

Good morning and thank you for coming to my talk, “**Empiricism as an Ally for Knowledge**”

(slide 1). In reading the works of empiricist philosophers, I have found that they are slow to cast judgment on sense and matters of experience in the search for knowledge, almost as if by a kind of reverse method of doubt. So, it is **my argument** (slide 2) that empiricism with its emphasis on the reliability of the senses and its layered view of experience are knowledge’s best ally against charges of false justification--that is, from a rationalist attack on knowledge where criteria could be deemed capable of disproving experience and dismantling knowledge. I would contend that knowledge is possible, and certainly a matter of degree.

The problem that I have been concerned with in this regard and the one I bring to the table here is how does the imagination make sense of reality, and come to knowledge about it? How do we know what knowledge we can infer from the senses and the knowledge that we have already? And how can we be certain about it?

To demonstrate something of this problem with which we are all familiar, I will put up a picture of John Constable’s “**The Hay Wain**” (slide 3). In researching it for this presentation, I found many interesting things that I didn't expect. Among others:

Hay making has a tradition of appearing in English painting. According to one historian:

“...*The Hay Wain* evolves from other paintings of hay making like Gainsborough and Stubbs... and the subject is also grounded in a literary tradition.” ¹

Another one writes that *The Hay Wain*’s success is due to its treatment of nature, but also to its relationship to Continental traditions in painting:

¹ Michael Rosenthal. *Constable: The Painter and His Landscape*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 120.

“*The Haywain* owes much of its lasting success to the feeling that in this ‘Idyllum’, this image of ‘rustic life,’ the essential passions of the heart speak a plainer and more emphatic language...’ But also in the fact that this work ”looks back to the high art of the seventeenth century, and, in particular, to Rubens, another important influence on the Romantic Movement.”²

Apart from this artistic heritage, one historian notes that Constable has been criticized for being socially unaware, saying:

“Constable has been attacked for misrepresenting the country people of his own days, in particular for giving an image of peace and plenty at a time when there was widespread unrest and poverty.”³

And the painting certainly doesn’t show that the artist himself was in difficult financial circumstances when he made it, as one historian reports:

“Constable’s friend and major patron John Fischer was also strapped. Constable said the painting of *The Hay Wain* had impoverished him and asked his friend to lend him twenty or thirty pounds-Fisher sent five pounds, all he could afford.”⁴

To get to some ways of looking at this problem of imagination versus reality and how experience fits into it, I will do an overview of the works of the main empiricist philosophers, among those **Locke, Berkeley and Hume**, as well as **Immanuel Kant**, who responded directly to them, as well as **William James**, (slide 4), to see how we go about gaining knowledge from experience, and perhaps achieve some certainty about it. By doing this, I wish to set out an argument by way of interpretation.

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.

To that, knowledge represents a reality as established by the senses, taking place in the framework of a mind. The mind's knowledge of reality conjoins with the knowledge of things it encounters in experience through the senses. To make knowledge is to make a kind of bridge between them, possibly through a set of concepts that may even pre-exist current experience.

Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* of 1698, (slide 5), presents a system for knowledge anchored on identity of perceptions of ideas and the accuracy of the senses.

To him, understanding is an inter-locking system where perception and ideas are in fact subject to reason if in doubt to their veracity. This may be ultimately how ideas are associated.

As such, knowledge includes the whole range of perception and cognitive activity. Perceptions and ideas make knowledge possible.

Locke's definition of knowledge is a familiar one, as he writes: knowledge is "the Perception of Agreement or Disagreement of Two Ideas."⁵ The problem is, of course, considering the flux of experience, how to bridge that gap. We'll get to that later.

While Locke is an empiricist philosopher whose system emphasizes experience and the senses, reason finds its place as the last guide and arbiter for knowledge.

Berkeley, in his *Principles of Human Knowledge* and his dialogues, (slide 6), presents a demanding argument for the continuity of the senses within reality.

To him, reality *must* be known through the senses. There just isn't any way around it. If you want to claim that there is some reality that is NOT knowable to the senses, then you are allowing

⁵ John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Book Four, Of Knowledge and Opinion, Chapter 1, Of Knowledge in General or p. 320 in the edition by A.D. Woozley, published in New York, New York, USA and Scarborough, Ontario by New American Library in 1974.

something that is of literal NON-SENSE into your thinking. While this can be hard to grasp, I think another way of saying what Berkeley means is that there can be no ideas without minds.

With this there is also a problem that lies in ideas about matter, in that matter has been seen as a somewhat mysterious substrate of all things. Also, that material things can be seen as the causes of sensation. According to Berkeley, material things have qualities, but they don't cause anything. Perhaps this is what Marx meant in his concept of commodity fetishism. Against all of this, according to Berkeley, *It is the mind* that responds to things and *creates* sensations.

To him, the main thing is that there can no reality outside of all possible minds that know it. As he says, somewhat amusingly, if he closes his eyes, he does not think the furniture disappears. If you close your eyes as well, the furniture will still be there. Even if we all do. There *are* real things in a real world. Otherwise, to talk of anything else one would be talking non-sense.

His example of how a mite's legs appear to the eye is an interesting one. To the mite, at close range, they are jagged. To us, under circumstances of unaided, normal vision, they appear smooth. It is the larger context that defines the reality we see.

While this might be slippery ground, helpfully, the "very root of skepticism," as Berkeley sees it, is when ideas and their objects don't align. As he writes, "for, so long as men thought that real things subsisted without the mind, and that their knowledge was only so far forth real as it was conformable to real things, it follows that they could not be certain they had any real knowledge at all. For how can it be known that the things which are perceived are conformable to those which are not perceived, or exist without the mind?"⁶ There is no connection between perception and reality that way.

⁶ George Berkeley. *The Principles of Human Knowledge*. Section 86. Or, p. 108 of the edition published by Peter, Smith, Gloucester, Massachusetts, USA, 1978.

However, the senses are here to help with that. The problem of the oar of a boat appearing bent on the water is not a problem of the fallibility of the senses, he says, but a problem of the inference the senses are making about conditions. It tells us something about the quality of reflection on the water, and not that the senses are deceiving. So, the senses are trustworthy enough and even in exceptional cases.

As I mentioned, Berkeley thinks of reality as in a continuum with the senses. He believes that there are real things in the real world. Considering the foregoing, I wonder how much of an idealist is Berkeley really? Because reality in its entirety is probably never knowable to any one human being, one way to account for this is to consider knowledge of reality as something that is always unfolding. It just may not be entirely knowable now, but that does not make it beyond sense, beyond your mind, my mind, or all minds.

Hume, in his *Treatise of Human Nature* published in 1739, (slide 7), I think is interesting because he is the first of these thinkers here to discuss problems of knowledge while referencing the imagination often. However, no one is more aware than he of the problems the imagination can bring.

In order to anchor the activity of the imagination, Hume looks to the classical problem of cause and effect to see how they play a role in observing phenomena in the real world. While this may have been helpful in the past, Hume finds himself ultimately skeptical.

His billiard ball example, as I first read it, was a demonstration of extreme and even shocking skepticism. How could anyone not think that billiard balls would not strike each other in the same way a year apart? But, after thinking about what it's like to play pool, and remember what it's like to be on the winning side, experience can be very fickle, especially if one is losing.

As a result, in describing experience and how knowledge works, reason plays a vastly subservient role in Hume's system, though he is not skeptical of the efficacy of reason itself, as Barbara Winter's article points out.⁷

All this makes me ask, how much of a skeptic is Hume really? I find his formulation "Tis by experience only that we can infer one object to another"⁸ to be very helpful in a cultural sense, read simply that we can infer knowledge from experience in everyday life using reason and the senses wherever one finds oneself.

However skeptical Hume may be, thinking about cause and effect is probably much more problematic in the physical sciences. Hume didn't mean it to mean that day is caused by night, it is true. But in a cultural, every day context, the idea of inference from experience is quite useful.

Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* from 1781, (slide 8), addresses empiricism and its concerns directly, making knowledge accountable to experience through reason. In fact, he begins the *Critique* by saying that while all knowledge **begins** in experience it by no means follows that all of it **arises** out of experience.

Reality for Kant also is knowable by the relationships of things as they exist, as he says: "for that which stands in connection with perception, according to the laws of the progress of experience, is real."⁹

⁷ Barbara Winters, "Hume on Reason," *Hume Studies* Volume V, Number 1 (April 1979), 20-35. Also available here, at: <http://www.humesociety.org/hs/issues/v5n1/winters/winters-v5n1.pdf>

⁸ This falls in Book I, Part III, Section VI of David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* or on p. 71 of the edition by Barnes & Noble, New York, 2005.

⁹ In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this falls under "The Antimony of Pure Reason," Section VI, "Transcendental Idealism as the Key to the Solution of Pure Cosmological Dialectic," or p. 279 in the 1990 edition by Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York, 1990.

Crucial is his idea that the understanding is the “author of experience.”¹⁰ While this formulation might sound like it leads to unphilosophical subjectivity, I think Kant, however, is being realistic about the limits of human cognition. He recognizes experience and understanding to be both subjective but at the same time completely internal and accountable to one another. There is almost a complete epistemology in that. If there is one thing I would wish anyone to consider or remember from this talk, it is *this* because no one can know all of reality all at once, and probably would not want to. And after Berkeley, there is really no way to know reality apart from the apparatus of human cognition anyway.

Equally as crucially, Kant says that all experience and cognition take place within the framework of the pure intuitions of time and space. This allows cognition to reach toward objectivity, by proofs I can’t replicate here. I think it is fair to say we can access what he means by analogy, for instance, if we think of the perceptions of time and space it requires to drive a car in city traffic, or harder still, to bike in it. By this, one might understand how sharp perceptions of space and time may be and how they interact in consciousness.

Reason plays a special role in uniting subjective impressions of sense in the conditions of experience. Reason is formative to Kant because as he says, “reason is employed *in concreto*—but at the same time *a priori*.”¹¹

Kant spends the time he does with reason because he thinks it can work in empirical and non-empirical conditions. It’s called the *Critique of Pure Reason* because Kant wants to purify reason and rein it in from the historical excesses of the metaphysics of the day, which asked meaningless

¹⁰ Kant discusses this in relation to the understanding and the pure conceptions of the understanding in the “Transcendental Dialectic,” Book II, “Of the Deduction of the Pure Conceptions of the Understanding,” Section I, “Of the Principles of a Transcendental Deduction in General,” p.74, *op cit*.

¹¹ This falls in the last section of the *Critique*, “Transcendental Doctrine of Method,” Chapter III, “The Architectonic of Pure Reason,” or p. 470, *op. cit*.

questions about things that cannot be known. One such question is, “Does the world have a beginning or an end?” It is in fact a question he takes up in the *Critique*. His answer is, as far as I can understand it, that the world does have both a beginning and end though by nature it’s a question we can’t really answer anyway because it’s not really knowable in any experience.¹²

In conclusion, Kant repeatedly observes that experience is what all knowledge must be tested against, either empirical or *a priori*. All *a priori* knowledge is built from empirical experience. And, all knowledge must have an object. I find this a way of calling closure.

William James in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, (slide 9), which he brought together in 1907, was no doubt aware of Kant’s legacy and what it implied. As I read his philosophy, he wishes to free consciousness and even cognition from all forms of conceptual determination that are foreign to it. This is why it’s called radical empiricism.

In the quote I have for you on the slide, he says that relations between things must arise from experience.¹³ No concept may intrude into the consciousness in order to hold things together. However, as the discussion in the on-line members’ forum for the Oxford Philosophical Society has led me to believe, knowledge by definition might be a conceptual thing. There may not be such a thing as knowledge without concepts.

¹² This discussion falls under the “The Antinomy of Pure Reason,” Section II, “The Antithetic of Pure Reason,” under “First Conflict of Transcendental Ideas” discussing the thesis “The world has a beginning in time, and is limited in regard to space” versus the antithesis: “The world has no beginning, and no limits in space, but is, in relation both to time and space, infinite.” This begins at p. 241 *op cit*.

¹³ The quote from James is: “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.” This appears in William James *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Chapter 2, “A World of Pure Experience,” Section I, Radical Empiricism or on p. 42 in the edition published by the University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

In his *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, James describes a phenomenon called "pointing or "self transcendency" which seems to be making the intriguing assertion that experience itself might suggest its own limits and at the same time some insight to how it might even be structured. ¹⁴

But where does this leave us? **If I were to formulate an epistemology**, (slide 10), which I will do!, I would say that the senses are almost always reliable. Following Berkeley and Kant, we can know reality through them. However, how do we do that? I admit that human cognition is subjective. We can infer from experience along the lines of reason. If knowledge wishes to approach objectivity in any pure sense, this is where Kant's construction of experience comes in, as created by the understanding through pure intuitions of time and space which are grounded in proofs about time and space and permanence and cause and effect. Experience is built within the dimensions of space and time, with the input of the senses to the mind, and is vividly known. The objects of experience are known by sense but within the framework of a mind that knows what reality is by previous experience, but what has been. Perceptions may vary from one person to another, but sense and experience are still true. The problem knowledge has in disciplining these perspectives. In other words, knowledge acts like a frame within a frame, where all is judged by experience. When the mind and its framework agree with what objects are presented to it, I will suggest that is when we know we have knowledge. This is also, I would submit, an aspect of aesthetic experience.

Before going further, here are a few **examples from everyday life**, (slide 11), that might speak to what knowledge is, how the mind frames things, and how the senses work within experience. They point to the fact that knowledge is something more than just the sum of its parts- which I think is very intriguing.

¹⁴ See Chapter IX in James' *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, "Is Radical Empiricism Solipistic?" *op cit*.

In this example about **Stilton Cheese**, (slide 12), I remark that knowledge is about things that are concrete and also synthetic. Indeed, English Stilton cheese physically must attain certain conceptual requirements in order for it to be certifiably the real thing! Cheese is formed by milk and various other ingredients, and yet becomes something more than the sum of its parts, perhaps as knowledge does with data. This example leads me to believe that knowledge is a way of giving form to experience, not imposing on it, just in fact like cheese is formed by milk and various different ingredients.

This example about a **transcendent** or **really good doughnut** , (slide 13), from a specialty shop shows interestingly how intellectual concepts can be surpassed and redefined by sensory experience. In other words, there is something about a singular sensory experience that can push the mind toward new conceptual conclusions about a known reality. Other examples of where this happens:

-In Neil Armstrong saying, as he stepped onto the moon, "One small step for me, one giant step for mankind."

-Or, something I overheard a musician friend saying: "He's a really good composer. He knows how to play some of the instruments he writes for, but not all of them. But, his pieces are phenomenal." So, there's a knowledge of some specific that gives one an overview of the more general.

Or, the signs in the stairway going up to the Whispering Gallery at St Paul's cathedral in London that say, "Please mind your head."

The mind's ability to know itself might be shown In this example of a **Zen Garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden** (slide 14). It is called a dry garden because it is laid out in stone, though it is intentionally meant to resemble water. As I read it, instead of using a reflecting pond for reflection, they've used stones and dryness to encourage the mind to build its own space to reflect in. It meditates

on objects presented to it in its own framework- the framework it creates. In this case, instead of time and space, the framework for understanding things is the order of nature, often understood culturally as the nature of things.

In regard to the frameworks of space and time, music might be another example of how we have knowledge. It is something that unfolds within the framework of space and time, and yet it presents cognizable objects through form, through musical figures, and melodies, etc. The same could be said in regard to works of visual art, that frame objects within certain fields of experience.

To get back to the Constable painting, (slide 15), one could present the following account, based on what is presented within the framework of the painting, as well as the larger framework of inferences drawn by reasoning from cultural history as well as just experience and insight into daily life:

- This painting partakes in both British and European traditions. Constable probably had access to both at the time he painted it, 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 ideas about the harmonies of nature in order to perhaps point to a more beneficent order.

A skeptic might say, well, I have a document that says Constable had twenty-thousand pounds in the bank, and was just playing poor. But, I ask you, would that invalidate his intentions to show a harmonious balance between humanity and nature? Or, a skeptic might say, well,

there are actually three workers depicted in the field, (as I saw in the National Gallery a few days ago), and that invalidates your argument about there being some beneficent order at work. To that, I would say, it actually strengthens it because work and workers do have a place in any order of nature.

The problem is, **how certain can we be of any argument from experience?** (slide 16)

To frame this argument about Constable, I have referred to an object, a physical object, and used a framework of different ideas, perhaps some of them *a priori*, and historical data to infer different things about reality, about what is, through reason. I admit this supposes an ordered universe, which Locke, Hume and Kant all supposed, and that cognition can be ordered system that interacts within it. In this way of seeing things, a contradiction of fact or even facts may well not ruin an argument. Knowledge can be seen as a dynamic system which responds to experience and one's perspective in it yet is still based on the reliable input of the senses, objects in the real world and the laws of reason and experience. After Kant, knowledge occurs in a Copernican system of experience. It takes place in an ordered universe and in an ordered system of cognition that can respond to changes. Below I give you a quote from Kant more on this.¹⁵ Hume also said something similar. A quote from him is on the right.¹⁶

In regard to anti-skeptical strategies and strategies for closure, (slide 17), skepticism has a helpful way of pointing out problems with knowledge, for pointing out when data and concepts do not cohere. Interestingly, as Kant sees it, however, the burden of proof is on the skeptic. Pure reason

¹⁵ The quote from Kant is: "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." This appears in *The Critique of Pure Reason* in the "Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic," at the end of the "Second Division of the Transcendental Doctrine of Elements" or p. 385 *op. cit.*

¹⁶ The quote from Hume is: "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." This appears in: 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).

can rest secure because the burden the skeptic has is it to admit of knowing the same object, of knowing the same experience and then disproving it by reasoning with that experience. For as in the foregoing, Berkeley would say that in knowledge ideas and objects are in good accord. However it works, knowledge must be according to experience, and also have an object, at least considered dogmatically.

Along these lines, Aristotle is quite helpful to identify first causes as crucial to knowledge. This may also be helpful in fending off skeptical attack because the objects of knowledge are found as deeply within experience as possible, with reasoning proceeding from them. Another strategy for closure, somewhat related, is offered by St Augustine, who says that knowledge not only has objects, but must have some intentionality toward its object. You know you know something when you have solved the problem you set out with.

One last interesting example about how knowledge might work is found in face recognition software. We don't doubt that the cameras and optical equipment used in face recognition software uses are able to sense physical reality with a good degree of realism or accuracy. The software probably has coded within it some system of describing a face, and, fascinatingly, some way to make comparisons of that data with what it sees, probably by an algorithm of some sort that drives it. Now, according to Locke's definition, knowledge is in the perception of agreement, or even disagreement of ideas. In the mental or perceptual landscape of knowledge, the difficulties that come in have to do with 1) being able to judge accurately what objects are and 2) having a framework for seeing them in. But all of this to say that knowledge probably relies on its own space to use experience, concepts and ideas beyond the data it has in current experience, in order to create a bridge between a thing perceived in order to create some semblance of reality. How it does that is along the lines of what I've described, through the framing of reality, the senses and reasoning about them.

How we as individuals have knowledge and reason with it probably has a lot to do with one's own perspective and life's experience, culturally, socially, economically or philosophically. With all this in mind, I would ally myself with none other than David Hume, when he says that "tis not solely in poetry and music we must follow taste or sentiment, but likewise philosophy."¹⁷

Thank you very much for your time, and I'm glad to discuss any questions, comments or further considerations.

[Further comments welcome at tmduchow@uchicago.edu.]

¹⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section VIII, "On the Causes of Belief," p. 83 of the edition by Barnes & Noble.