

THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DAVID HUME'S "RADICAL" EMPIRICISM

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Abstract

Perhaps, it is important to highlight right from the beginning that the term “radical empiricism” is used here in a sense different from its normal use in the philosophical parlance to refer to a philosophical doctrine propounded by the American philosopher, William James. Here, it is employed to qualify Hume's version of empiricism and show its marked deviation from the empiricist tradition of his predecessors. This paper, therefore, explores the “radical” nature of Hume's version of empiricism and exposes the explicit and implicit philosophical implications of his claims. It analyzes and evaluates Hume's claims about the origin and foundation of knowledge, the narrow limits of the human mind, the emptiness of the notions of substance and causality and the irrationality of holding on to the metaphysical ideas of the self, God and the world. It is the opinion of this paper that Hume's radical empiricism deals all hopes of establishing the foundations of knowledge a heavy blow; the philosophical equivalence of bulldozing the entire edifice of epistemic certainty. The epistemological implications of Hume's philosophy are examined at length. Towards the end of this paper, a section which briefly examines the relationship between Hume's “radical” empiricism and the radical empiricism of William James is included.

Keywords: Empiricism, Impression, Idea, Skepticism, Radical Empiricism.

Introduction

The Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), is perhaps one of the most consistent and radical empiricists in the history of Philosophy. Taking the empiricism of the modern period to its logical (though radically bizarre) conclusion, he demolishes the very foundations of philosophical and scientific knowledge—the very thing which the philosophers of the modern period, from Descartes, tried to establish. Consequently, his “radical” empiricism steered the course of philosophy steadily to the shores of skepticism.

Hume set out to establish the foundation of all sciences. His point of departure lay in the fact that the science (and philosophy) of his age was characterized by such splintering and dissenting opinions. He therefore took up for himself, the task of giving scientific knowledge a firm foundation. To achieve this, he embarks on an analysis of human nature itself, especially with regards to the process of acquiring knowledge. However, the results he achieves stand in utter contrast to his original mission. The irony in Hume's philosophy is summed up by Lawhead thus:

Hume declared his goal to be that of setting out the foundations for all the other sciences. It will be interesting to keep this claim in mind as we study the development of Hume's philosophy, for there is a certain irony here. He presents himself as a stonemason, setting out the foundations of the sciences, but his actual

results will make him appear more like a demolition expert, destroying any hopes of scientific knowledge.¹

With all these in mind, this paper explores the “radical” empiricism of Hume and exposes the explicit and implicit philosophical implications of his claims. This exploration comes in five sections. The first is the introductory section which also throws some light on the background of Hume's radical empiricism. The second chapter explores Hume's radically empiricist stance at length. The third section exposes the implications of Hume's claims. The fourth section is the evaluation and also contains a brief analysis of how Hume's version of empiricism shares a link with James' radical empiricism. The fifth section is the concluding section.

Hume's “Radical” Empiricism

Hume's empiricism is here described as being a radical empiricism. The term itself connotes both the consistency which characterizes his empiricist philosophy as well as the extremity and rather bizarre nature of the conclusions that follow from his claims. Remarkably, Hume takes empiricism to its logical conclusion. Unlike Locke and Berkeley, he was unwilling to temper his position by adopting commonsense conclusions which were prevalent among his predecessors and contemporaries. For instance, while Locke and Berkeley maintained that all we can know comes from the impression of sensory qualities on the mind, they refused to abandon the age-long philosophical tradition which conceives of qualities as inhering in some underlying substratum, referred to as substance. While Locke would define it as “something-I-know-not-what,”² Berkeley would proceed to postulate the existence of mental or spiritual entities in which the qualities encountered on experience inhere.³ Hume, however, takes a radical position by eliminating this idea altogether. In this and similar circumstances, Hume would display such a radical commitment to consistent empiricism that is unparalleled in the history of modern philosophy.

It is important at this point, to make some clarification. The term “radical empiricism” is usually employed to refer to the philosophical doctrine propounded by American pragmatist, William James (1842-1910). This doctrine maintains that both particulars and relations between them are embodied in experience and thus must be taken into account in our explanations of reality.⁴ To mark the distinction between James' doctrine and Hume's version of empiricism, the “radical” which here qualifies Hume's version of empiricism is always given in quotation marks

¹ William Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 4th ed. (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2015), 336.

² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 1999), 2.23.2.

³ Cf. George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Colin M. Turbayne (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), sec. 26.

⁴ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), Essay 1.

throughout this paper. Later on, however, the relationship between Hume's version of empiricism and James' doctrine will be analyzed. This section explores Hume's "radical" empiricism in detail. Special attention is given to the way in which he carries on with the implications of empiricism as well as his points of deviation from the traditions of Locke and Berkeley.

On the Empirical Foundations of Human Knowledge

Just like his predecessors of the empiricist tradition, Hume commences his philosophy by investigating the nature of human sense perception. According to him, all our knowledge ultimately comes from sense perception. Hume identifies two forms of perception which he referred to as impressions and ideas. Impressions refer to our original experiences; either sensations or the immediate and original contents of our own psychological states. Hume describes them as "our lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will."⁵ On the other hand, ideas are less vivid copies of our impressions. For instance, while the pain we experience on accidentally touching a flame would be an impression, our memory of the pain would be an idea. According to Hume, there is a one-to-one correspondence between impressions and ideas. They differ only in their degree of vividness. All ideas are traceable to impressions and without the original impressions; the mind can have no real content.

Hume explains that "there is a principle of connection between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind, and that, in their appearance to the memory or imagination; they introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity."⁶ As such, ideas in the mind are associated in some way, following certain principles. He identifies three of such principles; resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect. By the first principle, the mind associates ideas that bear similarity to each other. By the second principle, the mind associates ideas that are closely related to each other in space and time. By the third principle, ideas that follow each other in regular succession are linked together in thought.

Remarkably, Hume says that all we know is ultimately reducible to impressions. How then do we account for the fact that it often seems that the human imagination goes beyond the bounds of experience? For instance, one may find oneself thinking about flying horses. Hume says that this is achieved by creatively combining elements of one's previous experiences. He explains that the "creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience."⁷ As such, all that we can ever think of, and all that we can know rest on empirical foundations. At this point, it is necessary to highlight the distinction that Hume makes between the necessary truths of Logic and

⁵ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2. With regards to the works of Hume, the traditional manner of documentation by section instead of page number will be maintained. The same applies to other philosophical texts to which such manner of documentation is applicable, like the works of Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke and Berkeley.

⁶ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, 3. 1.

⁷ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, 3. 1.

Mathematics and matters of fact.

Relations of Ideas versus Matters of Fact

According to Hume, there are two kinds of reasoning, and consequently, two kinds of knowledge produced. These are relations between ideas and matters of fact. The class of reasoning about relations of ideas includes “the sciences of Geometry, Algebra and Arithmetic, and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain.”⁸ On the other hand, the class of reasoning about matters of fact includes all reasoning that is grounded on experience. According to him, propositions that express relations of ideas are necessary truths whose denial would amount to contradiction. An example of such proposition is the mathematical statement that $1 + 1 = 2$. The truth of such propositions is not known by observation or experimentation but simply by analyzing the relationships between these symbols as we have defined them. Importantly, our knowledge of the external world is irrelevant to the truth of these kinds of propositions because their certainty does not rest on any external facts. As such, they do not give us any information about the world of experience—they do not provide us with new knowledge.

However, it is not the same with matters of fact. Unlike the former class of propositions, one would not be expressing a logical contradiction if one denies a proposition embodying a truth concerning matters of fact. This is because such truth is neither logically necessary nor certain. Hume says that reason alone cannot decide whether a factual statement is true or false; we have to have recourse to experience. Consequently, we cannot have any a priori knowledge about matters of fact.

The Impossibility of a priori Knowledge about Matters of Fact

As we have seen, Hume contumaciously contends that reason cannot tell us anything about matters of fact. Consequently, we cannot have any knowledge about the world of nature, independent of experience, even with our perfect rational faculties. According to him, Adam—the first human according to biblical account—even though his rational faculties were complete at creation, would not have known the workings of nature by any pre-experiential means. To quote him,

I shall venture to affirm, as a general proposition, which admits of no exception, that the knowledge of this relation is not, in any instance, attained by reasoning a priori; but arises entirely from experience, when we find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other....Adam, though his rational faculties be supposed, at the very first, entirely perfect, could not have inferred from the fluidity and transparency of water that it would suffocate him, or from the light and warmth of fire that it would consume him. No object ever discovers, by the qualities which appear to the senses, either the causes which produced it, or the effects which will arise from it; nor can our reason, unassisted by experience, ever draw any

⁸ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, 4. 1.

inference concerning real existence and matter of fact.⁹

Propositions about matters of fact have their basis in experience and give us information about the world. However, they do not have the certainty nor necessity that logical truths enjoy. The truth of such propositions are based on various degrees of probability. Hume's conclusion that we cannot have a priori knowledge of matters of fact is based on the fact that according to him, the basis for our confidence in matters of fact is the principle of cause and effect. This will be examined in the next section.

Hume's Critique of the Notions of Substance and Causality

Having grounded his epistemological principles on the foundation of strict empiricism, Hume extends his empirical analysis to the core metaphysical issues which were taken for granted by the philosophers of his age. The first to fall under the sledge hammer of his radical empiricism is the idea of substance. Despite variations in details, philosophers of different philosophical traditions, from Aristotle to the scholastics and the modern philosophers before Hume all agree that the qualities which the mind encounters in perception inhere in some underlying substratum which is referred to as substance. Even the tradition of British empiricism which he espouses did not dare to refute the idea, despite its standing at odds with the conclusions of strict empiricism.

On the idea of substance, Hume starts (as he is accustomed) on the premise that all knowledge about matters of fact ultimately stem from impressions. However, all the impressions we have are all impressions of qualities—colour, taste, odour and so on. Hume challenges us to find the impression of causality in any of our perceptual experiences. Of course, we do not have such an impression and he thus rules out the idea of substance, describing it as an “empty idea.”¹⁰

The next concept that comes under the attack of Hume's “radical” empiricism is the notion of causality. Just like he did with the notion of substance, he starts again on the premise that all our knowledge stem from impressions. He proceeds to challenge us to find the impression from which we derive the notion of causality. According to him, all what we experience are simply a flow of impressions. For instance, we experience the sensation of pain after touching a flame and therefore conclude that our exposure to the flame caused the pain. However, Hume points out that all we have experienced is simply a succession of two events—visual appearance of flame and the sensation of pain—but we do not experience the connection between the two events. Since all knowledge is ultimately grounded on impressions and we have no impression of the causal connection between two events, then we have no rational grounds to believe in the existence of causal connections between events. How then do we arrive at the notion of causality which has been taken for granted through the history of philosophy?

⁹ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, 4. 1.

¹⁰ Cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 1. 1. 6.

According to Hume, the types of experiences that are the occasion for our making causal judgments exhibit three features. The first is contiguity, that is, the supposed cause must have some sort of contact with its supposed effect. The second is temporal priority, that is, the supposed cause must precede the supposed effect in time. The third is that the supposed cause must be constantly conjoined with the supposed effect. These three features, he notes, are all grounded in empirical observation. However, we proceed to add a fourth condition of necessary connection to these three features. According to him, it is exactly this necessary connection that we refer to when we say that two events are causally related. Again, Hume asks for the impression from which we gain our knowledge of necessary connection between a cause and its effect. Confident that there is none, he says that: "All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem conjoined, but never connected."¹¹ Therefore, the notion of causality is merely an idea we add to our experience of events which are related by contiguity, priority, and constant conjunction. Nevertheless, Hume does not outrightly deny the fact of causal relations; he rather takes the skeptical position that we cannot know the connection between a cause and its effect. To that effect, he writes: "I never asserted so absurd a proposition as that anything might arise without a cause: I only maintained, that our certainty of the falsehood of that proposition proceeded neither from intuition nor demonstration; but from another source."¹² If this is the case, we have no rational foundation to ground our belief in causal relations. Hume thus demonstrates that our ordinary judgments and scientific knowledge are based on a fundamental principle that is totally without rational foundation—the principle of causality. For Hume, our belief in causal relations stem from custom or habit; it is a feature of our psychological makeup that we believe some things for which we have no proof.

Skepticism: The Self, God and the External World

One thing about Hume's "radical" empiricism is that within it lurks the specter of epistemological skepticism and its concomitant metaphysical agnosticism. From this standpoint of his "radical empiricism", Hume challenges us to find the impressions from which our ideas about metaphysical (that is, trans-empirical) realities; the self, the cosmos and God arise. As a matter of fact, the radical nature of Hume's empiricism comes in again for caustic consideration. While his predecessors in the empiricist tradition still held on to the traditional notions of the self, the cosmos and God, Hume argues that we have no rational grounds to suppose their existence.

Descartes started his philosophy on the grounds of doubt and proceeded with it until he discovered the indubitability of the fact of his own existence.¹³ He then saw the statement of this existence—the cogito ergo sum—as the indubitable foundation of all possible knowledge about God and the external world. Hume, contrastingly, commenced his skeptic assault on human

¹¹ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding*, 7. 2.

¹² David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 1, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 187.

¹³ C.f. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.

knowledge by casting aspersions on the so-called self-evident knowledge of our existence. Starting out on the premise that all knowledge arises ultimately from impressions, he asks us to produce the impression from which our knowledge of the self arises. He maintains that we do not have such impression. What we have are experiences of anger, disgust, anxiety and so on. When we analyze these experiences, what we cannot find is the impression of any unifier of consciousness, of an enduring self, of an “I” which underlies the streams of consciousness we experience: “when I enter most intimately into what I call myself.... I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.”¹⁴ Therefore, the notion of the self is nothing other than “a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.”¹⁵

Having squashed the notion of the self, Hume takes up that of the external world. As usual, he challenges us to provide the impression from which our knowledge of the cosmos arises. He makes clear the point that we do not have such an impression. As such, all we can know is simply the flow of impressions we experience. We do not have the impression of an external world in which the passing flow of impressions that we experience is unified, neither do we have any impression of the connection between the world of experience and anything outside of experience. Since Hume is skeptical about the existence of the external world, it is not surprising that he is skeptical too concerning the existence of God. His main claim is that all proofs offered for the existence of God—whether a priori or a posteriori—fails. In the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume dismisses all philosophical pretensions to establishing a rational proof of God's existence.

It is worthy of note that Hume does not deny the existence of the self, the cosmos or God. That would be a nihilistic position. Hume is rather a skeptic; he denies that we cannot know the existence of the self, the cosmos or God. By implication, therefore, we have no rational grounds to justify our belief in the existence of these trans-empirical realities.

Philosophical Implications of David Hume's “Radical” Empiricism

From the foregoing, it is evident that the assault of Hume's “radical” empiricism on the entire edifice of human knowledge is replete with a plethora of implications. First and foremost, Hume's claim concerning the origin of our knowledge is very startling to the rationalists who paint pictures depicting the glories of the human mind. Hume's theory of knowledge is no doubt an extreme version of the Aristotelian-Scholastic claim that “nihil in intellectu, nisi prius fuerit in sensu.”¹⁶ By asserting that all our knowledge of matters of fact are ultimately grounded on impressions, Hume rules out the possibility of any rational, a priori conception of the world of experience.

¹⁴ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.6.

¹⁵ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.6.

¹⁶ Literal translation: “there is nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses.” Cf. H. C. Ezebuilo, *Epistemology at a Glance* (Awka: Iprogressive Press, 2022), 168.

Furthermore, Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact is very important, not simply because it underlies Hume's entire philosophical discourse, but because it has been taken for granted as the foundation stone of twentieth century empiricism.¹⁷ By this distinction, Hume digs an impassable trench between the order of reality on one hand, and the way ideas are related in logic and mathematics. Now, this is very important to epistemology since it renders improbable, the hopes of the rationalists to find a certain rational and logical order within nature. The ultimate implication of this distinction is the wreckage it portends for the metaphysical systems of the rationalists which make pretensions to discover a certain logical order in reality, similar to the order found in Logic and Mathematics. Consequently, Metaphysics becomes an impossible and useless venture since we cannot have a logical speculative system of reality. Epistemologically, therefore, the entire edifice of rationalism collapses and our optimism of ever having scientific knowledge is rendered tenuous.

Interestingly, the most important and most significant aspect of Hume's "radical" empiricism is his assault on the notion of causality. The search for causes is obviously the driving force behind the rise of both philosophy and science. Aristotle, for instance, had averred that the 'first philosophy' is that which enquires into the ultimate causes of things.¹⁸ Concomitantly, Aquinas defines philosophy as "scientia rerum, per ultima causas."¹⁹ On the side of science, it is evident that scientific success rests on the discovery of laws by which the operations of the universe can be explained. For instance, the scientific revolution of the time of Hume himself was anchored on the discovery of the laws of universal gravitation by Sir Isaac Newton. These laws are causal laws which explain the motion of massive bodies in space such as stars and planets as well as that of small bodies on earth like pendulum bobs. An assault on the principle of causality, therefore, is equivalent to shattering the very foundation of both science and philosophy. This is exactly what Hume did with incredible ingenuity.

To enable us to appreciate the far-reaching consequences of Hume's "radical" empiricism, it is important for us to consider in a bit more detail how scientists operate. Basically, the scientific approach is the postulation of theories and laws which attempt to explain the general order of things. These laws themselves are causal laws, embodying different cause-effect relationships in the universe. Underlying the principle of causality is the principle of uniformity of nature which itself assumes that the laws of nature will continue in the future just as they have operated in the past. By extension, therefore, scientists employ the principle of induction which argues from what is true of one set of facts to what is true of further facts of the same kind. For instance, the advances in medicine rest on the laws of uniformity of nature and on the principle of causality. A

¹⁷ Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery*, 338.

¹⁸ Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Barnes (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 981b 28.

¹⁹ For Aquinas, Philosophy is the "science of all things through ultimate causes gathered by the light of natural reason." Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, vol. I, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Ohio: Benzinger Books, 1947), part I, q. 1, art. 1.

particular disease is held to be the effect of, let us say, bacterial invasion. Research is carried out and a particular chemical substance is discovered that kills these bacteria. After series of tests are carried out, such a substance is declared as a cure for the disease in question. This particular declaration and the subsequent use of the substance in question as a cure for the disease is based on the fact that what works for a particular instance of the bacterial invasion will work on all cases (inductive generalization based on the uniformity of nature), and that all cases of the disease in question are caused by the bacteria.

Ironically, when Hume denies the necessary connection between a cause and its effect, he is simply saying that we have no rational basis to ground the claim that what works in one instance will work in another instance and that there is no logical reason why a particular effect must follow another particular event which is regarded as its cause. Going by this, then, all scientific laws are simply mere beliefs whose only basis is the psychological habit of constant conjunction of events. This is by no means a modest claim, at least for the scientist.

Having analyzed some of the implications of Hume's "radical" empiricism, we are left with the question of the tenability of his claims. How are we to take the arguments of Hume? Do they really 'hold water', when tested in the crucible of philosophical scrutiny? This issue is addressed in the next section.

Evaluation

Hume's version of empiricism obviously has its stark problems. One of such problem that arises with Hume's "radical" empiricism is the odious implication of his refutation of the principle of causality. First and foremost, it is important to note that Hume's argument for the refutation of cause-effect relationship is dead-on-arrival. He says that we cannot have any assurance about the way things happen in the real world since there is no logical basis on which we can anchor the belief that an effect necessarily follows a cause. By implication, things in the real world are simply beliefs based on the constant conjunction of events. As such, we cannot make any valid statements about the structure of the universe. Perhaps, one needs to remind Hume that what he makes is in effect a categorical statement about the order of things. How can Hume then categorically give us such explanations depicting a universe with no structure, no necessity, and no laws; one based on customs and psychological habits? How sure is Hume that given the sporadic way of the universe, some order cannot emerge over time? Hume cannot therefore defend his thesis in the face of his own radical empiricism.

Furthermore, Hume's dismissal of the fact of the existence of the self is epistemologically self-defeating. We cannot go by his bundle theory; there must be some long-enduring unifier of consciousness for our smorgasbord of fleeting experiences. This unifier is the self, persisting beyond these fleeting experiences. In fact, Hume shot himself in the leg with the very argument with which he intended to disprove the self. In his words: "when I enter most intimately into what I call myself. . . . I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe

Rev. Fr. Dr. Hyginus Chibuike Ezebuilo

anything but the perception.”²⁰ Ironically, it is the existence of his self that enables him, in the first place, to probe into such perceptions even when they are long gone!

Interestingly, however, Hume's “radical” empiricism dealt the quest for rational certainty in both the scientific and philosophical domains a heavy blow. It would take another century of “system building” from Kant to the Great German idealists to restore the hopes of scientists and philosophers to find rational answers to the problems that are concomitant with nature. This renewed optimism would reach its apogee in Hegel (1770-1831).

Be that as it may, Hume should be commended for his consistent empiricism, despite its seemingly odious and bizarre conclusions. He is arguably the most consistent empiricist in the history of modern philosophy, refusing to temper the grotesque implications of his position. Contrast this to the position of his predecessors, Locke and Berkeley, who were rather unwilling to give up the “common-sense” beliefs which in turn tempered their own versions of empiricism.

As was highlighted at the beginning of this paper, the term “radical empiricism” was introduced into the philosophical parlance by the American philosopher, William James. James contends that all philosophical perspectives which stop at the physical level and fail to account for meaning, values and intentionality are grossly flawed.²¹ From this perspective, therefore, James would challenge Hume's version of empiricism.

Before proceeding with the analysis of how Hume's “radical” empiricism is related to James' doctrine, it is important to restate what was said earlier concerning the qualification of Hume's empiricism as “radical”. The term itself connotes both the consistency which characterizes his empiricist philosophy as well as the extremity and rather bizarre nature of the conclusions that follow from his claims. Remarkably, Hume takes empiricism to its logical conclusion. Unlike his predecessors, he was unwilling to temper his position by adopting commonsense conclusions which were prevalent among his predecessors and contemporaries.

Interestingly, James describes his empiricism as radical (and rightly so) given its deviation from the empiricist traditions of Locke and Berkeley, as well as Hume's version which is here qualified as being radical as well. On one hand, James would agree especially with Hume that conclusions about matters of fact are only probable. However, he rejects the view that all experience is ultimately reducible to pings of unconnected sensations.

I say “empiricism” because it is contended to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say “radical” because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as a hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the half

²⁰ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.6.

²¹ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), Essay 1.

way empiricism that is under the name of positivism, or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square.²²

For James, the entire edifice of British empiricism (both the moderate form espoused by Locke, the idealistic version espoused by Berkeley and the extremely skeptical version articulated by Hume) have a fundamental problem. This problem is that they tend to conceive of experience as consisting of a series of unconnected (or loosely connected) atomic pings of sensation. As such, the big picture which includes connections, causality and meaning are often left out. James, therefore, provides a broad interpretation of experience which would include these bits of experience as well as the connections between them. Contrast this with Hume's denial of the rationality of causal connections between impressions and ideas.

Nevertheless, the important point of this comparison is that both accounts qualify as “radical” given their marked deviation from the established empiricist traditions. While the radical nature of Hume's version tilts towards skepticism and thus denies any unity of perceptual experiences, James' version attempts to bring back the balance which Hume's contumacious insistence on the reducibility of all knowledge about matters of fact to pings of impressions had thrown to the trash bin.

Conclusion Reflections

Hume's “radical” empiricism is the locus classicus of the result of very strict and unyielding commitment to logical consistency. Despite its pitfalls, Hume's “radical” empiricism stands out the “nagging conscience” of this age. First and foremost, it is a stark reminder of the narrowness of the human mind. Philosophers are often confident of their supposed ability to get to the underlying reality beyond experience. While this paper is not concerned with the tenability of any pretensions to transcendental knowledge, it resounds Hume's warning that the human mind is limited. There is therefore every possibility that there are so many things out there which the human mind cannot encompass.

Secondly, Hume's “radical” empiricism is of immense benefit to the fields of epistemology and Philosophy of Science. For Epistemology, it challenges the traditional pretensions to epistemic certainty especially as represented by the foundationalists such as Descartes and Husserl. By making the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact, Hume puts it to us that what we can 'know' about the world does not come with the same logical necessity and a priori validity as does the truths of logic and mathematics. Consequently, our quest for epistemic certainty cannot proceed with the brazen confidence of the foundationalists, bereft of any charade of modesty. For Philosophy of Science, Hume's “radical” empiricism reminds us to understand the advances of science and technology within the proper framework of praxis. More often than not, contemporary scientists view these advances with even greater dogmatism than metaphysicians

²² William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1897), vii-viii.

Rev. Fr. Dr. Hyginus Chibuike Ezebuilo

and theologians. They proceed with utmost confidence that they can discover all about the workings of the universe, thereby proffering solutions to all human existential predicaments. While this paper does not necessarily agree with Hume that we can have no certain valid knowledge about the workings of the universe, it also recognizes the fact that far from giving us a unified objective account of reality, many of the scientific theories we have are merely transitory and fragmentary accounts of the whole picture which possess pragmatic utility.

Finally, Hume's "radical" empiricism lays before us the limitations of human rational faculties. Reason is often limited and often tells us very little about the real world. Philosophers often construct great but intricate metaphysical systems with which they intend to demonstrate the ability of human reason to penetrate the so-called logical order of reality. This approach is exemplified in the German Idealism which followed shortly after the time of Hume. Søren Kierkegaard regards these attempts as similar to works of modern science fiction which bear no resemblance whatsoever to reality.²³ While this paper (unlike Hume) does not dispute the fact that reason has a critical role to play in understanding the workings of the real world, it maintains that reason does not have the final word. Therefore, other sources of knowledge like perceptual experience and intuition should be taken seriously.

In the final analysis, therefore, while Hume's version of empiricism runs into a plethora of philosophical problems, its importance to the philosophical enterprise cannot be overemphasized. Perhaps, the importance of Hume's "radical" empiricism does not lie so much in the answers it provides as in the questions it raises, and the avenues that it opens up for contemporary science and philosophy.

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²³ C.f. Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vol. 2, no. 1605, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 217.

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