

Origin of knowledge, Empiricism.

Rationalism considers necessity and universality to be essential conditions of knowledge. Its methodology, therefore, is rigorously deductive. Deduction is construed to be based on self evident, axiomatic truths. This procedure is postulated to be effective in sanitizing the context of discovery of ontological, political and other kinds of commitments, and consequently, to preclude everything that is not necessary from the content of knowledge.

Empiricism, however, is content with contingent truths. Its methodology is inductive, that is, based on observation of and experiment on particular instances, and arrive at universal statements on the strength of the number of instances taken into account.

Observation or sense perception does not guarantee the validity of value judgments and metaphysical claims. Hence, there can be no knowledge of metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics and the like.

Classical empiricists consider sense perception, that is, sensation or reflection, to be the only sources of knowledge expressible in synthetic propositions. Mathematical, logical propositions, which are analytic and a priori, however, are held to be known through reason. Mill, however, explains the origin of mathematical and logical knowledge also in terms of sense perception.

John Locke refutes the thesis of innate ideas as starting points of knowledge. The basic constituents of empirical knowledge are termed by Locke as 'simple' ideas, obtained through sensation or reflection. The mind lacks complete agency in producing simple ideas. They are imposed on the mind by the external world through the senses, or by reflection. The mind receives them passively. The mind's activity consists in joining, disjoining, magnifying, abstracting simple ideas at will, forming complex ideas and thus producing the fabric of knowledge. This atomism is manifest in Hume too, though a terminological modification takes place. He uses the expressions impressions and ideas in place of Lockean simple and complex ideas. In spite of this terminological difference, they both strive to repudiate the Cartesian postulate of innate ideas, and base the entire edifice of knowledge on sense perception.

George Bishop Berkeley's empiricism consists in reducing existence to perception. The essence of existence, he asserts, is being perceived, actually or potentially. He invokes linguistic analysis to establish his point. Berkeley asserts that it is impossible to describe existence without any reference to perception, at least, a covert one. This thesis commits itself to an ontology of minds and its perceived contents, namely, ideas.

The mind receives ideas of sensible qualities through perception. These qualities alone are real. Berkeley, as a true empiricist, does away with Locke's postulate of an abstract, occult material substance, construed to be the locus of sensible qualities, and along with it, of Locke's disputed thesis of representative realism. The postulates of an enduring self, of causality as entailment and of God, however, await wholesale refutation by Hume. By divesting the mind of all these contents, Hume earns the reputation of a skeptic, consequent though mitigated.

Empiricism furnishes an epistemological tool, more in conformity with the methodology of science than rationalism. But classical empiricism is criticized for understanding experience in an excessively narrow and mechanical sense. It fails to account for knowledge of usage of constituents of language, like and, but et al, knowledge of theoretical constructs of science, of abstract concepts like liberty, justice and the like. It fails also to explain feminist knowledge, based on lived experience. It deprives subjects of knowledge of any opportunity of interpretation.