

# THE EVOLUTION OF EMPIRICISM

Its Ancient Roots, Medieval Disappearance, and  
Modern Revival and Fragmentation

David W. Dixon

# WHAT IS EMPIRICISM?

General definition since c. 1796:

Belief in experience as only source of knowledge

(Only? Some “empiricists” seem not to believe it)

Term derived from English “Empiric”

16th Century general definition of “Empiric”:

Pertaining to Medical Quackery or Laziness

(Apparently based on traditional Aristotelian assumptions)

Reference to the **Empeirikós**

# EMPEIRIKÓS: MEMBERS OF EMPIRIC SCHOOL OF GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY

## **Empiric School of Medicine**

School of medical thought within broader philosophical  
school of **Pyrrhonist Skepticism**

Versus **Dogmatic School of Medicine** (school of  
medical thought originally identified with  
Hippocrates but that had become generally **Aristotelian**  
in its philosophy)



# MAJOR GRECO-ROMAN PHILOSOPHIES OF ANTIQUITY

1. **Platonism** (Academic School) (Plato, c. 425- 348 BCE)
2. **Aristotelianism** (Peripatetic School) (Aristotle, 384 - 322 BCE)
3. **Stoicism** (Zeno of Citium, c. 334- c. 262 BCE)
4. **Epicureanism** (Epicurus, 341- 270 BCE/ Lucretius, c. 95- c. 55 BCE)
5. **Pyrrhonist Skepticism** (Pyrrho of Elis, c. 360- c. 270 BCE/ Sextus Empiricus, 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE)
7. Hybrids (e.g., Gnosticism and “Neoplatonism”)
8. Others (e.g., Judaism, Manichaeism, Cynicism, and many others.)

# ONTOLOGY

(PHILOSOPHY OF BEING OR “STUFF” OF EXISTENCE)

Platonism: Pure (Abstract) Forms

Aristotelianism: (Concrete) Material Things as (concrete) Matter structured by (abstract) Forms (inseparable from each other, at least on earth- medieval exception for “God” on earth)

Stoicism: Complicated. Generally pure (concrete) Matter as a Unity (but also some abstract “Incorporeals”)

Epicureanism: Pure (concrete) Matter as distinct **Atoms**

Pyrrhonism: Seemingly unknown except for ***Phantasiai***

*(Note: Skepticism = don't seem to know, not denialism)*

# *PHANTASIAI* (DEFINITION)

Typical translation today: “imagination” (influenced by Aristotelianism)

(compare to “fantasy” or “phantom”)

Arguably most accurate and neutral translation: “appearance”

Related to Greek *phainomomai* (“I appear”)

Related to Greek *phainomenon* (“appearing” to one’s view)

English “phenomenon” c. 1575 (from Greek via Late Latin,  
meaning “an observed fact”)

Apparent Greek root: *phainein* (“to show”)

Major disagreement on meaning in Antiquity



# *PHANTASIAI* (DIFFERING VIEWS IN ANTIQUITY)

Platonism (very unimportant): an illusion lacking ontological significance (a non-existent: **Pseudo-Reality**, or non-reality)

Aristotelianism (relatively unimportant): a “faculty” of *nous* (“intellect”), lacking ontological significance (a non-existent: **Pseudo-Reality**, or non-reality—only what the *nous* does)

Stoicism and Epicureanism (important): exists within matter (perhaps as an impression within it), of ontological significance, but solely as a part of matter and not distinct from it (**within Material Reality**)

Pyrrhonist Skepticism: (very important): Of ontological significance as an existent serving at least as the object of phenomenal experience (but not necessarily distinct from the subject) and otherwise a mystery  
(**Consciousness or Subjective Reality?**)

# SUBJECTIVITY/OBJECTIVITY

Modern meanings of “subjectivity” and “objectivity” are recent (c. 1800):

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) developed German terms

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834, slightly misconstruing Kant)  
developed English terms

“Conscious” dates only to c. 1600 in English language

Almost all western terminology clearly referencing consciousness was developed in modernity or evolved in meaning (e.g., “concept”/Latin *conceptum* substantially evolved from a different meaning). Seemingly reflects near universal ignorance of consciousness in medieval West.

Still much confusion today re: objectivity/subjectivity (esp. in common language)

General definitions (mine and typical for much philosophical discourse):

**“Subjectivity”:** That, if anything, which exists as, or within, consciousness

**“Objectivity”:** That, if anything, which exists other than as, or within,  
consciousness



# ONTOLOGY: OBJECTIVITY OR SUBJECTIVITY?

In modern terminology, reality believed to be:

Platonism: Pure Form (objectivity)

Aristotelianism: Combined Matter and Form (objectivity)

Stoicism: Mainly matter, but also “incorporeals” (objectivity)

Epicureanism: Pure Matter (objectivity)

Pyrrhonism: *Phantasiai* and Mystery (subjectivity? and mystery)

**Except for Pyrrhonists, major Greco-Roman philosophies were hyper-objectivist**

# TRADITIONAL WESTERN OUTLOOK (SUBJECTIVITY V. OBJECTIVITY):

Objectivity = True Reality;

Subjectivity (if recognized as distinct from Objectivity) = Pseudo-Reality

Implied question of Pyrrhonist skepticism (with *phantasiai* as subjectivity):

Is it not possible that:

Subjectivity = True Reality;

Objectivity = Pseudo-Reality?

**Might traditional western thought have things backwards?**

# ONTOLOGY: “UNIVERSALS”

Platonism and Aristotelianism: Realist (Extreme and Moderate, respectively) (Universals ontologically exist as forms)

Stoicism and Epicureanism: Anti-Realist and Proto-Nominalist (Universals are means of organizing thought, e.g., semantically or logically, but not ontological existents)

Pyrrhonism: Skeptical and Proto-Conceptualist (Universals, ontologically, might “really” exist or might not, but perhaps they exist solely as *phantasiai*)



# EPISTEMOLOGY

## (PHILOSOPHY OF KNOWLEDGE)

**Platonism:** Subject: *Nous* (Abstract Intellect, or “Understanding”, as Form);  
Object: *Logos* (Reason as Form); Non-experiential knowledge of abstract  
Form (**Non-Empiricist**)

**Aristotelianism:** Subject: *Nous* (Intellect, or “Understanding”, as Form); Object:  
*Logos* (Reason as Form); Non-experiential knowledge of abstract Form  
(not knowledge of Matter) (**Non-Empiricist**)

**Stoicism and Epicureanism:** Subject & Object (basically indistinguishable):  
Matter; Experiential knowledge of concrete Matter (**Objectivist(?)**  
**Empiricist**)

**Pyrrhonism:** Subject: Mystery (but perhaps *Phantasiai*, itself); Object: *Phantasiai*;  
(Seemingly) no knowledge except some experiential knowledge (self-  
knowledge?) of mysterious *Phantasiai* (**Subjectivist(?)** **Empiricist**)

# ETHICS: IS MORALITY “REAL”?

Platonism: Virtue Ethics (morality is “real” as pure “form”)

Aristotelianism: Virtue Ethics (morality is “real” as pure form within material thing)

Stoicism: Virtue Ethics (morality is “real” as pure matter)

Epicureanism: (Enlightened) hedonism (morality is not “real”, but is merely acting pragmatically to achieve pleasure) (proto-utilitarian?)

Pyrrhonism: Moral skepticism (morality may or may not be “real”, but *might* exist solely as *phantasiai*); response of “suspend judgment”

(nihilist?) a) For some: “suspend judgment” meant ignore ethical issues indefinitely

b) For others: “suspend judgment” meant keeping an open mind, but did not exclude attempting to act practically or as seemed best (proto-utilitarian?)

Ancient Judaism: Deontology (rule based; morality is “real”)



# CHRISTIANITY AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS

**Platonism** conformed with some Christian beliefs, esp. re: “spiritual” issues, but differed substantially from it in most respects (e.g., general metaphysics)

**Aristotelianism**, with a few modifications, seemingly conformed well with most beliefs of Christianity (esp. general metaphysics)

**Stoicism**, despite usefulness of some ideas (esp. in corrupted form, e.g., its concept of *Eudaimonia* as “resignation”) for power of Christian authorities, generally conflicted with Christianity (e.g., semi-panthéism, determinism)

**Epicureanism** was in extreme conflict with Christianity (e.g., materialism, atheism, moral anti-realism)

**Pyrhonism** was in extreme conflict with most pre-modern Christian faith (radical skepticism, albeit arguably adaptable to unorthodox Christian fideism)



# WEST IN LATE ANTIQUITY

**Aristotelianism** was already in ascendancy in Rome in Late Antiquity (e.g., apparently due to influence of Andronicus of Rhodes, 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE)

**Church authorities** generally adopted **Aristotelian philosophy** for most “non-spiritual” purposes (e.g., metaphysics, logic) as consistent with Christianity

Gradual increase of **Christian influence** (and, thus, Aristotelianism) over Rome

In 380 CE, Theodosius I “the Great” (347-395) issued the **Edict of Thessalonica**, making Roman Empire formally Christian, leading to suppression of most non-Christianity

**Christianity** (esp. Nicene) and **Aristotelian philosophy** (at least in approximation on most philosophical issues) thereafter **dominated much of West**

**Islam** adopted same general philosophical assumptions and shared domination of West with Christianity

# WEST IN MIDDLE AGES

**Aristotelianism** began Middle Ages as favored philosophy of Christendom (and later “Islamic World”)

**Most philosophical texts from Antiquity were lost in Late Antiquity**

**Aristotelian texts** gradually were **rediscovered** and became very familiar to most leading western scholars substantially prior to Late Middle Ages

**Most other philosophical texts of Antiquity generally remained lost at least until Late Middle Ages, if not modernity**

The **Abrahamic religions** (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), with generally **Aristotelian philosophy**, dominated medieval West, typically treating conflicting expressions of opinion as “heresy”

**Masses overwhelmingly illiterate, philosophically ignorant, and impoverished,** unfamiliar with philosophy other than as dictated by religious authorities (i.e., **Aristotelianism**).

**Few western scholars, generally monopolized by religious authorities**



# WEST IN MIDDLE AGES (CONT'D)

## WHAT HAPPENED TO THE FIVE SCHOOLS OF ANTIQUITY?

**Pyrrhonism:** rejected as anti-Christian and promptly forgotten

**Epicureanism:** rejected as anti-Christian and promptly forgotten

**Stoicism:** somewhat nominally respected, but in corrupted form, otherwise rejected and forgotten

**Platonism:** nominally was highly respected, but assumed to be basically identical to Aristotelianism, otherwise largely forgotten (see Neoplatonism)

**Aristotelianism:** only major philosophy of Antiquity very familiar in most of Middle Ages even to scholars; treated, for most practical purposes, as sacred-- not to be challenged on most major issues



# “NEOPLATONISM” (WHAT WAS IT?)

A modern neologism addressing a rough generality, not a homogeneous movement

Developed as Platonist (and most other ancient) texts were disappearing (such that Neoplatonists had little understanding of non-Aristotelian philosophy of Antiquity, incl. Platonism)

Evolved loosely from Middle Platonism (Plotinus, c. 205-270 CE)

A hybrid of Aristotelianism, Platonism, Stoicism, and Gnosticism– but basically unconventional Aristotelianism (arguably as Aristotelian as anything else)

Effectively, it seldom (with only a few outliers) differed significantly from Aristotelianism other than in degree of devotion to strict Aristotelian dogma

Yet, in medieval West, it was main **competition** to conventional Aristotelianism (including the very few anti-Aristotelian “radical” medieval

# THE VERY SHORT SPECTRUM OF MEDIEVAL WESTERN THOUGHT

Most medieval Christian and Islamic scholars fell along the short spectrum from relatively strict Aristotelianism (e.g., “scholasticism”) to relatively unconventional Aristotelianism (“Neoplatonism”)

Within medieval Judaism, thought generally divided between Aristotelianism and more strictly Jewish Talmudism; not many Jewish Neoplatonists.

Seemingly few non-Jews inclined to experiment with anti-Aristotelian thought

Of the few who were, it typically was dangerous in the medieval West to address it publicly (as it was typically deemed heresy).

Hence, non-Jewish expressions of radically anti-Aristotelian thought were extremely rare in the West for about a millennium.

Medieval western philosophy was highly dogmatic and authoritarian  
Aristotelianism

Aristotelianism became engrained in Western thought and language.



# AN OUTLINE OF MEDIEVAL WESTERN THOUGHT AND ITS APPARENT ORIGINS

**Concept of “God”:** Platonist + Ancient Jewish (+ Aristotelian “unmoved mover”)

**“Soul”:** Tension between Platonism (Abstract Form alone) and Aristotelianism (Abstract Form within Matter); Merger of Greek *Nous* (Intellect), Greek *Psyche* (Essence of life), and Jewish *Nephesh* (Living Being)

**“Science”:** Aristotelian (+ Galen, 129-216 CE, an eclectic, in medicine)

**Myth:** Jewish (mainly for Jews and Christians, less for Muslims)

**Politics:** Platonism and Ancient Jewish (hierarchical)/Aristotelian (naturalist)/Roman law

**Resignation to one’s place** (non-deterministic): Corruption of Stoic *Eudaimonia* (deterministic)

**Normative ethics:** Deontology (conformed with authoritarianism and traditional Jewish moral philosophy) with some aspects of Aristotelian and Stoic Virtue Ethics

**Most other thought** (Ontology, Epistemology, Logic, etc.): Primarily Aristotelian



# MEDIEVAL WEST (CONT'D)

Eliminated or significantly limited in the West during most of the Middle Ages:

Atomic Theory

Materialism

Pyrrhonist view of *phantasiai* (consciousness?)

Empiricist Epistemology (knowledge as experience and encouragement of experimentation)

Skepticism or denialism re: validity of established authority

Skepticism or denialism re: “reality” of “universals”

Moral anti-realism or moral skepticism

**Debates regarding validity of Aristotelianism**

Instead (until Late Middle Ages):

Aristotelian dogmatism (with limited exceptions)

**Debates regarding interpretation of Aristotle**

Very little experimentation with theories clearly contrary to Aristotelianism

# MEANWHILE IN THE EAST

During relative intellectual rigidity in medieval West, relative intellectual dynamism in the East, such as:

- Development of general concept of consciousness, esp. in Yogacara Buddhism

  - Dignaga (c. 480-c. 540 CE)

  - Dharmakirti (c. 7<sup>th</sup> century)

- Rapid development of mathematical and logical analysis (esp. in India), e.g.:

  - Increasingly common use of concepts of zero, negative numbers, and decimal systems

  - Development of Navya-Nyāya logic (leading to much sophisticated analysis in modernity)

  - Development of algebra and trigonometry

  - Double-entry bookkeeping

- Developments of revolutionary (and world-changing) technologies in the Far East, e.g.:

  - Woodblock printing

  - Paper

  - Gunpowder

  - Mechanical compass

# A FEW VERY UNORTHODOX OUTLIERS IN THE MEDIEVAL WEST

John Scotus Eriugena (c. 800-c.877)

Peter Abelard (c. 1079-1142)

**Shihāb ad-Dīn” Yahya ibn Habash Suhrawardī** (1154-1191)

Peter John Olivi (1248-1298)

**Dietrich/Theodoric of Freiberg** (c. 1250-c.1311)

(“Meister”) Eckhart von Hocheim (c. 1260-c. 1328)

**William of Ockham** (c. 1287-1347)

William Langland (?) (c. 1330-c. 1386)

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464)



# SHIHāB AD-DĪN' YAHYA IBN HABASH SUHRAWARDĪ

A Persian philosopher highly critical of Aristotelianism

Founder of Illuminationism (an unorthodox Islamic school of philosophy)

Speculation that he may have been exposed to Indian thought

Encouraged the revolutionary development of logic and math

**May have been first medieval westerner to recognize what now is called consciousness**

However, his sect was secretive

Few learned much of his philosophy until modernity

# DIETRICH/THEODORIC OF FREIBERG

Contemporary of Aquinas, Eckhart, and Ockham

Probably did not go so far as fully to recognize consciousness

Theorized “**conceptual existence**” as a true existence distinct from both “real existence” (previously assumed to be all true existence) and “non-existence”

Foreshadowed the concept of the subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy

- Applications of concept of “conceptual existence”:
  - Problem with ontological argument for the existence of “God” by Anselm of Canterbury
  - Adoption of zero as a number (contrary to Aristotelian philosophy) in the West– a revolutionary idea that revolutionized western mathematics and reflected how problematic dogmatic devotion to Aristotelianism in West had been
  - Conceptualism re: “universals” (Ockham)
- Unlike Suhrawardi, Dietrich was not secretive; his work promptly got out, leading to his reputation as the “Aristotle of the 13th century”

# WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

Among various other work, he developed “**conceptualism**” re: “**universals**”

Foreshadowed somewhat by Peter Abelard’s anti-realism re: “universals”

But Abelard’s anti-realism seems not to have been full-blown conceptualism

Ockham seems to have been first major theorist of “conceptualism”

May not have been directly influenced by Dietrich, but Dietrich’s “conceptual existence” idea came shortly before, suggesting indirect influence

Conceptualism re: “universals” gained much popularity and further called Aristotelianism into question, further revolutionizing western thought

Dispute regarding “universals” would be a major topic discussed in universities in decades prior to Protestant Reformation, encouraging intellectuals



# LATE MIDDLE AGES/EARLY MODERNITY

Following centuries of general intellectual stagnation, there were increasingly rapid changes

Increased trade, introducing non-western thought to the West, challenging Aristotelianism

Improved means of communication (e.g., printing press), facilitating dispersion of unconventional thought

Gradual western recognition (rediscovery?) of consciousness (c. 1200-c. 1600) (e.g., “conceptual existence”)

Increasingly more radical unconventional thinking by “Neoplatonists”

Developments under the Palaeologan Dynasty of the Byzantine Empire:

Patronage of much scholarship, incl. unconventional, bringing Palaeologan Renaissance (c. 1250-c. 1450)

Gradual Collapse of Byzantine Empire to Islamic Turks, leading to migration of scholars from Byzantium to western Europe (esp. Italy)

Thus: **(Re)discovery of, and growing attention in western Europe to, ancient non-Aristotelian texts**

Platonist and Stoic (relatively less radical) texts in the 15<sup>th</sup> century

Epicurean and Pyrrhonist texts (relatively more radical texts) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century

The (Great) Renaissance (c. 1300- 17<sup>th</sup> century), an extension of the Palaeologan Renaissance in western Europe, with massive spread of, and attention to, non-Aristotelian scholarship in western Europe

First in Italy and southern Europe generally

Later (16<sup>th</sup> century) spreads to northern Europe

**Apparent result: The intellectual monopoly of Aristotelianism was severely challenged by newly competing (albeit typically ancient) theories, bringing “modernity”**

# EMBRYONIC MODERN EMPIRICISM

Initial shift toward increasingly anti-Aristotelian thought was led by  
“Neoplatonists” (who else was there?)

Gradually, unconventional (i.e., anti-Aristotelian) thought gravitated toward various of the ancient Greco-Roman schools as understood from rediscovered texts:

“Neoplatonists” shifted emphasis to much newly-discovered  
Platonist thought

“Neostoics” (relatively few) adopted much Stoic thought

“**Renaissance Atomists**” adopted much Epicurean thought

“**Renaissance Skeptics**” adopted much Pyrrhonist thought

Loosely, they, and many others, belonged to a broad movement willing to question and challenge the validity of many traditional Aristotelian



# EMBRYONIC MODERN EMPIRICISM (CONT'D)

Some early modern unorthodox thinkers, probably unaligned to any specific school of thought, who contributed to what evolved into empiricism:

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), who favored observation and experimentation and questioned established theories

established  
widespread  
Aristotelians

Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), whose thought seriously challenged theories and whose famous heliocentric theory would gain support among later empiricists and condemnation from

Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639), who was a major critic of Aristotelian thought (and imprisoned for “heresy”)



# EMBRYONIC MODERN EMPIRICISM (CONT'D)

Despite evolving from a general movement of unorthodox thinkers, modern Empiricism primarily developed as a joint enterprise of Renaissance Atomists (Epicureans) and Renaissance Skeptics (Pyrrhonists)

In Antiquity, Epicureanism and Pyrrhonism were extremely different from each other.

However, they shared the following:

- a) They (far more even than Neoplatonists and Neostoics) were radically anti-Aristotelian (and vehemently condemned by Aristotelians as such)
- b) They (and the Neostoics, albeit to a lesser extent) were epistemologically empiricist (albeit in different ways), favoring observation, experimentation, and skepticism or denialism re: established

# RENAISSANCE ATOMISTS

**Leading Renaissance Atomists** (early modern Epicureans) who seem to have had much influence on the early development of modern empiricism:

Girolamo Frascatoro (c. 1477-1553)

Gerolamo Cardano (1501-1576)

Bernardino Telesio (1509-1588)

Joseph Calasanaz (1557-1648)

Thomas Harriot (c. 1560-1621)

Santorio Santorio (1561-1636)

Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)

Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637)

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

Isaac Beeckman (1588-1637)

# RENAISSANCE SKEPTICS

**Leading Renaissance Skeptics** (early modern Pyrrhonists) who seem to have had much influence on the early development of modern empiricism:

Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola (1470-1533)

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535)

Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540)

Gentian Hervetus (1499-1584)

Henri Estienne (c. 1530-1598)

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

Pierre Charron (1541-1603)

Francisco Sanches (c. 1550-1623)

Marie de Gournay (1565-1645)

Francois de La Mothe Le Vayer (1588-1672)

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (“Molière”) (1622-1673)

Pierre Bayle (1647-1706)



# INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY ON EMPIRICISM

Although empiricism began in Italy and southern Europe, the Catholic Church, which remained strongly committed to Aristotelianism, generally, by c. 1600, drove empiricism out of most Catholic countries (excluding France, which had a unique relationship with Catholicism) in the Counter-Reformation, shifting the center of empiricism northward to Britain

Many Protestant leaders (opposing Catholicism, incl. its commitment to Aristotelianism), especially in Britain, became major advocates of empiricism (until c. 1800, by which time a great amount of radical empiricism came seriously to challenge traditional Christian dogma)

Despite major conflicts of Epicureanism and Pyrrhonism with Christianity in Antiquity, most Renaissance Atomists, Renaissance Skeptics, and modern empiricists remained committed to Christianity (albeit increasingly not to Catholicism after 1600) until about 1650/1700 (although some were religiously rather unorthodox)

# EARLY EMPIRICISTS

Identified generally as the earliest empiricists:

Sometimes: **Bernardino Telesio** (1509-1588) (supposedly first significant modern western scientific method)

More often: **Francis Bacon** (1561-1626) (especially influential scientific method of western modernity and political influence popularizing empiricism in Britain under James

in  
VI/I)

**Santorio Santorio** (1561-1636) (standardized use of measurements in scientific practice)

- **Galileo Galilei** (1564-1642) (major theoretician and practitioner of early empiricism)

Theoretician who attempted to fuse Renaissance Atomism, Renaissance Skepticism, and Christianity into a coherent philosophy :

**Pierre Gassendi** (1592-1655)



# **GREAT SUCCESS OF EMPIRICISM IN LATE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

**John Locke (1632-1704)**

**Isaac Newton (1642-1726/27)**

**Examples of other empiricists of the era:**

**Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689)**

**Robert Boyle (1627-1691)**

**Antonie van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723)**

**Robert Hooke (1635-1703)**

**Birth of Scientific Revolution, Liberalism, and British world influence**

**Widespread acceptance of Empiricism as a philosophy (especially in Britain, but also in France, Netherlands, North America)**



# LOCKE'S BLANK SLATE (*TABULA RASA*) THEORY

**Blank Slate Theory: all knowledge derives from experience**

Supposedly the core principle of empiricism (see definition)

Note: It did not claim that all knowledge is limited to experience, itself, merely that knowledge is not “innate” in humans

**Phenomenalist corollary** (of David Hume and Ernst Mach):

**Knowledge seemingly is limited to that of phenomenal experience as it is phenomenally experienced.**

This is a radically skeptical and subjectivist view adopted by few “empiricists”, but arguably follows from strict empiricism

# RECENT CRITICISM OF BLANK SLATE THEORY

Cognitive scientists, linguists, etc. (e.g., Steven Pinker and Noam Chomsky) have claimed: modern science shows humans to be born with innate “knowledge” (e.g., “knowledge” of how to suck or of human language structure)

This misconstrues “knowledge” as term is used by Blank Slate theory

For Blank Slate theory, knowledge (“knowledge of what”) is construed to have as its object the validity or invalidity of a proposition (e.g., “ $1 + 1 = 2$ ”, “X cannot simultaneously be not-X”, “a mammal is an animal”)

Supposed “knowledge of how” (“knowledge” said to be evidenced by what one does or how one does it, e.g., sucking, responding to heat, structure of language, etc.) may be caused by physical or other conditions (e.g. “instincts”, nerve circuitry, chemistry, genetics, etc.) with which one is born, but that does not constitute true “knowledge” as construed by theory

**Doing does not constitute knowing. (If it did, a rock would “know” how to fall to ground when dropped.)**



# THE FRAGMENTATION OF EMPIRICISM

In late 17<sup>th</sup> Century and thereafter, empiricism increasingly fragmented into three general movements that moved radically away from each other

Gassendi's effort to fuse Renaissance Atomism, Renaissance Skepticism, and Christianity into a single coherent philosophy failed

Epicureanism, Pyrrhonism, and Christianity were, in important respects, radically conflicting philosophies

The fragmentation arguably began with Locke and Newton

Locke and Newton were largely in agreement with each other and supported by many Protestants so that the fragmentation with them was not obvious, but:

- Locke was more subjectivist than Newton

- Newton was more objectivist than Locke

- Despite being deeply religious, both Newton and Locke were quite religiously unconventional



# THE FRAGMENTATION OF EMPIRICISM (CONT'D)

The three major fragments:

**Objectivist Empiricists:** Gradually became more radically objectivist and materialist (or physicalist), increasingly resembling ancient Epicureans

**Subjectivist Empiricists:** Gradually became more radically subjectivist and skeptical regarding objectivity, increasingly resembling Pyrrhonists

**Christian Empiricists:** gradually drew away from objectivist empiricism and subjectivist empiricism as too radical and contrary to traditional assumptions of (Protestant) Christian faith to which Christian empiricists remained primarily committed

Over time (despite overlaps between fragments and transitions between them), the fragmentation became so major as to make the different fragments functionally different and distinct.

# CHRISTIAN EMPIRICISM

Much enthusiasm for empiricism among many Protestant leaders well into 18<sup>th</sup> Century  
Retained primacy of Christian faith over empiricism

Leading 18<sup>th</sup> century Christian Empiricists:

Peter Browne (1665-1735) (Attracted to empiricism, but rejected Lockean theory of knowledge as contrary to Christian faith)

Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) (a strong supporter of Newtonian empiricism, but relied on rationalism to support Christian faith)

George Berkeley (1685-1753) (also a major subjectivist, but a devout Christian)

John Wesley (1703-1791) (founder of Methodism and enthusiastic empiricist)

Thomas Reid (1710-1796) (also a major objectivist and major critic of Hume)

By the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, radical objectivist empiricism and radical subjectivist empiricism increasingly conflicted with conventional (Protestant) Christian faith

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Christian empiricism largely vanishes as a movement, **merging into mainstream traditional Protestant Christianity**



# OBJECTIVIST EMPIRICISM

Focus on “Objectivity” and Matter

Dismissal of “Subjectivity” as a corruption or misunderstanding of “Objectivity”

General adoption of Materialism/Physicalism

Direct Realism (or sometimes, like Newton, Indirect Realism assuming “object” of observation to bear at least close resemblance to “objectivity”)

Consciousness deemed non-existent, a mere function of “matter” lacking ontological relevance, or otherwise of relatively little, if any, significance

Gradual rejection of Christian faith as contrary to empiricism and “reason”

Assumed: validity of:

- Logic

- Induction

- Abduction

- Mechanistic causality

- “Objectivity” as true existence

- “Scientific laws”

- “Common sense” (of like-minded people)

Adoption of scientific realism

Gradual movement away from “empiricism” and toward rationalism and “common sense” assumptions

Eventual merger with rationalism into mainstream “analytic philosophy”, which has generally been far more rationalist than empiricist

In effect, gradually withdrew from Empiricism and adopted something like Rationalism



# OBJECTIVIST EMPIRICISTS (PEOPLE)

Isaac Newton (1642-1726)

John Toland (1670-1722)

Anthony Collins (1676-1729)

French Materialists, e.g.:

Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751)

Denis Diderot (1713-1784)

Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715-1771)

Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789)

Thomas Reid (1710-1796) (also a Christian empiricist)

Scientific Realists and Positivists,

e.g. Auguste Comte (1798-1857)

Merger with rationalism in analytic tradition, e.g.:

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) (although supposedly a subjectivist empiricist briefly when young)

G.E. Moore (1873-1958)

Logical positivists (although some supposedly were subjectivist empiricists very early)

# SUBJECTIVIST EMPIRICISTS

General evolution into **Phenomenalism** (as radical subjectivist empiricism), which might almost be described as Neopyrrhonism  
Increasingly focused attention on phenomenal experience (consciousness) as seemingly only object of true knowledge  
Became increasingly skeptical (albeit not necessarily denialist) regarding everything but phenomenal experience as experienced  
Eventual consideration of apparent possibility that existence merely is phenomenal experience phenomenally experiencing itself  
Eventually moved away from metaphysical indirect realism of Locke and toward metaphysical skepticism  
Never developed a large following but included several highly respected philosophers (e.g., Hume, Mill, Mach, James)  
Due to its radical skepticism, it became too “counterintuitive” and even frightening for most people to be comfortable with it

Phenomenalism was thought by many to lead to:

- Solipsism (belief that one’s mind is only mind in existence)

- A philosophical “dead end” by suggesting impossibility of any knowledge (of objectivity)

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it especially lost much support due to:

- Atomic theory dispute: Mach v. Ludwig Boltzmann (1844-1906, atomist) and Boltzmann’s suicide blamed on Mach (phenomenalist)

- Revisionist view of David Hume’s philosophy by Norman Kemp Smith (1872-1958, an objectivist) and others

  - Theorized that Hume was truly an objectivist and rationalist, not a radical skeptic or subjectivist

  - Suggested that Hume’s “radical skepticism” was not intended by Hume to be taken seriously and should be, in effect, ignored as nothing but Hume trying to demonstrate how clever he was

- A major series of attacks on phenomenalism (and radical subjectivist empiricism generally), especially by many analytic philosophers, in supposed “refutations”

**Phenomenalism, as radically subjectivist (and skeptical) empiricism, did not die, but has had few adherents since early 20th Century**



# SUPPOSED “REFUTATIONS” OF PHENOMENALISM (OR RADICAL SUBJECTIVIST EMPIRICISM)

F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) (Absolute Idealism, British Idealism)

John Dewey (1859-1952) (Pragmatism, Process Philosophy, and, early, Neo-Hegelianism)

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) (Analytic, Logical Atomism and, early (supposedly), Phenomenalism(?))

G.E. Moore (1873-1958) (Analytic, “Common Sense”)

Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) (Analytic, Value Pluralism and Liberalism)

Wilfrid Sellars (1912-1989) (Analytic, Critical Realism and Neo-Kantianism)

Roderick Chisholm (1916-1999) (Analytic, Neo-Platonism)

J.L. Mackie (1917-1981) (Analytic, Australian Realism)

David Malet Armstrong (1926-2014) (Analytic, Australian Realism)



# SUBJECTIVIST EMPIRICISTS (PEOPLE)

John Locke (1632-1704)

Pierre Bayle (1647-1706)

George Berkeley (1685-1753) (also a Christian Empiricist)

Francois-Marie Arouet (“Voltaire”) (1694-1778)

David Hume (1711-1776)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

Ernst Mach (1838-1916)

William James (1842-1910)

Bertrand Russell (?) (1872-1970) (supposedly when young; later an objectivist)

Arthur Eddington (1882-1944)

Some of the Logical Positivists (?) (supposedly very early; later objectivists)

John Archibald Wheeler (1911-2008)