

The British Enlightenment

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I want to look at three great thinkers Locke, Berkeley and Hume and how they thought we acquired our knowledge of the world. And I'll squeeze in a brief plug for another Enlightenment giant: Thomas Reid. Obviously I am not going to do justice to any of them in this space. I shall try to simplify their ideas by organising them around three possible sources of knowledge: Religion, Reason and Experience.

The world of the European thinker at the end of the 16th century was a small world. It consisted of the earth and other members of the solar system and a sky full of stars. It had been created by God, and God in creating man had endowed him with Reason which enabled him to grasp Truth. But the most important Truths were truths about God and Man. Truths about the natural world were not very important. The earth was as it were merely the food and shelter which enabled man to study God and himself. There were few who were perverse enough to spend their time studying the resource base instead. Religion and Reason ruled, OK

A partial exception was the sky. It was natural to associate the heavens that told the glory of God with the heaven in which God dwelt. It was pious to find in the majestic movement of the heavenly bodies the most awesome manifestation of God's power and the inexorability of his law. It was easy to suppose that people's own lives might move to the same majestic pattern and astrologers thrive on that supposition.

So bring on the 17th century. Enter Galileo, Kepler and Newton. Newton supplied the key to that great dance. The movement of the heavenly bodies was all in accord with the laws of motion and the law of gravity. And the law of gravity was a mathematical formula. There could hardly have been a more convincing demonstration of the role of Reason in ordering the real world.

But the learning about it was based on Observation, that is on organised Experience. And the same thirst for Observation which gave us the telescope gave us also the microscope. And that same art optic also founded Newton's other great achievement, the unravelling of the nature of light, the medium for our most exact, most vivid and most memorable Experience. Light did not yield itself then to any mathematical formula, and as for world revealed by the microscope, it was multifarious, teeming, chaotic, and irrational.

So, we may say that the 17th century saw a vindication of Experience. Exact observation at any level from a drop of water to the entire night sky revealed more and more about the real world. Proper records and publication meant that Experience could be documented, compared and accumulated. More had been learned about the world in a century of Experience than in millennia of philosophic speculation or Religious revelation.

So let us start with Locke, the first of the British Enlightenment philosophers. He was a friend of Newton and of Boyle. He was well aware of the advances which had been made in understanding the natural world and of their being the fruit of carefully organised and documented Experience. In fact he was clear that virtually all our knowledge was the result of Experience. He specifically rejected the idea that we were born with any knowledge at all. We start, according to Locke, with an empty cupboard, and Reason does little to fill it. It supplies a little knowledge - perhaps of mathematics - but this is far too "short and scanty" to enable us to conduct our lives. Reasoning, for Locke, is mainly a secondary activity, almost wholly dependent on Experience for its material.

In embracing Experience as the basis of virtually all knowledge, Locke cheerfully accepted the associated loss of certainty. Most of our knowledge could at best be highly probable. This line was enough to dethrone Religion. Locke duly acknowledged the infallibility of revealed Religion but in a superb turn, he said that of course this must only

apply to true Religion - and as to which of the proffered Revelations was valid, we must use the ordinary rules of empirical evidence to arrive at an assessment which could not be more than probable.

*The Mind . . . is bound to give up its assent to such Testimony, which, it is satisfied, comes from one who cannot err, and will not deceive. But yet, it still belongs to Reason, to judge of the truth of its being a Revelation, and of the significance of the Words, wherein it is delivered.*¹

Now there is a real problems with the primacy of Experience as Locke saw it. His principles imply that it would actually be possible, starting from scratch, to make sense of a mere succession of colours, noises, touches etc and construct a coherent vision of a world in which we can act with more or less successful purpose.

Locke got around this problem to some extent by allowing us innate powers of reflection, including the ability to see relationships such as likeness. This in turn allows us to form general or abstract ideas. But as with his direct perceptions, he seems to ask too much of the reflective mind. He does not do justice to the active process by which we construct generalisations in terms of what we take for this or that purpose to be relevant likenesses. Any cat can generalise about dogs or mice from a fairly limited and random experience. But cats probably do not generalise about predators and prey.

Underlying Locke's assumption that raw, unmediated Experience made sense was the assumption that there really was a world out there consisting of objects and processes waiting to be observed. That is, a fairly crude idea of our perceptions being in some sense representations of reality

But in accepting that we really experience external objects, Locke made a distinction between primary and secondary properties. Colour for example is a secondary quality: it does not inhere in the object but in our perception of the light reflected from it. His desk was not really brown; it just looked brown. But the top was really rectangular, even if it did not always look it.

This distinction between the object and our perception of the object was one point where Berkeley was able to drive in his wedge. Berkeley's challenge was 'What is this connection between an external world and our perceptions? What are these objects that we allegedly perceive?' This is a double-barrelled question. At the conceptual level it says: I challenge you to form any idea of an object without these secondary properties of colour, feel etc. Then at the epistemological level it asks: And just how would you verify any conceptual definition you might frame other than in terms of observations, of sense impressions on your mind? Surely no perceptions, however carefully arranged and recorded, can testify other than to what is perceived.

Berkeley's second line of attack again picks up on Locke's assumptions. We depend on raw Experience for all our knowledge, do we? So what is there that we perceive which in any way connects one experience to another? We see a table and feel something hard. Is anything given in either experience which connects it to the other, except simultaneity? Is there anything in successive experiences which justifies our treating them as experiences of the same thing? Can any set of experiences justify that supposition of the continuity of external objects or their identity as perceived in different ways?

Although the challenge is valid, I think Berkeley overdoes it. For example he argues from the variation of comfort and discomfort we feel by a fire that heat is nothing but a subjective impression, only accidentally connected to the fire itself. He ignores the thermometer, already available for measuring heat. Of course we must perceive what the thermometer tells us; but it can be constructed so as to register its readings visually, aurally, tactilely - and will do so consistently, and regardless of our personal feelings of warmth. There is good reason to think that temperature is an objective phenomenon.

1 Locke IV.XVIII (p 694: see also pp 667, 690)

Thomas Reid picks up this point

*For what could be more absurd, than to say, that the thermometer cannot rise or fall, unless some person be present, or that the coast of Guinea would be as cold as Nova Zembla, if it had no inhabitants?*²

Anyway Berkeley feels entitled to dismiss all such appearances as valueless on a slightly different basis. He assumes, without argument or discussion, that mind and ideas belong to a non-material, a spiritual, domain. This allows him to play one of the standard arguments against such dualism. If you believe in a material world, which is by definition not spiritual, by what means does the material affect the spiritual so as to produce ideas in it?

So far then, Berkeley makes a strong case for scepticism, doubt about the real world. We cannot logically deduce the existence or the nature of an external world from any sort or set of perceptions. Reason refutes the claims of Experience. But he goes further. Since he asserts that we know only what passes through our minds, and since we can frame no notion whatever of an external object or an external world, it is absurd to suppose that it exists. He is no longer sceptical about the external world, he denies it. All we are entitled to take as real are the sensations and ideas which occupy our minds - or rather an individual mind.

We are after all well accustomed to the experience of sights and sounds in dreams that bear no relation to any 'real world'. Why attach any more significance to the sense impressions we get when nominally awake? Well, there is a difference, otherwise we could not distinguish the two states. When awake, our senses tell a consistent story within a coherent frame of time and space. Moreover the story agrees with that of other people. How can we all be singing the same hymn if there is no hymn book?

Berkeley's answer is heroic. These sensory impressions that come into our minds are not under our control. And they are not random but consistent. Therefore they must be put there by some superior mental power. So of course by God. Return of Religion indeed.

Now it seems clear that Berkeley is not being consistent here. If there is no logical inference from having sensations to the sensations being occasioned by a real external world, then there is no logical inference of either of their being occasioned by anything else. And if there is no external reality outside our minds, there are no other persons, still less divine ones. If all my knowledge is confined to mental sensation then the very most I can claim is that the idea of a god is one of those that passes through my mind.

For Berkeley, however, the very consistency of our waking thoughts was testimony to the power and love of their creator, and assurance that we might trust to them in the conduct of our lives.

*If we follow the light of reason, we shall, from the constant, uniform method of our sensations, collect the goodness and wisdom of the spirit who excites them in our minds. But this is all that I can see reasonably concluded from thence. To me, I say, it is evident that the being of a spirit infinitely wise, good, and powerful is abundantly sufficient to explain all the appearances of nature. But as for inert, senseless matter, nothing that I perceive has any the least connexion with it, or leads to the thoughts of it.*³

But if God is sufficient to explain our thoughts, so is the actuality of an external world. And if an external world is not a necessary inference, neither is God.

He wants to assure his readers - figments of his own mind though they must be - that they need not take the world as constructed in their minds any the less seriously for its

2 Reid V.I (p 55)

3 Berkeley *Principles of Human Knowledge* LXXII (p 149)

having no external reference. Most of us do not find this assurance maintains our conviction that our lives are real and our decisions matter. The whole thing is just virtual reality, a well engineered and absorbing video game. The consistency of our waking sensations becomes merely the consistency of an author who always remembers what time of year it is in her story, and what was the first name of a minor character in chapter one. The discoveries we reckon to make about the nature of the natural world are not real discoveries but rather the solution of puzzles set for us, puzzles which like an Agatha Christie story could have had other solutions if the author had wanted.

So Berkeley has rejected the theory that our senses tell us about a real external world, but has not satisfactorily explained why we so firmly believe in it or what else we should suppose is going on. That is where Hume takes up the challenge.

Hume takes on board all Berkeley's rational case against attaching any significance to Experience. Reason can make no connection between our Experience and the Beliefs to which it seems to give rise. We have no rational basis for supposing that our perceptions represent any external objects, no rational basis for supposing that a repeated perception can ever represent an object which has continued to be when we weren't perceiving it; no rational basis for supposing that we ever perceive any one phenomenon of event causing another. So far Reason has demolished Experience.

Hume's new turn is to say: but nevertheless we do form these beliefs - about the existence and continuity of an external world and about the regularity of cause and effect - absolutely regardless of any Rational justification. And we do so because we have to. We cannot choose not to do so, and we could not live except by doing so. In many passages Hume ascribes our confidence in these beliefs - these fictions as they may appear to Reason - to Habit or Custom. This will not do. We cannot form any habit until we have done something several times - so why did we do it before it became a habit? Custom may answer better, and Hume might have said Culture if the concept had been available. But even that would have left our practice as somehow arbitrary, as though we might just as well have formed different habits and followed different customs

But Hume is on surer ground when he refers this habit of ours to Instinct, to Nature, as shared with other animals. They for the most part manage very well without Reason. So do we. If Reason purports to tell us that we have no right to construct the world as we do from Experience, then that just shows, not that we must distrust Experience, but that we should cock a snook at Reason.

So Experience is reinstated as the prime source of knowledge, but not on the basis of Reason which will later be relegated to an instrumental role as slave of the passions -

As for Religion, Hume deals it a double blow. Remember there are no innate ideas. So we must acquire our knowledge of the divine from Experience. So the first blow is directed at the argument from design - known from the paradigm of Paley's watch. First he grants that we are entitled to draw from the perceived world the inference of its being created. But he says, how can it possibly justify any inference as to the nature or purposes of the creator or creators? This argument is still good against the proponents of Intelligent Design. Then he takes the further step, which relies on his general discussion of Cause and Effect. We can never observe this connection; we only infer it from the regular association of this as followed by that. But we do not have repeated experiences of worlds which turn out to have been created by divine beings. In fact, we have just the one experience of the putative effect and can never form the habit or custom of seeing it follow from any divine cause. Not only does Reason tell us that no inference about the nature of the Creator is admissible, but the true nature of Experience means that we cannot even infer a Creator at all.

Time for an all-too-perfunctory spot for Thomas Reid, a later Enlightenment giant. Possibly prejudiced by Hume's dismissal of religion, he marks Hume down as a philosophising sceptic and fails to register Hume's solution. In fact he comes to the same

solution himself. We are so constituted that we must rely on Experience; and require no licence from Philosophic Reason to do so. And where Hume is perhaps rather downbeat in allowing, with a sort or ironic reluctance, that we can but trust to Experience, Reid is positive and celebratory of what he calls Common Sense. He also does a great analysis of sense perception and sorts out some of the simplifications and confusions of the others Locke, Berkeley and Hume. In particular he draws attention to as yet unexplored pathways by which external events like rays of light transform themselves into sensations. These pathways have not been built into our nature without point. their existence is itself a sufficient warrant for trusting what they, consistently and reliably, tell us.

Between them, Hume and Reid clear the way for natural science to proceed by way of observational Experience without the need to justify itself at the bar of Reason or Religion. Reason became the assistant to Experience, ordering and projecting the findings. Religion was no longer looked to as a source of real world knowledge at all. The new direction is well signalled by the replacement at the end of the 19th century of the term Natural Philosophy by Natural Science. Speculation has given way to Knowledge. The results have been of course, staggering. In the words of Prof David Robinson, the progress of science has made us sceptics indeed - sceptics of scepticism.

Reading

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George Berkeley *A New Theory of Vision & other writings* (1709-1713) Everyman 1910

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John Locke *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) ed P H Nidditch OUP 1975

D F Norton & J Taylor ed *Cambridge Companion to Hume* CUP 1993

Thomas Reid *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (1818) CUP 2012