

# Empiricism as an Ally for Knowledge

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# Argument

Knowledge is possible. Empiricism with its emphasis on the reliability of the senses and its layered view of experience are its best ally against charges of false justification--that is, a rationalist attack on knowledge where criteria are deemed capable of disproving experience. Its certainty is a matter of degree.



John Constable, *The Hay Wain*, 1821. National Gallery, London.

## Apparent Contradictions?

- This is a painting like other haymaking pictures known in Britain at the time, on the order of Gainsborough and Stubbs. (1)
- The *Hay Wain* owes its success to the superb depiction of idyllic nature as well as its location within European painting traditions. (2)
- Constable was socially unaware not to have depicted anything of the harsh realities of rural life of his day in this painting. (3)
- Constable was financially broke when he painted this. He asked his patron John Fischer to lend him 20 or 30 pounds. Fisher lent him 5 pounds – all he could afford. (4)

# The Philosophers



LOCKE



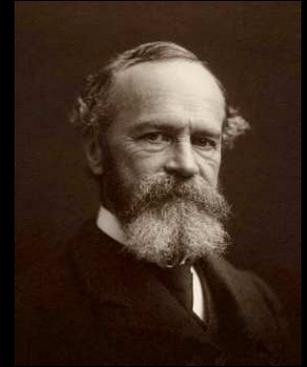
BERKELEY



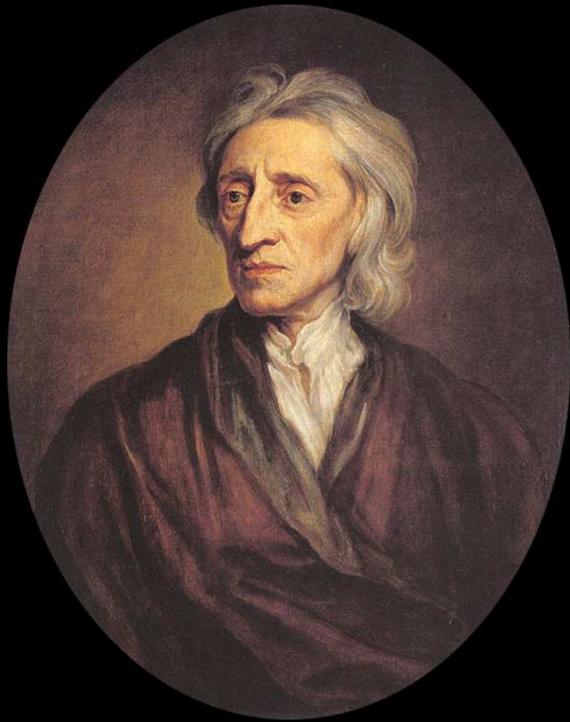
HUME



KANT



JAMES



Portrait of John Locke, by Sir Godfrey Kneller, 1697  
Collection of Sir Robert Walpole, Houghton Hall

*John Locke*  
*Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690)*

Presents a system based on identity of the senses and perceptions, anchored in the accuracy of the senses

Understanding is an interlocking system where perception and ideas are subject to reason

“Knowledge is the Perception of Agreement or Disagreement of Two Ideas.”

“Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything.”



Lock and interlocking tracery

Koffer van Namban lakwerk, ca. 1575-1625,  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Bishop George Berkeley, by John Smybert, 1727?  
National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC.

*George Berkeley*  
*The Principles of Human Knowledge (1710)*  
*and*  
*Three Dialogues*  
*between Hylas and Philonous (1713)*

Reality and the senses exist in continuity with each other.

There are problems in knowing reality because of faulty ideas about matter, namely, that material things cause sensation. Rather, it is the mind that creates sensations in response to things.

In other words, there are no ideas without minds.

The very “root of skepticism” is found in the mismatch of ideas and perceptions of sense.

The problem of perceiving an oar as bent in the water is not due to the senses, but rather faulty inference.



Gezicht op de Gouden Bocht,  
Gerrit Adriaensz. Berckheyde, 1671 - 1672  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



David Hume, 1711-1776. Historian and Philosopher  
By Allan Ramsay, 1766. National Gallery of Scotland

## David Hume

### *A Treatise on Human Nature (1739-40)*

Imagination is the ground upon which mental phenomena, like impressions and ideas, confront each other.

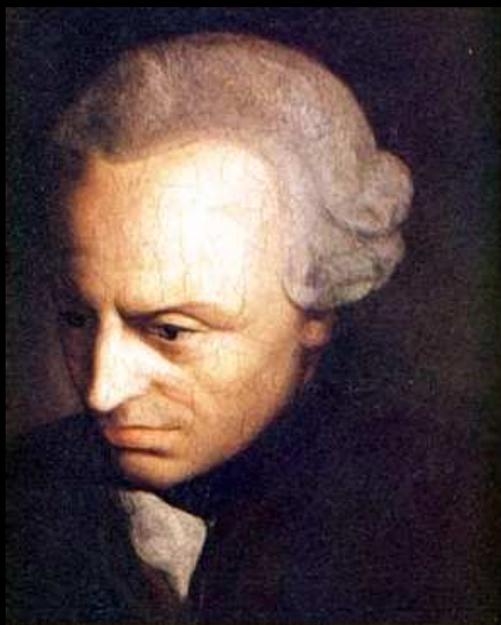
Cause and effect play a role in observation of real world and may be helpful and anchoring it.

The billiard ball example: may be an extreme example of how not to assume the laws of experience work uniformly, especially when playing pool!

For this reason, reason plays a vastly subservient role in how sense is made of experience.

Hume: "Tis therefore by experience only that we can infer one object to another." How much of a skeptic is Hume really?





Attribution unknown

*Immanuel Kant*

*Critique of Pure Reason (1781)*

Seeks to resolve tensions between the imagination and reality by establishing a system making cognition accountable to reason.

Reality is knowable. Quote: “for that which stands in connection with perception, according to the laws of the progress of experience, is real.”

The understanding is the author of experience. While it is subjective, all experience and cognition take place within a framework of the pure intuitions of time and space. This allows enable cognition to reach toward objectivity. Reason plays a special role in uniting subjective impressions of sense and conditions of experience.

Empirical knowledge, knowledge gained by experience, is the foundation of *a priori* knowledge, or pure knowledge gained apart from direct experience.

Experience is what all knowledge must be tested against, either empirical or *a priori*.

All knowledge must have an object.

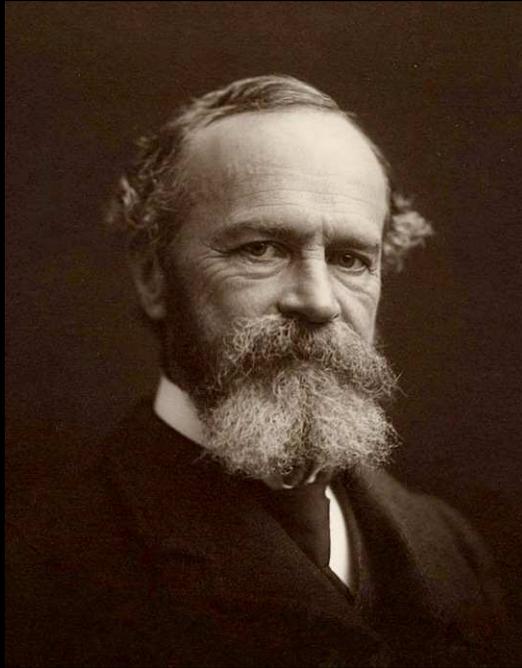


Photo: Source Unknown. 1890's

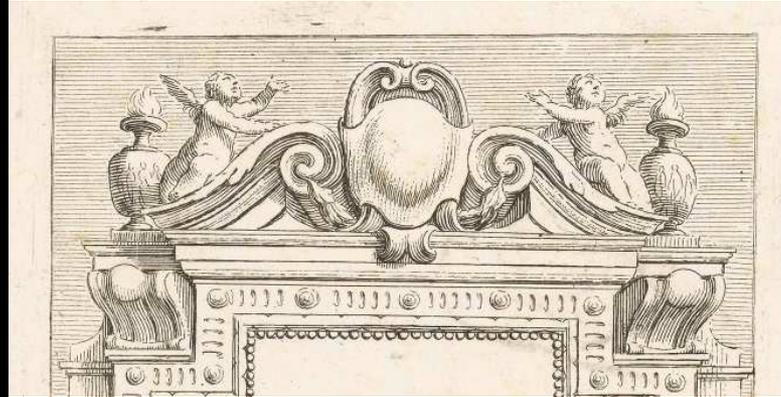
## *William James* *Radical Empiricism (1907)*

Realizing along with Kant that cognition beings as completely subjective, James seeks to free cognition from all forms of conceptual determination that are foreign to experience. This is his radical empiricism.

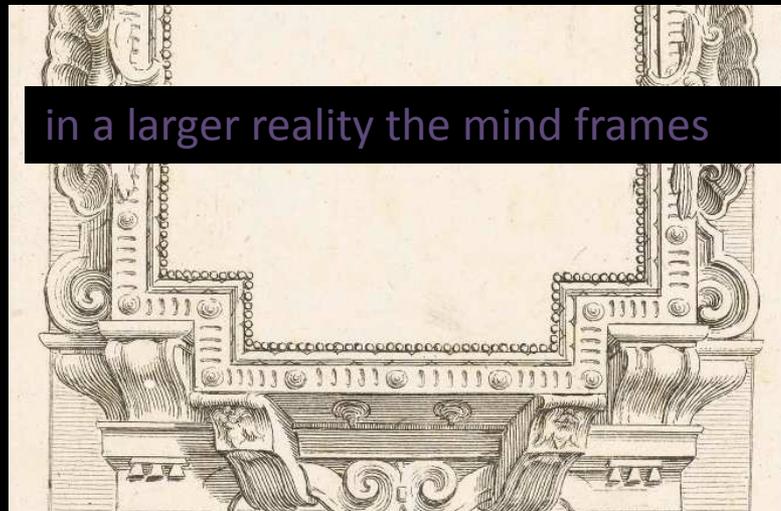
“To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced nor exclude from them an element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experience must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything else in the system.”

He describes a phenomenon called "pointing" or "self transcendency." While not explained further in the text, it seems to suggest that data in experience itself can cohere and point to some object of knowledge without the need for rational criteria in which to discern it.

# Knowledge works as a frame within a frame



The senses provide trustworthy data about reality.



Knowledge results by reasoning about subjective experience as conditioned in time and space.

# Examples

Knowledge is like:



A Stilton cheese

1. Knowledge is concrete and synthetic.  
Knowledge is a way of giving form to experience.



A good chocolate doughnut

2. Knowledge is made by the senses, which can go beyond current conceptions, or “transcend” them.



A 'dry' Zen garden

3. where the mind is able to create the conditions under which it perceives things.

# Stilton Cheese

1. Knowledge is concrete and synthetic.  
Knowledge is a way of giving form to  
experience.



Stilton cheese

-is made of unpasteurized  
milk,

-can only be made in three  
counties.

-be made in a traditional  
cylindrical shape, etc. but also  
-have a 'taste profile typical  
of Stilton' (Wikipedia)

Perceptions of sense as well  
as intellectual concepts  
determine whether a cheese  
is 'objectively' a Stilton

# Doughnuts

2. Knowledge is informed by the senses, which can occasionally provide new data to go beyond, or “transcend” current concepts.

The senses may so thoroughly inform a conception that a conception may change— as in the case of a good specialty store doughnut changing one’s conception of what a doughnut even is. Now doughnuts are warm and light, as well as dry and cake-like.



Regular Doughnut



“Transcendent” Doughnut

3. The mind is able to create the conditions under which it perceives things.

# A Zen garden



A 'dry' Zen garden approximates a water garden, but in stone. It stimulates the mind's ability to create conditions on which it can carefully and precisely meditate on objects with the framework of nature.



John Constable, *The Hay Wain*, 1821. National Gallery, London.

## A Synthesized Account

- This painting partakes in both British and European traditions. Constable probably had access to both at the time, considering how developed Britain was and the accomplishment that he demonstrates in the work.
- Constable probably was well aware of the rural hardships of the day. Being a landscape painter, he probably noted them well.
- Broke himself at the time, he was aware of social hardships. But, as a Romantic painter he was probably more committed to presenting the harmonies of nature in order to perhaps point to a more beneficent order.

# Responses to Skepticism

In an ordered universe and in an ordered system of cognition that interacts with it, one contradiction of fact will not ruin an argument. Knowledge on this model is in a dynamic system which responds to conditions that change.

## Kant

- “If we presuppose in relation to the earth...wise designs on the part of the author, we cannot fail to make a great number of interesting discoveries. For if we keep to this hypothesis, as a principal which is purely regulative, even error cannot be very detrimental. For in this case, error can have no more serious consequences than that, where we expected to discover a teleological connection, only a mechanical or physical connection appears.” (5)

## Hume

- “Experience must give us a notion of these objects (of cause and effect) and must remove all mystery from our conclusions. ...’twould scarce have merited our attention, were it not to obviate certain objections of this kind which might arise against... reasonings concerning matter and substance. I need not observe, that a full knowledge of the object is not requisite, only those qualities , which we believe to exist.” (6)

# Points toward Closure

Knowledge must have an object.

Knowledge must be accountable to experience and the laws of reason.

After Aristotle, knowledge about first causes is most useful.



The island of *Horaijima* (The Island of Everlasting Happiness) at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

# End Notes

- (1) Michael Rosenthal. *Constable: The Painter and His Landscape*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 120.
- (2) Malcom Cormack. *Constable*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 132-133.
- (3) William Vaughn. *John Constable*. (London and New York: Tate Publishing, 2002), 9. British Artists Series, North American edition.
- (4) Anthony Bailey. *John Constable: A Kingdom of his Own*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), 123.
- (5) Immanuel Kant. *The Critique of Pure Reason* in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, in the Second Division of the Transcendental Doctrine of Elements. or p. 385 in the edition by Prometheus Books (New York, 1990).
- (6) David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Book One, Part Three, Section XIV, "Of the Idea of Necessary Connection" or p. 134 in the edition by Barnes & Noble (New York, 2005).

# Photo Credits

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- Photographs of doughnuts, Stilton cheese and dry Zen garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, Illinois/USA courtesy of the author
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