

David Hume's Theory of Knowledge: An Exposition & Evaluation

By:

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Introduction

David Hume is said to be one of the most consistent empiricists of his time. His strict consistence led to the controversial challenge of induction. Amongst other Empiricists who also had remarkable ideas, "It was Hume who consistently brought Empiricism to its logical conclusion and was prepared to accept the consequences" (Omeregbe 72) Induction as the bed rock of scientific knowledge was put to serious doubt by David Hume.

In this work, the ground work of his theory of knowledge shall be presented and evaluated. Basic objections shall also be presented and evaluated accordingly. The work shall employ the critical expository method using historical material. However, effort shall be made to relate the work to contemporary times. In order words is there still value in studying old philosophical ideas? If so the easy will save to remind us in a summary form about the most consistent empiricist in history who himself had also influenced others especially Kant who confessed woke him from "dogmatic slumber." As a scholar of History of Philosophy there are several burdens of History of Philosophy; the chronicle of ideas (who said what first, when did an epoch end and when did the other start, impact of a single Philosopher on an epoch and so on) But while under tutelage of a renowned scholar, Professor G. Ozumba, he raised a serious question that has remained unanswered, he said, "when I consider the ideas and contributions of past philosophers especially the Ancient, I wonder if they are not the real Modern and we are Ancient." So it is useful for us to take a hind view of some notable Philosophers and do analytical exercise with their ideas.

What is theory of knowledge?

Theory of knowledge is that specialized field of study in Philosophy that examines various insights into the origin, sources and the extent of the limitation of human knowledge. Its major concern is the study of how Philosophers respond to the main issue raised such as; where does human knowledge arise from? Is there a limit to what man can know? Some believe it comes from reason(Rene Descartes, Leibniz etc) while others insist it is from sense experience. In fact for John Locke the mind at birth is *a tabula raza*. Nothing is written on it except those from experience. And for the Rationalists, reason is the most reliable source of knowledge; they say this because the nature of knowledge from reason is *apriori* (before experience). That makes it indubitable. Especially for Descartes such knowledge is perceived “*clearly and distinctly*” Some chose to interchange theory of knowledge with Epistemology. Epistemology a term that is derived from the Greek episteme (Knowledge) and logos (reason) is sometimes referred to as theory of knowledge. Though the line of demarcation may be so thin, it is clear theory of knowledge may be a bit restricted than Epistemology. In this work the focus shall be on the theory of knowledge of David Hume. The history is equally chequered moving from the traditional criteria of the justified true belief (JTB) through modern issues of foundationalism challenges and now Humanizing, Naturalizing and Renormalizing Epistemology? No matter the attempt to apply scientific methods on Epistemology, it is still about Human knowledge not mechanical knowledge. That has led to the creation of the AI (softwares) powered machines that is devoid of the human side of the elements of knowledge, the reflexes, initiatives, rethinking, and personal decisions than the programmed knowledge.

Hume’s theory of knowledge

David Hume (1711-76) a Scottish is regarded as the greatest of the British empirical tradition. He was a historian, a man of letters and a philosopher, he developed to a logical conclusion the empirical philosophies of Locke and Berkeley, and according to Bertrand Russell, "...by making himself consistent made it incredible" (Russell 634) Hume grew up in Nine wells, near Edinburgh: it is said that at the age of fifteen he had finished his education at the Edinburgh university and started studying law, though the wish of his parents, Hume suddenly found out it wasn't his natural calling. His interest was in general knowledge and philosophy readily lend a helping hand.

As a result of his romance with philosophy he came out in 1739 with *A Treatise of human nature*, which was written in France at the age of twenty six. The *Treatise* which he thought will greatly change the course of philosophy, suddenly fell "dead born from the press". As he puts it, "being naturally of a cheerful and sanguine temper I very soon recover from the blow". His second attempt to buy fame and attention from the public was still not fulfilled. This was his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, which came out in 1748; apparently to present his earlier views in a more popular form. It actually became more popular than the *Treatise*, and was responsible for awakening Kant from his "dogmatic slumber". Other publications by Hume includes *History of England* (1775) *Enquires Concerning Principles of Morals*, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* published post-humus in (1779).

Hume was not passive in the political struggle of his age. In 1760 when he was serving as secretary to the British embassy in France, he was hailed by the French intellectuals as the most important writer of the British Isles". His anti religious stand led to his recognition as a hero among French Skeptics and enlightenment leaders. His extreme "unorthodox views in religion and politics gained him great notoriety, so that by the time he retired he was generally known as 'the gentle skeptic and the great infidel'" Popkin 209

Hume's skepticism came as a result of the shortcomings of other empiricist who, though they belief experience to be the guarantor of valid knowledge still had the common sense belief of their time. Thus Hume was out first to inquire about the human intellect and know its limitations, so that we know what the human is capable and not cable of knowing.

Impression and Ideas

To understand Hume's philosophy better, it is pertinent to know first the role impression plays, and also the origin of our ideas, ideas here, were used by Hume in a different way to Locke and Berkeley, Hume's intention in his research was, "a conviction that what was needed in order to uncover what knowledge, if any, we were capable of, was an inquiry into what he called the science of man" (Popkin209) The result of his search into the content of the mind was the discovery of what he calls 'perception'. The human mind has no other content than the material afforded it by experience through the senses. Perception according to Hume, comes in two forms to wit, impressions and Ideas. As he said, "sense perception gives us complete knowledge of reality..."(Edward 18) in more categorical way he put it thus in his Enquiry "Here therefore we may divide all the perception of the mind into two classes or species. The less forcible and lively are commonly denominated thoughts and ideas. The other species want a name in our language, and in most other; I suppose, because it was not requisite for any but philosophical purposes, to rank them under a general term or application, let us, therefore, use a little freedom, and call them impressions employing that word in a sense somewhat different from the usual".(Hume18) Impression, the way Hume puts it, 'employing that word in a sense somewhat different from the usual' means that it is the original perception that we get when we are directly perceiving an objective; either the original stuff of thought. For instance if I am now looking at a car moving, then I have the Impression of it. Ideas follows Impressions in the example above when you close

your eyes after the car might have passed. But what then is the difference between ideas and impressions? Does it follow then that all ideas that I have are ‘caused’ by Impressions?

To the first question, Hume says they could be differentiated on degree of ‘forcibility’, ‘Liveliness’ and ‘vivacity’. Whereas, Impression fulfills the above three requirements to its highest degree of superlative, ideas do not. Thus ideas are faint images of our Impressions, this account for the origin of our ideas. When the senses have the perception of impression, the mind then reflect on the Impression and gain its idea. Like in the platonic ‘forms’ the ideas are poor copies of impression. But the difference is that instead of the impression to live in the world of forms it lives in the sensible world. The second question is also answered by Hume, thus not all ideas have a preceding impressions. For instance I can have ‘an idea’ of Joe Biden, Putin, Zelenskyy or Donald Trump from their photographs whereas I have no ‘impression’ of them. We can also have an idea of a flying horse without having its impression.

Another question that comes up is that if we talk of compound or complex idea, it means it is a combination of simple ideas, how come this? According to Hume, the mind has unbounded powers to combine different ideas to produce another idea which has no corresponding impression. Such power consist in ‘compounding’, ‘transposing’, ‘diminishing’ or ‘augmenting’, of materials afforded it by the senses.

There are also simple impressions and complex ones, and can be differentiated as Popkin puts it, the simple ones “admits of no distinction or separation. According to him “...the perception of the quality of blue is simple, whereas the perception of a blue picture is complex, and can be separated into two parts.” (Popkin210) The problem in the whole gamut of knowledge for Hume is caused by the activity of the mind in compounding simple ideas to give rise to complex ones. In

other words, that by flying horse we mean the conjoining of the idea of ‘a horse and that of flying’. We never had an impression of a flying horse but we have that of horse and flying respectively, thus reality for Hume becomes impression, so that before anyone makes an assertion about the existence of anything, he has to search himself of its impression. If there is none then, we could conclude it as unreal. As Hume put it, “when we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning of idea (as it but too frequent), we need but to inquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion”.(Hume 22)

For Copleston, the analysis of Hume apart from being “a theory of purely academic interest and of a little importance”, is according to him, “...a restatement of empiricism which excludes the hypothesis of innate ideas”.(Coplston 266) But then the importance becomes glaring if we understand the way this is being applied by Hume. According to Copleston Hume asked, “For example...from what impression the idea of substance is derived. And he comes to the conclusion that we have no ideas of substance apart from a collection of particular qualities”(Copleston 266). In another dimension, apart from being of importance to his analysis of causality, according to Copleston, the theory can be used to get rid of what Hume calls ‘all that jargon which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasoning and drawn disgrace upon them.(Hume21) And also reduces a profound philosopher to a mere plebian due to the employment of various terms. To finally illustrate what Hume meant by Impression and meaning, Copleston use the word ‘skyscraper’, “if a child comes across the word skyscraper, he may ask his father what it means. The latter can explain its meaning by definition or description...he can explain to the child the meaning of the word, ‘skyscraper’ by employing words such as ‘house’, tall, storey...”(Copleston 266). But the child will not understand it except he knows the meaning of those words used. These

words can “be explained by definition or description”. Such way of getting meaning from words for him” must be learned ostensive demonstration”. According to him, using the parlance of Hume, “the child must be given impressions”. Since it is possible to distinguish between terms with which meaning is learned by definition and description, Copleston thinks also that”...it is possible to substitute for Hume’s psychological distinction between impressions and ideas a linguistics distinction between terms”.(Copleston 267). He was not all the way admiring Hume as he suddenly becomes critical of Hume’s atomization of perception and questioned if it is actually possible thus, “...this may be possible if considered as a purely abstract analysis, it is questionable whether ‘experience’ can profitably be described in terms of these atomic constitutions”.(Copleston 267) His effort only shows his doubtfulness of Hume in atomizing perception. But rather unfortunate as he has not shown its impossibility thus could not proof the contrary to be the case.

Matters of fact and Relations of Ideas

In the *Enquiry*, Hume wanted to show how we come to associate simple ideas into complex ones. He observed that the constancy with which such ideas come to us seem to suggest that it must not be unconnected with the activities of the mind. Of course Hume during his inquiry did not discover any structural mechanism responsible for such act. To drive home his point, he said that there must be some bond of union that is responsible for introducing one idea to another this he calls a “gentle force”. Thus when certain qualities are found on one idea, this idea is then associated with another idea, depending on the qualities he enumerated as, resemblance, contiguity, cases and effect. To buttress his point he gave this example, “a picture naturally leads our thought to the original (Resemblance): the mention of one apartment in a building naturally introduces an enquiry or

discourse concerning the others (continuity): and if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forbear reflecting on the pain which follows it (cause and effect)".(Hume 24)

As a result he divides the object of human reasoning or enquiry into two kinds, to wit; relations of ideas and matters of fact". In the first case are the science of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic, he went on, in short every affirmation which either intuitively or demonstratively certain "that the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides, is a proposition which express a relation between these figures".(Hume25) He went on, they "...are discoverable by the mere operation of thought without dependence on what is anywhere existence in the universe".(Hume 25)

The second object of human reasoning, matters of act, are not ascertain the same way the former is. The truth of matters of fact is not discovered the same way because it is possible to discover the contrary. In order words its contrary 'can never imply a contradiction for according to Hume; "that the sun will not rise tomorrow is not less intelligible a proposition and implies no more contradiction than the affirmation, that it will rise".(Hume25&26)

Hume's view of the relations of ideas can be challenged because its truth does not depend on existence in the universe. This is because it runs contrary to the tenets of empiricism. This was also Copleston's stand accordingly, "Hume account of mathematics is, therefore, rationalist and non empiricist, in the sense that he maintains that the relations asserted are necessary. (Copleston 274) It could be remembered what havoc Hume used the word 'necessary' to do with our knowledge acquisition during his analysis of causation. Why when is the relation asserted in mathematics, of everything in the world, necessary and certain? Copleston warns that by saying that relation of ideas need not experience to confirm it doesn't mean they are innate. He went on stressing why the difference exist in finding the truth – falsehood. They are formal propositions

not empirical hypotheses. And though, of course, mathematics can be applied the truth of the propositions is independent of this application”(Copleston 274). In other words we can replace them with a modern term of necessary and contingent truths.

In the twentieth (20th) century J. S. Mill tried to show that mathematical propositions are empirical hypotheses. But judging from the characteristics of the 20th century empiricism, that of Hume was most accepted. The neo positivist are also adherents of this view.

David Hume in his *Treatise* has a different view about geometry for him “geometry fall short of the perfect precision and certainty which are peculiar to arithmetic and algebra, yet it excels the imperfect judgment of our senses and imagination” (Hume *A Treaties...*71) The reason he gave was that since the first principles of geometry are drawn from appearances and since appearances cannot give us certainty, it becomes counted off. And consequently, “there remain therefore algebraic and arithmetic as the only sciences in which we can carry on a chain of reasoning to any degree of intricacy and yet preserve a perfect exactness and certainty”. But I seem to agree with Copleston that the treatment of geometry as such is not justified because according to Copleston, “if the truth of algebra and arithmetic as the only science in which we can carry on a reasoning to any of intricacy and yet preserve a perfect exactness and certainty. (Ref 21). But I seem to agree with Copleston that the treatment of geometry as such is not justified because according to Copelston, “If the truth of Algebraic and arithmetical propositions depends solely on ‘Ideas’ or definitions, the same can be said of geometry and sensible “appearances” are irrelevant”.(Copleston 275) In recognition of his fault, he seems to do justice to it by placing it “on the same footing” in his *Enquiry* hear him, “though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truth demonstrated by Euclid would forever retain their certainty and evidence”. (Hume Enquiry 25)

According to Copleston, Hume made matters of fact variable and relations of idea invariable except the meaning of the symbols are changed as he puts it, “variable relations however can change without any change in the related objects or in their ideas being necessarily involved. For example, the spatial relation of distance between two bodies can vary, though the bodies and our ideas of them remain the same”.(Copleston 276) One can therefore say that modern usage of the terms necessary and contingent truths represents a development of Hume’s view of relations of ideas and matters of facts.

Belief in Hume’s Philosophy

The custom of the mind in associating Ideas according to qualities of resemblance contiguity, cause and effect relationship, is according to Hume responsible for our reasoning concerning matters of act and real existence. The source of our reasoning concerning matters of act and real existence comes from sense experience. This is by perceiving the impression which comes from sense experience forcefully, lively and vivid. After which the mind has a duty of ‘compounding’, ‘diminishing’ and ‘augmenting’ those ideas the object registered on our memory. For instance my idea of a table: my present impression of a table enlivens my ideas of a table and consequently I become aware of a table present before me. As Anthony flew explains it that belief, “arises from the customary conjunction of object with something present to the memory or senses”.(Flew 103) Corroborating his opinion with that of Hume, he could be understood as meaning that belief is the product of habitual association of classes of ideas and impressions. This is due to the regularity with which we perceive the external world we jump to the conclusion that there is connection between events. Whereas, there is no such connection, and the senses cannot lead us to discover the connection in events. But what then is responsible for this form of belief or attitude?

Hume said, it is the propensity of the mind to reveal connection in event which might not be there. Thus we come to hold the opinion that an effect must necessarily have a cause. Hume therefore defines belief as the power of the mind to conjoin event and expect that they shall be so conjoined any day. This habitual association of classes of ideas and impressions due to the propensity of the mind to always expect a future event to be thus conjoined as the present led Hume to his celebrated analysis of causation.

This pattern of knowledge acquisition Hume contended is not acquired through the process of reasoning or understanding but rather, it is from experience, underpinned by the determination of the mind to project the present into future. As he said, "...that even after we have experience of the operation of cause and effect, our conclusion from the experience are not founded on reasoning or any process of understanding"(Hume...*Enquiry* 227)

It is the view of John Locke that some objects have inbuilt power to cause certain qualities in our perception. But Mwaipaya seems to agree with Hume that it is not the case "no object ever discovers, by the qualities which appear to the senses either the cause from it, nor can our reason, unassisted by experience ever draw any inference concerning the real existence of matters of facts".(Nwaipaya 75) Hume also stated it in his own way when he said, "reasoning based upon the relation of causation does not involve any kind of knowing which involves some mysterious power or force in object as the vulgar think".(Hume 66)

But from whence come this idea of 'power' and 'force' as the vulgar belief, Hume says, "this idea then is an idea of reflection since it arises from reflecting on the operation of our mind, and on the command which is exercised by will both over the organs of the body and faculties of the soul".(Hume *Enquiry* 64) Since we know where it comes from, do we observe it? Hume will say 'power'

and ‘force’ is not observed. All we observe are sequence of events. For instance the will that I should stand up and my actually standing up, to Hume there is no necessary connection between the two events. As Flew puts it, “a man suddenly struck with palsy in the leg or arm, or who had lose those members, at first to move them and employ them in their usual offices”.(Flew 109) The view of Flew might be a little bit nearer to reality and commonsensical than that of Hume. Hume I think was assuming too much, and his dabbling into psychology should be better left to psychoanalyst to show whether there is connection or not. Rene Descartes who postulated the point of interaction between the body and the mind at the Pineal gland could not show where it is due to his overlap into psychology.

Hume will agree that impression “precedes” ideas, but will not agree that ideas are “caused” by impression. This is a problem of semantics. And to really discover his weakness in his drive to demolish the edifice of knowledge built on the foundation of association of ideas, which have no necessary connection whatsoever, is to have a proper grasp of the meaning of “precede” and “cause”. If we say that someone (a) is leading a file before another (b), it means he precede me on that single file. But when we say that impression precedes ideas, it is not the same arrangement. Because to say the least, ideas are reflection of the impressions afforded the mind by the senses. Whatever it does (augment) to produce existent or non existence entity (ies) is not a concern here. Geographers and astronauts alike will agree that the moon shines because of the reflection of the sun. we can safely say the brightness of the moon is caused by the reflection of the light emitted to it from the sun, or was Hume seeking way to exterminate the entrenchment of the word ‘cause’ in English vocabulary and our daily usage? If we say it precedes the moon, then, the sun on safely conceal its light and forget about the moon. But how will the moon shine if its brightness is not “caused” by the sun?

Evaluation and Conclusion

I will say that Hume's second intention of going into philosophy being his deep interest in skepticism to me does not really hold any longer because of its paradoxical nature. Moreover, Kant had already assured us of a universal valid knowledge through his attempt of a synthesis between rationalism and empiricism. Omoregbe commenting on his initial interest in skepticism said we cannot persist in skepticism; Philosophy should be based on skepticism but excessive skepticism is incompatible with daily life. We cannot persist in skepticism in our daily life which is generally based on assumptions and beliefs...but ... Hume is ready to live an ordinary life which for him the only thing that can cure it is "Carelessness and inattention" (Omoregbe 79, Hume *Treatise...Nature* 1,4,2), thus saving religion and science from the onslaught of Hume's skepticism. As Durant also opined, "To put these threads of argument together, to unite the idea of Berkeley and Hume with feeling of Rousseau, to save religion from reason and yet at the same time to save science from skepticism this was the mission of Immanuel Kant".(Durant 198) he had then to ignore Hume's skepticism not on grounds of logic but on grounds of reality. And have therefore adopted his view on idea and impression because at the end of the day we still group him as an empiricist. Just as we cannot call Karl Marx a Hegelian, though he adopted his shell of dialectics but discarded his nut, (idealism) for a more concrete content of materialism. Thus Hume's skepticism which cannot 'alone' provide universal valid knowledge.

For Karl Popper, in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* opines that the problem of causation is a 'myth' therefore nonexistent. That the way we acquire knowledge is by "conjecturing and refutation"; in other words through the process of demonstration of error either falsification rather than verification or confirmation. This will prompt me to ask whether man has stopped acquisition of knowledge in science and elsewhere since Hume inaugurated his analysis? Even though, I will

agree the problem is ‘unanswerable’ as Paul Edwards the editor of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* would agree, “Hume clearly regarded his argument as unanswerable, but unconvincing. He said that his intention in producing it was to show that ‘belief’ is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our nature’. if belief were a voluntary act, owing allegiance to logic alone, it would on every occasion destroy itself”.(84) Hume is most respected for his use of logic, consistent argument, a powerful writer, but not on the search for the “real” Hume wears his shoes so he knows where it pinches. He might have recognize this when he said, “Be a philosopher; but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man”.(Hume Enquiry 9)

This reminds me of the popular dictum of Karl Marx to the effect that every system contains within itself a seed of destruction. Hume’s Theory of knowledge has been widely criticized by Philosophers even of the contemporary era, yet the issue he raised continues to be very relevant. So as have often said; you don’t criticize a Philosophy (theory) on the basis of its impracticability, because you never made attempt to apply it or show it can work. In history therefore he has carved a niche for himself as one of the most consistent Philosopher of all times. His doubts has helped to awaken others like Kant from his dogmatic slumber.

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