

OF IMPRESSIONS, IDEAS AND VERACITY OF MEMORY: A REVIEW OF THE HUMEAN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROJECT

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ABSTRACT: *David Hume's epistemological project reinvigorates the British Empiricist tradition. His theory of knowledge thrives on the very idea that through impressions, the human mind mirrors reality and from there creates simple and complex ideas of our knowledge claims. It also forecloses the possibility of the apriori by elevating experience as the source through which man encounters and retracts knowledge of the external world. In its propositions, the Humean epistemological project regurgitates and retains the indubitability of sense data as fundamental to knowing. This paper therefore investigates the propriety David Hume's claims. It identified and reviewed three fundamental premises of the theory of knowledge and submits that like other empiricists before him, his theory of knowledge is refutable primarily because, David Hume holds an overwhelming confidence in the viability of the senses without giving minimal cognition to its fallibility.*

KEYWORDS: knowledge, sense data, apriori, impressions, ideas, memory

INTRODUCTION

Impressions and Ideas as the subject matter of this essay will be considered exclusively as an offspring of David's Hume's Epistemology. Impressions and ideas are considered in this paper, as the basis of his various discourses on Epistemology, that is, his theory of knowledge. It is noteworthy to state that these concepts were derived from his careful analysis of some philosophers ahead of him whose works can be described as pioneering as far as the theory of knowledge and epistemic discourses are concerned. In fact, "Hume's epistemology has often been treated as the culmination of the Empiricist tradition of John Locke and Bishop George Berkeley, it can also be seen to continue the skeptical tradition and even more strikingly the naturalist tradition of Epicurus, Lucretius, Hobbes and Spinoza"¹.

While arriving at his doctrine of Impression and ideas as the actual and undeniable contents of our perceptual process as distinct from the entire thesis before him, Hume argued that the acquisition of knowledge must be experiential while at the same time debunking the difficult approaches to the enigmatic nature of knowledge as professed in those preceding arguments and propositions. Against the Continental Rationalists, Hume argued that the

metaphysical nature of their proposition is untenable in the search for knowledge, he thus concluded that

If we take into our hands any volume of divinity or school of metaphysics, for instance let us ask does it contain any abstract reasoning? Concerning q quality or number? No. does it contain any experimental Reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to flames, for it contains nothing but sophistry and illusions.²

For him, the true nature of knowledge must be empirical. Hume exemplifies this position in his discourse *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. By proposing clear-cut distinctions between Impressions and ideas which are constituents of the perceptual process that is experiential he established the primacy of the senses in the acquisition of knowledge without creating a parity with John Locke's notion of primary qualities and secondary qualities. Where Locke said primary qualities and secondary qualities were inherent in the object of perception, Hume said impressions are what we sense or perceive when we encounter images or object for the very first time and ideas are derivatives of these impressions.

In this Essay therefore, I will dwell largely on Hume's categorization of impression and ideas as distinct from his precursors. The paper will also engage in a review of David Hume's emphatic argument on the formation of beliefs from imaginations and the perceptual process as against the continental rationalist's propagation of reason and rationality by showing and conclude by showing some of the inadequacies of his theory of knowledge .

IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

David Hume opines that "one can know nothing outside of experience and experience based on one's subjective perceptions never provides true knowledge of reality"⁶. In David Hume's epistemology the only contents of the mind are impressions and ideas. By this, Hume advocates a theory which states essentially and against all other things, that what we seem to perceive, that is, the "contents of our thoughts"⁷ are actually impressions and ideas and nothing more. To claim that mental states exists independently of impressions and ideas is perhaps a categorical mistake since knowledge is retractable from a single source, that is, our encounter with an external reality through our senses.

It appears that Hume's thesis is and his separation of "impressions and ideas is an explicit amendment of Locke's theory of ideas, which does not attempt a corresponding distinction"⁸, it is however important to add that this separation consists in the supposition that impressions are vivid, and violent when they make their appearances on the mind, while ideas are weaker because they are derivatives of impressions. For him, the two do not possess the same level of veracity.

The degree of force ascribed to impressions is more potent while ideas are literally weaker. Hume further classifies ideas into simple and complex ideas. For him complex ideas are just a group of simple ideas which have been merged to become one. For instance, the simple ideas of a man and a goat can be combined to arrive at a complex idea of a centaur, likewise simple ideas of a bird and a horse can conveniently create a complex idea of a flying horse, and we can only rely on impressions for simple ideas. From the foregoing, ideas are therefore, just faint images or representations of our more vivid and lively impressions. Hume claims that ideas are copied or derived from their correspondent impressions, that is, it is impossible to have ideas when they are no impressions. This argument becomes lucid when we talk of an infant child having an idea of a particular colour primarily because we have presented him with an object of same colour thereby creating an impression through a perceptual process that is fundamentally experiential.

Hume maintains that innate knowledge is a farce and that ‘it is impossible because human mind finds itself lost in a maze of contradictions when it goes beyond the realm of possible experience and so metaphysic infringes upon the rules which any utterance must satisfy if it is so literally significant’⁹.

By these, Hume expects that we understand that the perceptual process fundamentally starts at the stage when we begin to have sensations that are “particularly vivid and forceful”¹⁰ which we can call impressions; and with these impression He propagates the creative powers of the human mind. He affirms the creativity of the mind by saying that “to form monsters, and form incongruous shapes and appearances, costs the imagination no more trouble than to conceive the most natural and familiar objects. What never was seen or heard of may yet be conceived, nor is anything beyond the power of thought except what implies an absolute contradiction”¹¹.

ANALYSIS OF HUME’S EPISTEMOLOGY

It is apparent that Hume’s theory of knowledge and his thesis that knowledge of the external world is fundamentally created through experience and that it cannot be regarded as emanating from innate ideas or reflections. On the prominence of impressions and ideas as products of our perception, he claims that they are solely from empirical means as against metaphysics and its proponents.

It is safe to say that David Hume’s epistemology is a frontal attack that is deliberately written to query metaphysics and its foundations wherever it existed. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume rejects “abstract ideas, substance, the soul and beliefs not grounded in antecedent resembling impressions. In the introduction to that work Hume says none of the sciences can go beyond experience or establish any principles which are not founded on that authority”¹² and whatever we make claim to know which is beyond experience is impossible and unverifiable and therefore be seen as an “imputation of emptiness or sophistry”¹³.

It is apparent that Hume dismisses any knowledge that is said to be metaphysical and not originally rooted in our impressions gathered from the perceptual process. He argued in the tradition of the logical positivists that sensory data are the only means of knowing the world. He affirms the theory of verification where it is argued that any statement of fact that cannot be justified through empirical means and whose meanings or truth cannot be derived directly from such statements are metaphysical and incongruent with reality. By and Large, it is appropriate to state that the analysis of Hume's epistemology leads to these three fundamental submissions.

Firstly, David Hume's theory of Impressions and Ideas is first and foremost a theory of knowledge borrowing from Empiricists ahead of him. It is therefore a strong rebuttal of the claims of metaphysics as it relates to the possibility of the existence of abstract ideas transcending the reach of our senses through the perceptual process.

Secondly, from his theory of Impressions and Ideas, it can be deduced that his work is a copious adaptation and modification of John Locke's primary and secondary qualities as the basis of all knowledge claims. It however differs in its adaptation of ideas as the fickle extracts derivable from forceful impressions about the external world. It claims that ideas are created whether in its simple or complex sense from the impressions of the external world and that there 'is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind, when a man feels the pain of excessive heat, or pleasure of moderate warmth and when he afterwards recall to his memory of this sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination'¹⁴. By this, he creates a difference by attaching force to impressions while ideas are less vivid in their appearance and construction.

Finally, Hume argued that knowledge of the external world is dependent on perception and rumination over impressions, that is, knowledge claims are dependent on the impressions and the interpretation or categorisation of impressions into simple and complex ideas. For him, this perceptual process is not more than the creative power of the mind as a 'faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience'¹⁵. With this, he claims that knowledge is fixated on objects and how we perceive them. He creates a debate on intentionality and forecloses the possibility of knowing without experiencing.

A CRITIQUE OF HUME'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Hume's epistemology is frequently subjected to debates for reasons such as the problem of induction, intentionality and the question of subjectivity. In the tradition of the extant debates and objections from philosophers on the inconsistencies contained in Hume's theory of impression and ideas, this section will make a contribution to the ongoing debate on the subject matter by attempting a critique of the three points raised earlier in the preceding section of the paper. The paper will anchor its position on the impropriety of sense data and experience in the search for indubitable knowledge of the world.

I will also argue here that if Hume's epistemology has its root in the empiricist tradition, it is susceptible to most of the criticisms against that tradition. For instance, his theory of impression is fundamentally dependent on the senses and when the senses give a wrong report of their impressions the epistemic agent is likely to form wrong ideas of the external world. John Hospers casts aspersions on the incorrigibility of the senses as a receptacle of knowledge of the external world thus

Sometimes we have sense experience when there is nothing at all to be perceived. We may be having hallucination, such as when we are thirsty and we think we see water. Or sometimes what we see is really there, but we think it has one characteristic when it really has another ¹⁶

On the viability of sensory states, George Berkeley's phenomenalism stands practically against the propriety of sense data as a basis for admitting that knowledge of the external world is accessible through perception. He denies this possibility on the basis that knowledge becomes subjective and dependent on the interpretation of the mind that perceives. It is apt to state then that the question of universals is improbable since impressions are notably, personal experiences of the world or reality as we encounter it in a subjective manner unlike the universally monolithic representation of empiricists. For instance when two individuals perceive the same object it is likely they receive different sense data from the object of experience.

In addition, John Hospers explains that 'by means of sense experience we learn many things about the physical world; we perceive countless physical things, processes, and events, as well as the interaction of our own bodies with things in nature. But if our knowledge ended there, we would have no means of dealing effectively with the world'¹⁷. While affirming the functionality of the sense in knowing, Hospers also admits that processing sense data is the most important aspect of knowledge acquisition and that is expressly beyond the propositions of impressions, simple ideas and complex ideas as enthused in Hume's work.

Also arising from the first submission is the question of intentionality. Intentionality is a gaping hole in the development of Hume's epistemology because the proposition of impressions and ideas depend on objects outside of the epistemic agent for their veracity. It is more so because in writing off the rationalist argument, Hume fails to take cognizance of the possibility of holding knowledge claims that are not derived from the impressions of the external world, that is, the possibility of knowing without concrete or evidential claims correlating to objects in reality.

While referring to Bertrand Russell's opinion that knowledge cannot be totally derivative, this argument emphasises the possibility of knowing things without experiencing them. It rejects the Humean assertion that experiential knowledge is the only basis for knowing because 'derivative knowledge obtained from perception is merely a form of psychological

inference'¹⁸. By this, the paper elucidates intuition by affirming that the senses alone cannot be the premise for knowledge since there are subsisting claims that knowledge can also be *Apriori*.

David Hume's theory of knowledge stems from the same British empiricist tradition. It is in fact from John Locke's arguments on the propriety of the senses as a receptacle of knowledge. Hume's epistemology however departs from the tradition in the utilization of primary and secondary ideas as derivatives of sense data. He precludes the possibility of other sources or basis for knowledge acquisition as incredible once they fail to condescend to the central notion of the perceptual process.

Hume's argument takes a detour from the norm in its emphasis of the cogency of memory as against the primacy of ideas which was far more prevalent in the preceding tradition. By this, he projects a synthesis of the existing discourse by subjecting the acquired sense data to the creativity of the mind in the bid to explain the formation of knowledge claims, he however fell short of achieving this purpose because of the ascription of too much importance to how an epistemic agent can invariably augment reality to conform to a specific purpose.

In the final observation Hume argues that impressions are forceful and more vivid than ideas and as such they represent a valid depiction of the external world, we must readily admit that Hume's epistemology depends on memory, the ability of the mind to recall the activities of the senses and the creativity of the human mind in augmenting the ideas to form knowledge claims. It also follows that the veracity of knowledge claims are dependent on the ability of the epistemic agent to *memorise* ideas or all other sense data retracted from the external world. It is also appropriate to argue that the time lag that exists between when impressions produce ideas may affect the veracity of our knowledge claims such that depending too much on memory or recollection as a means for knowledge acquisition becomes irrevocably fallible.

CONCLUSION

Following from the above, David Hume's theory of knowledge may likely not have theorised a correct representation of the proper process of knowing the external world. If we must depend on impressions and memories alone for the formation of ideas, especially when knowledge claims are premised on the creativity of the mind, knowledge becomes subjective depending on the purpose for which it is construed. If knowledge claims are therefore justified only by recalling memories that are subjected to relative interpretations, it is apparent that Hume's epistemology would amount to a disjointed depiction of reality.

ENDNOTES

- 1) Craig, E. (Ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Vol. 4. (New York: Routledge 1998) p. 543.
- 2) Fadahunsi, A. *Metaphysics: A Historical and Thematic Introduction* (Ibadan: Hope Publication, 2004) p. 102.
- 3) Op. cit. p. 543.
- 4) Ibid. p. 544.
- 5) Craig op. cit. p. 546.
- 6) Jacobson, A.P. *Routledge History of Philosophy: British Philosophy and the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 1999) p. 152.
- 7) Fadahunsi op cit. p. 152.
- 8) Ibid. p. 153.
- 9) Hume, D. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Oxford University Press, 1902) p. 725.
- 10) Op. cit. p. 152.
- 11) Ibid. p. 153.
- 12) Ibid. p. 109.
- 13) Russell, B. *The Problems of Philosophy*
- 14) Hume, D. p.17
- 15) ibid. p.19
- 16) Hospers
- 17) Ibid.
- 18) Russell, B. p.