On Locke, Berkeley, Hume and the rise of empiricism

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The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man,

but to have only the law of nature for his rule.

~ Locke

Few men think; yet all have opinions.

~ Berkeley

The corruption of the best things gives rise to the worst.

~ Hume

Biography of Locke

John Locke (1632–1704), an English philosopher and physician celebrated as one of the most important of the Enlightenment intellectuals and acknowledged as the “Father of Classical Liberalism.” Known as one of England’s earliest empiricists, following his predecessor, Sir Francis Bacon, his work is likewise essential to the development of social contract theory. His intellectual contributions tremendously affected the creation and advancement of epistemology (study of the nature and scope of knowledge) and political philosophy. His philosophical writings influenced such diverse thinkers as Voltaire, Rousseau, Berkeley and Scottish Enlightenment thinkers like Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, Dugald Stewart, Thomas Reid, Robert Burns, Adam Ferguson, John Playfair, Joseph Black and James Hutton (to which Voltaire said: "We look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilization"), in addition to the American revolutionaries. Locke’s magisterial contributions to classical republicanism ("Law of Nature and of Nature's God..." Self-evident truths) and liberal theory ("... that all Men are created equal") are both Lockean ideas contained in the United States Declaration of Independence.
Locke's theory of the mind is frequently referenced as the beginning of our modern understanding of psychology and psychiatry; ideas we later find further developed in the works of Sigmund Freud and his famous Wednesday Psychological Society (Psychologische Mittwochs-Gesellschaft [1902-27]) which included Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, G.S. Hall, Abraham Brill, Ernest Jones, Sándor Ferenczi, Max Kahane, Rudolf Reitler, Wilhelm Stekel, and several others. Locke's psychological innovations included the conceptions of identity and the self, existing prominently in the writings of late Enlightenment philosophers including Berkeley, Hume, Hegel, Rousseau, and Kant. Locke was the first to describe the self by a conception of consciousness. He theorized that the mind of the baby at birth was essentially a blank tablet (tabula rasa). The concept of tabula rasa indicates an understanding of mind as an initially blank or empty recorder (Locke used the words "white paper") on which knowledge imprints its data. This idea rejected the notion that humans have intrinsic ideas which originated in Aristotle's work, On the Soul (3.4.430-1).

Locke's theory of the mind was different from what Descartes or the Cartesian School philosophy which were based on pre-existing conceptions. Unlike the Rationalists, Locke believed that humans are born without instinctive or natural ideas, and that knowledge is basically realized only by experience resulting from stimuli received via our five senses – sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing. Locke's empiricism redefined subjectivity, or self, and intellectual historians such as Charles Taylor and Jerrold Seigel maintain that Locke's An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690) is such an important work to be in essence the establishment of the modern Western understanding of the self.

**Locke's influence in history**

Locke was a one-man force of Nature whose voluminous ideas singularly defined and redefined the Age of Reason and political philosophy, especially on modern republicanism – e.g., natural law, natural rights. Locke's natural law theory reformed the extremist absolutism found in Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan (1651) and his ideas on the proper balance between the domains Church and State was demonstrative of the truly profound influence he had on the French Philosophers and French intellectuals – Voltaire, Molière, d'Alembert, Denis Diderot, Rousseau, Saint Just – ideas of freedom, brotherhood and liberty that would soon be tragically and systematically corrupted and perverted by demagogues of the French Revolution (1789-99) including the Jacobins, the Sans culottes (commoners), Jean-Paul Marat (radical newspaper editor and propagandist), George Jacques Danton, Honoré Mirabeau, Saint Just, Robespierre and many others. On the other hand, natural law ideas and natural rights arguments of Locke regarding liberty, legality/morality synthesis and the social contract theory were enthusiastically accepted in the American colonies; transcendent idea which would be pivotal in establishing the American Revolution (1775-83) and in developing the ideas and writings of America's constitutional Framers – George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Witherspoon, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, George Mason and other Founding Fathers of the United States.

**Biography of Berkeley**

*George Berkeley* (1685–1753), also known as Bishop Berkeley (Bishop of Cloyne), was a
mathematician and an Anglo-Irish philosopher whose major contributions to philosophy was the advancement of a theory he called "immaterialism" (later referred to by others as "subjective idealism"). I consider Berkeley to be a radical empiricist philosopher because his immaterialism theory rejects the existence of material substance and in its place argues that common objects like desks and beds are merely ideas in the minds of perceivers, and therefore cannot be real absent being perceived by someone. This idea reminds me of the ubiquitous philosophical question common on Psychology 101 exams in earlier times – "If a tree falls in the forest and nobody is around to hear it, did it make a sound?" Berkeley's immaterial philosophy would answer with a resounding, No!

**Writings of Berkeley**

Berkeley's first major work, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, was published in 1709. In this work Berkeley theorizes about the limits of human vision and proposes the theory that a more accurate view of reality; that objects which are seen are not material objects, but light and color. This led to his major philosophical work *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) which, after its rather unceremonious public reception, he revised in dialogue form and published under the title, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* in 1713 to great acclaim.

Following the tradition of dialogue writing made famous by Plato's dialogues of Socrates – *Crito, Philo, Symposium* and other works of this genre, Berkeley's work here explains views characterized by Philonous (Greek: "lover of mind"), while Hylas (Greek: "matter") embodies the Irish philosopher's enemies (especially John Locke). In his work, *De Motu* (1721) Berkeley contended that Sir Isaac Newton's doctrine of absolute space, time and motion (*On Motion*) was incongruous and his prescient arguments would be a precursor to the views of early twentieth century scientists like Ernst Mach and Albert Einstein. In 1732, Berkeley published *Alciphron*, a Christian apologetic promoting ideas of the so-called Free-thinkers movement and in 1734 he published *The Analyst*, an analysis of the foundations of calculus, which was a significant work in the advancement of mathematics.

**Biography of Hume**

*David Hume* (1711–1776) a Scottish philosopher, economist historian, diplomat, military strategist and polemist recognized today primarily for his radical philosophical empiricism and moral skepticism. A central figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, and in the history of Western philosophy, he was "generally regarded as one of the greatest philosophers and writers of the Age of Reason. His book, *The History of England*, was very popular and was the most important English history book of the 18th century. Hume is often paired with Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and George Berkeley as one of the Founding Fathers of philosophical empiricism.

**Writings of Hume**

Starting with his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume endeavored to construct a complete naturalistic "science of man" that studied the psychological origins of human nature. In contrast to the rationalist school of philosophy (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Pascal) that came
before him, Hume believed that desire rather than reason controlled human actions. He likewise disputed the reality of innate (natural) ideas, concluding that humans have awareness merely of phenomena they directly relate to material experiences. He contended that inductive reasoning or causality is impossible to explain or defend on purely rational grounds. Hume's suppositions moved toward convention and consensus instead of logic. He determined that humans have no real understanding of the self, only of a "bundle of sensations" connected with the self.

**Human Nature: Locke, Berkeley, Hume in Modern Times**

Human nature according to the Empiricist School is a dominant principle in science and the scientific method where all material things of necessity be *empirically* founded on the evidence of the senses. Together, natural and social sciences employ useable hypotheses that are testable by observation and experiment leading eventually to the formulation of a theory. Empiricism is often compared with rationalism, which holds that knowledge may be derivative from reason apart from the senses. Here, John Locke parted from doctrinaire empiricism and thought that some knowledge (e.g. knowledge of God's existence) was singularly derivative through intuition and reasoning. I believe this was what Locke meant in his *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690), that "The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule." Ideas like this greatly influenced the American Revolution and the constitutional Framers like Thomas Jefferson who borrowed heavily from Locke's natural law and natural rights ideas which he included in his Declaration of Independence (1776).

Regarding Locke's ideas on human nature the Editors of *Great Books of the Western World* had this interesting opening statement in their chapter on *Nature*:

Nature is a term which draws its meaning from the other terms with which it is associated by implication or contrast. Yet is not one of a fixed pair of terms, like

*necessity and contingency*,

*one and many*,

*universal and particular*,

*war and peace*. When things are divided into the natural and the artificial, or into the natural and the conventional, the opposite of the natural does not represent a loss or violation of nature, but rather a transformation of nature through the addition of a
new factor. The unnatural, on the other hand, seems to be merely a deviation, a falling away from, or sometimes a transgression of nature.

Contrasting with Hobbes or Kant or Hegel, Locke does not believe that the state of nature is essentially a state of war. However this distinction concerning Locke and other philosophers does not affect the argument that the partisan institutions of civil society are wholly phenomena of man's own imagination.

Berkeley, using very different principles of inquiry, likewise views natural phenomena including the ideas or sense perceptions which "are not produced by, or dependent on, the wills of men" totally separate from metaphysical phenomena. Man in a state of nature has no reality separate from the mind, but unlike fictional characters, for example in Shakespearean plays like – Henry IV or Richard II (historical figures fictionalized by Shakespeare's singular genius), natural beings consist of ideas not bound to our reality or the human mind, will or emotions. These ideas Berkeley argued are formed (or 'hot-wired') in our minds instantaneously by God at the moment we become sentient beings. Nevertheless Berkeley's worldview exemplifies a rather radical position from a theological sense. Viewing God through his empirical lens Berkeley's God is not only the Creator or First Cause, but the Sole Cause of all phenomena which occurs in a state of nature, indeed in the course of the universe. In Berkeley's reality natural causes do not exist. Nature has no productive control or force (reminiscent of Descartes' dualism). Berkeley's dualism has no room for the work of nature, but presupposes that all phenomena is either the work of God or the work of man.

Hume, in contrast, does not believe that miracles can be evidenced against our human nature; our existential experience of the order of nature. Nevertheless, he also presupposes that they are "dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian religion" who would try to defend its beliefs "by the principles of human reason. . . . The Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles," he declares, "but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: and whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person . . . which gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience."

In the modern era awareness of the importance of Locke, Berkeley and Hume's legacy, writings and ideas increased after World War II (1945), since they provided a testable and useable paradigm regarding the problems of great concern to philosophy, psychology, culture and society in the 20th century; primary among those being the problems of perception, the distinctions concerning primary and secondary qualities, and the importance of language, epistemology, human nature, the nature of evil, and the self.


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