it is a necessary part of that complex of conditions. A natural question arises at this point. Why do we pick out the dropping of the cigarette as the cause, rather than another indispensable part of the entire sufficient condition, e.g. the presence of dry straw? According to Mackie, this decision often depends on what is considered usual or unusual in the circumstances. In our particular case, it may be that dry straw is usually present; what is unusual is its contact with a burning cigarette. In some barns, however, the presence of dry straw might be an unusual circumstance (depending on what the barn is normally used for). If the barn had been of the latter kind, the presence of dry straw might be cited as the cause. It, too, is an INUS condition. As Mackie clearly notes, the selection of one INUS condition rather than another as *the cause* depends strongly on the context. Human interests, purposes, and knowledge play a large part in the selection of the cause. As we saw, Hume's analysis locates causation "in the mind (imagination)." Mackie's aim is to find causation "in the objects", i.e. in the external world as it exists independently of the human mind. Contexts are determined by the human point of view; conceptions of causation that depend on context don't succeed in finding causation "in the objects" (Mackie, 1974).

Mackie's analysis of the nature of cause-effect relation is a very tough and more elaborate than the one given by David Hume. Mackie considers

that there are several ways that we can consider the cause and effect relation between objects from the perspective of how they may be observed in the object. In spite of all these differences, it is important to point out that Hume's epistemic conclusions on causality is instrumental for the development and emergence of discourses on the scientific method of induction which continues to haunt researches in the 21st century. At this juncture, we concern ourselves with the idea of induction and implications for science in the contemporary era.

Hume's Idea of Induction and Implications for Science in the Contemporary Era

Much as the method of induction is replete for scientific use and the codification of ideas about the world, it is worth stressing that the scientists have yet to critically engage how the philosophic puzzle of causation announces itself as induction. It seems to have been taken for granted that induction is fool proof. When this problem is assessed from the intellectual gaze of Hume, the connection between induction and causation becomes clearer. While speaking on the nature of causation, Hume (2007:46) opines:

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 connexion; 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 attended with motion in the second. This is the whole that appears to the outward senses. The mind feels no sentiment or inward impression from this succession of objects: Consequently, there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, anything which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connexion.

The parallel between the foregoing excerpt on causation and the problem of induction will be more lucid when we consider what induction itself means. According to Michael Humer (2002:293), induction refers to "a species of non-deductive reasoning in which the conclusion generalizes on the information given in the premises." For example, since all observed zebras have black and white stripes, then it is safe to infer that all zebras have white and black stripes. Induction involves reasoning from the observed to the unobserved and Hume would think that there is no connection between these inferences. In other words, there is no reason to believe that, for Hume, even the scientists are correct. Obviously, the problem of induction still haunts sci-

entists but continue to erect the undeniable place of Hume in contemporary scholarship.

For the scientist, the process of observing phenomena and collection of data to analyse the things examined is followed with the use of this data to make predictions (Uduigwomen, 1996:73). These predictions are queried by Hume, if there is any logical connection between them and the inference that is being made about them such that it is necessary that what has been predicted and inferred would be the case. Scientists themselves have a hard time trying to figure out how this actually works and this is why it is obvious that even they cannot ascertain to the origin and necessity in this connection. Science, regrettably is yet to answer this question which is also tied to the Humean causation skeptical conclusion. This is why Karl Raimund Popper (1963) gives this problem a critical exposition in his *Conjecture and Refutations*. In spite of announcing that he has solved the problem of induction, it is the case that the problem of induction which had been informed by the problem of causality which goes as far back as David Hume is still very much alive.

Conclusion

This study aims to make a critique of the epistemology of David Hume. In this connection, it commenced with the biography of David Hume. From his biography, it was discovered that throughout his life, he was perceived more as a historian than a philosopher. Afterwards, attention was given to his thoughts on ideas and impressions. For Hume, whereas the latter are vivid and lively, the former are nothing but the copies of the latter and are less vivid. He proceeded to show the distinction between complex and simple ideas as well. The next aspect was to employ the ideas of Immanuel Kant to show that Hume's epistemology and those of his fellow British scholars commenced with a misleading premise – that the mind is passive when perception is taking place. Hume on the other hand, counters this possibility and turns the case around. The ideas of J.S. Mill and J.L. Mackie were also instrumental in not only showing the problems with Hume's thoughts on causality but also alternative conceptions on the subject of causality. The discourse on causation and its intersection with the scientific method of induction reveals, among many other facts, the enviable place of Hume in contemporary scholarship.

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