

# DAVID HUME AND THE CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF EMPIRICISM

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**Abstract:** The research is related to David Hume. This philosopher is described as being an empiricist, but it should be noted that the empiricism promoted by Hume represents the development up to the final consequences of this philosophical doctrine that should be subjected to the observability requirement. The core problem for Hume's philosophy is the difficulty of causality thinking. The Scottish philosopher promotes a moderate and inconsistent skepticism because he does not doubt the permanency of facts. The Humean epistemology is mixed with elements belonging to some naïve ontology of a materialistic nature and with elements of a sensualistic psychology of an associationist type. The causality or the causal connection between events is based on a psychological belief, which has a pragmatic end for people, in that it offers us the psychological comfort of habitual events and the familiar existential. Causality refers to certain events that have already happened in a certain way, but it cannot constitute a necessary and sufficient basis for similar future events.

**Keywords:** David Hume, John Locke, empiricism, causality problem

## INTRODUCTION

In the case of empiricism as a philosophical orientation, the most interesting, is the David Hume "case". The fundamental problem for his philosophical doctrine is the issue of causality. I shall consider that Hume promotes a radical empiricism (centered on the requirement to reduce all ideas and on the requirement of observability), a moderate and inconsistent skepticism (does not doubt the permanency of facts), and a naive materialistic ontology in terms of a sensualistic and associationistic psychology. Hume does not reject causality, but engages in examining the possibility of a rational and sensorial legitimacy of predicting future events based on the so called causal connection required. The result of his research is negative. It cannot be proven reasonably, by any demonstration, or by resorting to sensory

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experience, that the causal link truly exists and that it would bear necessity. The causal link between events is simply faith, which probably for pragmatic reasons, people will never give up. A question may be asked: is Hume's empiricism more radical than Locke's?

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF MODERN EMPIRICISM  
 Empiricists have started from researching the nature of our ideas. Both Locke and Hume have raised the question of the formation of our ideas, whether ideas are innate (the Cartesian rationalist version, for example) or acquired. If our ideas are innate, then behaviorism is deprived of its support. If our ideas are acquired through senses, then innateism is no longer justified, no longer founded. Locke and Hume chose the latter option. They have at least two things in common: fighting innateism and the origin of ideas. While in the first case, both take the same stand, in the second one, the structure is the same yet with some differences. It seems that Locke took a stronger and more explicit stand in combating innateism. He was concerned with proving the groundlessness of the so called theory of innate ideas, trying to show that experience is the source of all our ideas.<sup>1</sup> Locke believes that it is necessary to renounce not only to the incorrect thesis stating that there are ready-made ideas since birth, but also the pseudo ideas and prejudices that still master the human mind as immutable principles.<sup>2</sup> Rejecting innateism strengthens the thesis of the empirical origin of ideas; at birth, the human mind is like a white sheet of paper (*blank slate*), on which there is nothing written; all the elements of reason and knowledge are taken from experience alone.<sup>3</sup> Hume starts from the same stand that Fr. Bacon and Locke have departed from: experience.<sup>4</sup> Hegel noticed that David Hume rejects innate ideas; experience, as the only source of ideas, resides in perception.

Locke identifies two sources of knowledge: the first one is the external sense or sensation. It seems that "ideas emerging on this path

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<sup>1</sup>Nicolae Trandafiroiu (1999). *Substanța și cauzalitatea în interpretarea empirismului englez / The Substance and Causality in Interpreting the English Empiricism*, Bucharest, All Publisher's House, p.26.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.28.

<sup>3</sup>John Locke (1968). *An Essay Concerning Human Intellect*, Cambridge University Press. Romanian translation (1968): *Eseu asupra intelectului omenesc*, Bucharest: Scientific Publisher's House, p.81.

<sup>4</sup>G.W.Fr. Hegel (1830). *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Berlin: Verlag von Duncker und Humblot. Romanian translation (1963): *Prelegeri de istoria filosofiei*, Bucharest: Academy Publisher's House, vol. I, p.538.

have a maximum cognitive value, because they correspond to the things they refer to.”<sup>5</sup> The second source of knowledge is the internal sense or reflection by which the mind gets ideas reflecting on its internal processes. Hume also identifies two sources of human knowledge: 1) Impressions (all emotions more vivid and stronger) and 2) Thoughts or ideas (the less powerful and alive, they are less intense than ideas). However, an important difference between Hume and Locke concerning the issue of the two sources of human knowledge may be noticed. With Hume it relates to the requirement of reducibility: all our ideas are reduced to impressions. In other words, each idea must have a corresponding impression.<sup>6</sup> With Locke, although the first source is the sensation, it is not necessary that the entire knowledge come down to this. Locke himself says that there are only two sources of knowledge: sensation or reflection.

The term “experience” has two meanings with Hume.<sup>7</sup> The first one refers to the origin of ideas in impression, thus opposing apriorism, and the second one refers to the real world phenomena as a whole and the relationships among these phenomena (the issue of causality). The objective value of knowledge is given by the impressions corresponding to ideas. We only perceive specific features but we do not perceive the essence. Thus, the logical consequence of empiricism reaches its climax through Hume. He developed the empiricist philosophy of Locke and Berkeley “to its logical conclusion”.<sup>8</sup> Three components may be indicated in Hume’s argumentation: ontological, psychological, and epistemological.

## DAVID HUME’S ONTOLOGY

David Hume did not propose to himself to develop what we call ontology. He accepts as unproblematic the common sense views about existence. Existence is multiple and diverse; in other words, it holds quantity and quality. The quantity of existence consists in the

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<sup>5</sup>Nicolae Trandafiroiu, *op. cit.*, p.30.

<sup>6</sup>David Hume (1748). *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Cambridge University Press. Romanian translation (1987): *Cercetare asupra intelectului omenesc*, Bucharest: Scientific Publisher’s House, p.100.

<sup>7</sup>Florica Neagoe (1970). *Istoria filosofiei moderne. De la Spinoza la Diderot / History of the Modern Philosophy. From Spinoza to Diderot*, Bucharest: Didactical and Pedagogical Publisher’s House, p.90.

<sup>8</sup>Bertrand Russell (1972). *A History of Western Philosophy*, Simon & Schuster Inc. Romanian translation (2008): *Istoria filosofiei occidentale*, Bucharest: Humanitas, pp.670-671.

multitude of objects, the quality, in differentiating their determinations. Objects have characteristics (shape, size, and so on). As some characteristics are manifested, while others are cryptic (“hidden powers”), existence is defined by ontological depth. The objects are next to each other, some on top of others; therefore they have a spatial display. The configuration of the display of objects in relation to spatial structure is given; existence is characterized by exteriority and ontological neutrality. It would be even if man were not. The human body with all its organs (eyes, ears, skin, etc.) also belongs to this complete outer world. Between the objects external to the body and the organs external to the soul there is a relationship: the first act upon the latter.

Objects are active, organs are passive. Organs have a single function, to receive, to bear the action of objects. Responsiveness makes sense only when the organs are functional, the term “deaf ears”, for instance, is improper because that part of the body that is shaped like a funnel hanging on one side of the head cannot get sound signals. The actional relationship between objects and human organs is causal: the intensity of subjective effects is directly proportional to the intensity of the characteristics of objects. It is, just like the existence of reality, unproblematic for Hume. As far as the objects are quantitatively distinguished they are matters. The objectual ontology of the Scottish philosopher does not differ in any way from the naive materialistic beliefs of common sense. This tradition of commonsense philosophy has worked its way up in the British area.

#### DAVID HUME’S PSYCHOLOGY

Hume’s psychology is sensualistic and associationistic. He distinguishes among three psychic instances: sensitivity, memory, and imagination. At sensitivity level impressions are formed, in the memory ideas are stored, while imagination combines and recombines the materials memorized.

Impressions are reflections of the features of objects (external sensations), but also affective (“we love”, “we hate”) and volitional experiences (“we want”, “we desire”). Impressions form the class of originating experiences. Hume does not describe how external impressions are formed, namely, what happens when objects meet with sensory organs. We have seen above that objects differ in quantity (size) and quality (have different determinations); in their turn, characteristics differ in intensity. There is, thus, an ontological

gradation. Impressions differ from each other in intensity and vivacity; the impression produced by a smaller number of actions of an object is weaker and less vivid than the impression produced by a large number of actions of the same object. This means that the gradation of impressions should not be placed in direct correspondence to the ontological gradation, but to the number of the actions of objects upon the senses; the intensity and vividness of impressions are determined by the frequency of the sensory contacts of the epistemic subject with objects. Apart from a few sporadic indications (“we hear”, “we see”, “we touch”), Hume does not operate a systematic grouping of the types of impressions, depending on the stimulated body organ or another criterion; at the same time, he does not make any statement concerning the status of impressions, whether they are isolated from one another or whether they are related. However, we can suspect that he establishes a bi-univocal correspondence by default between the set of external impressions and the set of the attributes of objects, on one hand, and between the set of internal impressions and the set of affective and volitional states, on the other hand. Hume thereby decrees the prohibition of the appearance of any impression the external or internal origin of which cannot be unequivocally indicated.

Ideas are simple copies of impressions, so they will be paler.<sup>9</sup> Hume does not specify what we should understand by “idea”, images (representations) or relations between images; instead, he specifies how ideas appear. There are three principles of association: similarity, space-time contiguity, and causality. One might say that this is a vicious circle. As principles of association of ideas they should be ideas, at their turn; in order to be able to take form, they need to assume themselves. Hume does not discuss about these principles and does not refute their legitimacy because, probably, he thinks of them as a given mechanism. If they are given then they are either innate (which would force him to accept innatism) or regularities necessary to things (which would force him to reconsider his approach concerning the necessary connections). These principles exert two functions: generating ideas by associating impressions and associating simple ideas and so generating composed ideas.

While memory registers, preserves, and allows the update of ideas, imagination is defined by a degree of activism; it combines and

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<sup>9</sup>Harald Höffding (1924). *Histoire de la philosophie moderne*, Paris: Félix Alcan, p.450.

recombines ideas. The resulting ideas, sometimes very bizarre, are stored in memory as well. Supplied from two sources, memory contains, therefore, two types of ideas: some, exact replicas of impressions, others, products of imagination. On both, Hume imposes the requirement of reducibility: any idea must be able to be reduced (“decomposed”) to impressions. Simple ideas are reduced directly, composed ones, indirectly. In its turn, each impression must be able to be reduced to an attribute of an object or an emotional experience. This way knowledge in its entirety is organized in a pyramidal manner, impressions at the base and the most general and abstract ideas at the top.

Between the ontological and the psychological planes, there is certain symmetry: relations between facts correspond to relations between impressions. The first are causes, the others, effects. At a subjective level we may ascertain the simultaneity and succession of impressions. As the first feature seems unproblematic, Hume examines the other. Succession involves temporality, designated by terms such as “first of all”, “before”, “then”, “after”, etc. We assume that at instance T1 impression A is produced, and then at instance T2 impression B is produced. Let us call the first impression “fire” and the second one “smoke”. Both impressions respect the intersubjective testability requirement, meaning that any witness can prove that at T1 there is an object called “fire” and at T2 there is another object called “smoke”. In terms of empiricism, the above requirement can be more accurately called: observability requirement. It is a severe requirement and it indicates Hume’s radical stand. Neither of the two impressions violates this requirement. No other impression can be indicated between the two impressions. Establishing the sequence can therefore be concisely formulated as “fire, then smoke”. While examining their succession we do not gain any indication concerning the connection between them. Moreover, the impression called “smoke” is completely different from the impression called “fire”. No matter how much we analyze the qualities of the first impression (shape, color, etc.), we find none to suggest that it would be, in any way, generating the second impression; similarly no analysis can identify, among the qualities of the impression called “smoke”, any indication that would suggest it was caused by the first impression.

However, the statement “fire causes smoke” is accepted without restraint in common knowledge, science, and philosophy. Why? Hume’s examination leads him to the conclusion that the idea of

the necessary connection does not legitimize either *a priori* or *a posteriori*. If the principle of causality is based on experience, then there is no impression corresponding to the idea of a necessary connection between cause and effect. In fact, Hume states that a single experience cannot provide us with the idea of necessary connection, and more experiences show us only the events in sequence. For Hume it is clear that a third impression apart from the two does not exist; therefore, we cannot prove in any way that, in reality, there is a link between fire and smoke. Should such an impression exist, it would have to comply with the observability requirement.

In this case, either the causal link is an invention without a counterpart in reality, or it is an idea formed by an incorrect or unexpected operation of the psychological mechanisms of association. To clarify this issue, Hume examines the genesis of the idea of connection. Following a single impact between an object and a sense organ, no impression occurs and therefore, no idea; the impact is called “experience”. Only a large number of similar experiences can generate an impression, thus the impression becoming an idea; the greater number of experiences, the more intense impressions and ideas. Two emotional states are associated with the impression induced in this manner: habit (which may be an effect of repetition) and faith. An objection might be formulated: if habit is, as Hume seems to consider it, an effect of the repeated sequence of events, then the causal link insinuates itself in the argumentation as assumption. The term “faith”, in this instance, is not synonymous with “suspicion”. Suspicion admits probability and hence uncertainty and contingency. Faith is the indicative of absolute subjective certainty, the firm conviction in the strict determinism of the world. Habit and faith create a horizon of expectations centered on the similarity of future and past.<sup>10</sup> The faith in similarity cannot be proven, though, because the future cannot be experienced. All these subjective elements induced by the repeated successions of experienced facts are combined and recombined in imagination, resulting in the idea of necessary connection: “therefore, this connection that we feel in spirit, this usual passing of imagination from one object to the usually accompanying one is the feeling or

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<sup>10</sup>We can clarify the meaning of ‘habit’ considering the equivalent formulation of Albert Farges : *l’association habituelle*. See *Études des bases de la connaissance de la croyance avec la critique du neokantianisme du pragmatisme* (1907), Paris: Berche et Tarlin, p.115.

impression from which we form the idea of power or necessary connection. Nothing more is hidden here”.<sup>11</sup>

The genesis of the idea of necessary connection is thus explained by the combinatorial action of imagination that uses impressions and heterogeneous states; as it is not reducible to a clear and distinct impression of connection and as it does not comply with the observability requirement, it cannot prove its ontological foundation.

### DAVID HUME’S EPISTEMOLOGY

In the case of the epistemological dimension, Hume distinguishes between two categories of “objects of human research”: relations between ideas and relations between facts. From this point of view, Hume would anticipate Kant. Moreover, in slightly different forms, the distinction appears with Hobbes and Leibniz as well.

The first type of relations is specific to formal sciences, Hume indicating geometry, algebra, and arithmetic. The main feature of these relations is that they are factually neutral. Their truth is analytically determined (by simple operations of thinking) without resorting to facts. To clarify the issue of the causal connection, the examination of these relations is irrelevant, in Hume’s view. The basic characteristic of the other relations is that they can be factually refuted: “the opposite of any fact is always possible”.<sup>12</sup> Invalidation can occur only through sensory experience; the term “experience” is used only in this narrow sense by Hume. In psychological terms, Hume proves that the idea of causal connection is only a product of human imagination and one cannot prove it by sensorial means; the habit of thinking that one fact is caused by another takes the form of reifying protection. The man reifies by projection on reality, a figment of his imagination. In the epistemological component of his philosophy, Hume argues against the idea that future events can be predicted on the base of the unfounded necessity of the causal relation. From the perspective of contemporary and modern philosophy, Hume’s argumentation can be reconstructed in the following manner without altering the philosophical thought.

If the causal relationship really existed, (*in re* and not only *in mente*) and if, in addition, it were also necessary, then the statement that would express it would be universal. In terms already consecrated

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<sup>11</sup>David Hume, *op. cit.*, p.148.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p.105.



(Kant, Popper, etc.) it should possess strict universality; meaning it should be valid for past, present, and future events. Only such a statement would allow for the prediction of future events. The issue of examining the idea of causal connection will be reformulated, in this case, as an issue of the possibility to rationally legitimize the universal statement strictly relating to causality. In relation with the psychological approach placed in the context of the genesis, this approach lies within the context of the foundation.

The succession of two events, A and B, “B succeeds A” in a single experience can be described by a unique statement. From a unique statement a universal statement cannot be inferred. In Hume’s words, a single case does not generate any impressions and therefore no idea of causal connection is possible. The repeated sequence of events A and B can be described by a class of singular statements. It seems that this is the case covered by Hume. Repetition produces an impression, and the impression produces an idea. From several unique statements a universal statement can be inferred. Is it also strictly universal? It can take the shape: “in all the experiences so far, B followed A”. Every singular statement expressing the sequence “A then B” is true. From the set of singular true statements, we infer the truth of the universal statement. This universality, however, is empirical. The empirical proposition cannot guarantee anything about the future. Extending its validity over future events is therefore unlawful. A strict universal statement concerning the succession of events cannot be inferred from a universal empiric statement. While the latter is true, the first could only be likely because the false implies anything. This results from the truth table of the composed logical sentence called “logical implication”.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that, in psychological terms, this situation takes the form of unfounded faith in the similarity of future and past. No matter how great the frequency of repetition of the sequence of events and no matter how strong our feeling of safety would be, predicting future events based on past experiences is fundamentally illegitimate. These would be the most important elements concerning the causality theory developed by Hume. The “enrolling” of this philosopher within the direction called empiricism must be nuanced. The Scottish philosopher seems to develop until the last consequences the manner to found knowledge only based on the data provided by the five senses. This

terrible dispute in the history of universal philosophy, between rationalism and empiricism, is still “open” – as Constantin Noica considered in the case of “open concepts”. Be it alone the dispute between Noam Chomsky and Jean Piaget concerning natural human language. Piaget rather takes an empiricist stand, because he considers that language is assimilated empirically in the first stage of life (if, for instance, we have a man who has not assimilated a natural language from birth until adolescence, like the scenario of *The Jungle Book*, he will not be able to learn any form of natural language), while the American linguist Chomsky believes that we can talk about certain innate structures, the so-called “universal grammar”, and based on these structures we will be able to assimilate a natural language individually.<sup>13</sup>

The dispute between empiricism and rationalism is “mediated”, philosophically, by the Kantian critical rationalism. Immanuel Kant has called his philosophical doctrine ‘transcendental idealism’. The German transcendental idealism explicitly starts from David Hume’s philosophy, approaching rationalism in its “form of knowledge”, while the “subject of knowledge” will always be given empirically. The rupture that had occurred between the classical rationalism of knowledge, represented by: Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, and the classical English empiricism represented by: Locke, Berkeley, Bacon, and Hume, will be mediated by the German transcendental idealism.

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<sup>13</sup>Mircea Flonta (1994). *Cognitio*, Bucharest: All Publisher’s House, pp.104-124.

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