

John Locke (1632-1704) has been called "the founder of empiricism in epistemology." Generally speaking, this is the view that all our knowledge is derived from experience. In espousing this theory of knowledge, Locke rejected the rationalism of Rene Descartes (1596-1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), and Gottfried Wilhelm Von Leibnitz (1646-1716). Rationalism in epistemology is the view that knowledge is derived from the mind; that upon the occasion of experience of some external object, the mind intuitively knows that object by means of innate ideas; i.e., ideas which do not derive from the object, but from the mind. Locke said that the mind has no innate ideas about the world; the mind is a clean slate, a blank tablet. If any knowledge is to appear upon that slate, experience must print it. Inconsistent with this viewpoint, Locke claimed that our knowledge of our own existence is intuitive (by means of Descartes' "I think, therefore I exist."), and that our knowledge of God's existence is demonstrative (by means of rational arguments).

Whereas John Locke held that it is necessary to assume the existence of both a substantial mind that experiences and perceives, and substantial objects that are experienced and perceived; George Berkeley (1685-1753) argued that we never perceive objects or material substances, but only "qualities" such as colors, sounds, etc.; and that these "qualities" are "mental" or "in the mind." However, Berkeley said, since a divine mind exists, we can be certain not only that trees and rocks and stones exist, but also that our sensory experience is reliable.

David Hume (1711-1776) developed to its logical end the view that all knowledge derives from experience. Hume held that knowledge is of two kinds: sense impressions and ideas, which are exact images of sense impressions. Taken together, impressions and ideas may be called perceptions. All that we know, Hume said, is our perceptions. We have no knowledge of objects outside of ourselves, or of a substantial mind within ourselves, or of a "self" or a "soul", nor even of substance or essence; we have only our impressions and ideas of them. Thus when we think that we are experiencing a chair "out there," we are really experiencing only our perception of a "chair." We can never experience the chair itself, nor can we know whether such an item even exists! We experience only our own perceptions. Hume concluded (and logically so) that, since, when we experience and observe, we are experiencing and observing nothing more than our own perceptions, therefore we can never learn anything from experience and observation. Thus, by developing empiricism to its logical conclusion, Hume arrived at pure skepticism. And, since we can never learn anything, there can be no such thing as a belief based upon true knowledge, i.e., a rational belief. Any belief which we hold must be held irrationally, i.e., without benefit of knowledge or of truth.

It was inevitable that such a conclusion should find its reaction in a great outburst of irrational faith. Although Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and their twentieth-century followers agreed with Hume that no belief can be based upon reason, yet they claimed that the heart is superior to reason, having "reasons" of its own. The growth of irrationalism to its present proportions is a direct and natural sequel to David Hume's destruction of empiricism. However, this reaction is only the negative side of Hume's influence. His positive influence upon epistemology can be seen in the fact that, in the 20th Century, his phenomenistic empiricism has largely triumphed in the English-speaking world.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was the intellectual heir, both of rational metaphysics and theology, and of empirical science. He attempted a synthesis of rationalism and empiricism, and a reconciliation of religion and science. Kant believed that all knowledge derives from both experience and the mind, a view sometimes referred to as "rational empiricism." In this conception, experience provides the occasion and content of knowledge, and the mind contributes form. But in the end, all that we can know is our own perceptions (phenomena); the things-in-themselves (noumena) we can never know. In this respect Kant endorsed and confirmed Hume's phenomenism. However, Kant said, although we know only our own perceptions yet it is necessary to assume a mind-in-itself who does the perceiving, and objects-in-themselves which are the sources of our sensations. Thus we do know that