AN APPRAISAL OF HUME’S HERMENEUTIC OF THE *A PRIORI*

By Nicholas Anakwue

The precipitous growth of the philosophical enterprise has constantly witnessed the growing dialogue of mediation, in relation to its nature, between the two contrasting parts of science on the one hand, and theology on the other. The aspect of science, with relation to the philosophic paradigm, admits only of the realm of empirical investigation, as opposed to the ambiguity faced in the array of questions outside the precinct of sensible knowledge in the realm of the trans-empirical. This vividly constitutes the controversial aspect of metaphysics that is envisioned in the dialectical relationship between philosophy and theology. Metaphysics then as the primary instantiation of philosophy, seeks all the more to probe into the nature of ultimate reality. In the determined execution of this set goal, there has erupted a mélange of divergent opinions concerning the relevance and furthermore, the tenability of the enterprise of Metaphysics. It is in this regard, that there arose the rationalist and later to follow, the empiricist theories of knowledge, with regard to the quiddity termed Metaphysics. It is on this basis that the battle for the possibility of metaphysics has elicited a barrage of responses from both warfronts.

Hume (1711-1776), then, emerges in this debate, under the flagships of the empirical school, as a Scottish philosopher of the eighteenth century. He was initially engaged in diplomatic relations prior to his notable forays into the field of philosophical investigation. He wrote his first book in 1739, at the age of 28, later to be followed by a good number of influential works on his philosophy. He was evidently staunch and articulate in his philosophic outlook despite the obvious taint of skepticism as evident in his radical reformulation of Locke's empiricism. His defined aim was to project a natural philosophy of man and reject the vagueness of metaphysical reasoning. In order to accomplish this uphill task, he set out with an epistemic basis for his rejection of Metaphysics, fundamentally articulated in his hermeneutic of the *a priori*.

I

The concept of the *a priori* has a very popular usage in the discipline of philosophy and is regarded predominantly as an epistemological predicate, and then primarily, as an item of knowledge. As put by Kant, *a priori* knowledge is not just knowledge independent of a particular experience, but knowledge absolutely independent of all experience. The *a priori* is then understood as the ability to know with the help of reason alone as autonomous, bereft of the aid of sensible experience. This attempt at knowing independent of experience presupposes the
exercise of the cognitive faculty and the thorough process of ratiocination, in arriving at facts about ultimate reality. A further categorization of the concepts sees the *a priori* grouped with the “analytic” and the “necessary”, despite the obvious controversy over its meaningfulness. Though philosophers right from the time of Aristotle have criticized the concept in their philosophical treatises, with the rise of the rationalist era the term became more in use as a tool for advancing the cause of the rationalist mindset, envisioning knowledge as being able to be attained by reason alone without the aid of the sensory information. The rationalist hermeneutic of the *a priori* therefore entailed knowledge which is necessarily true and indubitable as known independently of the senses.

Foremost in this hermeneutic that served the purpose of upholding Metaphysics, was Leibniz. He was born in Leipzig in 1646 and later obtained a doctorate in jurisprudence but declined the offer of professorship as he redirected his energies into the vast panorama of philosophic investigation. He posited a strong Metaphysics, consisting in his defense for the goodness of God, universal harmony and a hierarchy of monads under a monad monadum (God) in his monadology.

In his hermeneutic of the *a priori*, he served to distinguish between two kinds of truth, namely, truth of reason and truth of fact. For Leibniz, the truth of reason was a necessary proposition as it was true in all possible worlds, and as it could not be denied without self-contradiction. However, the truth of fact, on the other hand, was a contingent proposition whose value depended on the necessary and was not necessarily true as it could be denied without contradiction. The necessary propositions/ truth of reason are propositions about the existence of God and according to Leibniz, could be known *a priori* by finite minds. The concept of the *a priori*, according to Leibniz, consisted of a statement in which the predicate concept was contained in the subject concept, such as, “Socrates is mortal”. These truths were true ex hypothesi, based on the principle of identity that defines a thing as it is necessarily: A is A. Hence, no appeal to the sensible experience was needed to authenticate these statements. On the other hand, truths, as seen in the statement “Socrates refutes Thrasymachus”, were said to be contingent as they expressed a fact known by experience. Leibniz's formulated the principle of sufficient reason, to account for contingent/ *a posteriori* truths, being that, “nothing happens without its being possible for him who should sufficiently understand things, to give a reason sufficient to determine why it is so and not otherwise”. Leibniz proposes the presence of innate ideas which we gain access to through self-inspection and which finally equip us with the first truth of fact from which our thought proceeds. This can be exemplified in the principle of non-contradiction, known *a priori*, which states that “a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time”. For example, “sweet is not bitter”.  


This dogmatic view of Leibniz, about the ability of the finite mind to grasp the ultimate reality, is most representative of the rationalist standpoint with regard to knowledge, which served as its bulwark for positing the possibility and justification of Metaphysics. However, the attempt of the rationalists at defining knowledge was not to prove an easy task, as they were to face a most capable opposition from the classical empiricists who contested their dogmatism with a rather extremist response in skepticism.

II

As the battle for supremacy ensued on the battlefield of the *a priori*, gradually capitulating in a dramatic apogee, the scene was suddenly stormed by the scintillating views of the empiricists who were to drag the debate further on, on the tenability of the Metaphysical enterprise. Empiricism, as against the view of rationalism, takes experience to be the basis of all our knowledge, as knowledge has its origins in and derives all its contents from experience. As such, empiricism denies the *a priori* and limits its scope within the field of sensible experience, raising the *a posteriori*, as it pertains to knowledge as stated in empirically verifiable statements or inductive reasoning, as the supreme basis for the proposition of a natural philosophy. Though empiricism could be traced as far back as Aristotle, Aquinas, Francis Bacon and a host of other philosophers, in modern times, rationalism has found its most noteworthy opponents in the trio of classical British empiricists: John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753) and finally, David Hume (1711-1776). Locke began the lengthy debate with his account of his rejection of innate ideas and a proposal that the mind be compared to a blank slate - in Latin, “tabula rasa” on which experiences writes. Berkeley was to later take Locke's argument to its logical conclusion in stating categorically, “esse est percipi”, that is, “to be is to be perceived”, a tacit retrogression to solipsism, which holds man to exist only and create everything of his subjective consciousness. Hume was to later follow this same trend in a radical skepticism that marked his philosophical approach. However, in order to fully grasp Hume's resultant hermeneutic of the *a priori*, as his basis for the deconstruction of Metaphysics, it is necessary to look into the prejudiced empirical background from which emanated the clearly defined argument against metaphysics.

Willard Van Orman Quine, a professor of philosophy at Harvard University in the United States, after clearly studying the positions of the empirical school, highlighted two dogmas on which are founded the entire bias concerning the controversial area of Metaphysics and hence the consequent understanding of the *a priori*. The first dogma, according to Quine, is a belief in some fundamental difference between analytic truths which are grounded in meanings, and
synthetic truths which are grounded in facts. This dogma reflects the distinction between the truths of reason and the truths of experience/ fact in Leibniz, or better put, between the a priori and the a posteriori. Despite Leibniz's understanding of the truth of reason as being necessary truths, the empiricists held a different view that sought to clarify the notion of self-contradictoriness that served as a basis for analyticity. The interchangeability salva veritate of the subject and the predicate of propositions in the truth of reason would then be indicative of a synonymy between the two parts of the proposition called 'cognitive synonymy'. Hence, for the empiricists, these statements are but grounded merely in the meaning implicit in them as against truths of facts which are grounded in facts. The Second dogma, that is most naïve of the empiricists, is that of radical reductionism, that relates every knowledge or proposition down to sensible experience which stands as the bedrock of knowledge. Empiricism, hence, subjugates the whole vast expanse of knowledge to the sensible datum and eschews from ascribing meaning to knowledge outside this defined boundary.

III

From the foregoing, it is clear that Hume was well aware of the position of rationalism, as most represented in Leibniz and was intent on a definite rebuttal of the position that seemed to enthrone Metaphysics comfortably within the realm of possibility.

Hume can be studied in two ways that are not far from being complementary: as a skeptic or as a naturalist. As a skeptic, Hume, despite many claims to the contrary, doubts the authority of the standard claims to knowledge; as a naturalist, on the other hand, he constructs a philosophy based on empirical observations about the human mind as against its “misconstrued” understanding among metaphysicians. Hume hence acknowledges the dual source of knowledge as given in the senses and in the intellect, subjugating the intellect to the senses, as being a 'slave to the passions'. Despite Hume's sharing a common front of offense with his empiricist predecessors, Locke and Berkeley, he intends a more rigid formulation of empiricism with relation to the a priori, leading him to remove some lingering metaphysics in their thought.

Hume first distinguishes between the two forms of perception in man, on the yardstick of degree of force or vivacity. The less forcible and lively were distinguished as thoughts or 'ideas', as against the more lively termed 'impressions'. This distinction of Hume bears a marked resemblance to Locke's distinction between sensations and ideas. Hume draws from the same wealth of resource, subjugating the ideas to the impressions, evidencing a higher level of meaning as viewed in the subordination of the intellectual function to the sensible function. Consequently, impressions are the building block of all knowledge for, “...when we entertain
any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire, from what impression that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicions”.

In establishing this prop for building his theory of meaning, Hume pushes further with his technical distinction between matters of facts and relations of ideas, strikingly similar to the fundamental cleavage between analytic truths/ truths of reason and synthetic truths/ truth of facts, and hence, between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*. For Hume then, the *a priori* relations of ideas, which referred basically to metaphysical reasoning, were demonstrably certain as their affirmation was discoverable by the mere operation of thought and did not relate to anything existent in the universe, that is, in reality. Therefore, for Hume, the *a priori* truths/ relations of ideas had no counterpart in the real world and so were ontologically vacuous as they were disjoint from reality. Consequently, Hume proposes *a priori* truths as tautologies as devoid of empirical content and verifiability and so proffering no knowledge about the real world. Summarily, Hume expresses three views fundamental to his hermeneutic, the first being that the conclusions of pure reason or *a priori* truths were empty, as they are necessarily true only by virtue of the meaning of terms. Secondly, Hume establishes the matters of fact to express contingent truths open to contradiction and grounded in the relation of cause and effect. Thirdly, Hume makes very vivid, the central role of experience in furnishing knowledge of matters of fact. Hence there can be no *a priori* proof of any matter of fact.

With his hermeneutic, Hume leaves no breathing space for Metaphysics, constricting the discipline within the rigid boundaries of a three-way categorization of epistemic propositions. The first group admits only of synthetic truths, grounded in sensible experience, of which Metaphysics cannot fit in due to its claim to suprasensible realities. The second category admits of the *a priori* as being tautological and disjoint from reality, serving to dismiss the supreme claim of pure reason. Finally, the last category admits of sophistry and illusion, which would prove Metaphysics as nonsensical.

IV

Kant (1724 -1804) later emerged in the tendentious debate concerning the issue of knowledge, and furthermore, the tenability of the Metaphysical enterprise. Kant fully acceded to Hume's categorization of all contingent and empirical judgments as being synthetic, however, he refused the supposition of Hume that all necessary and *a priori* judgments were analytic. He proposed some *a priori* truths to have a clear connection with reality and sense experience. These propositions he assigned to the discipline of Metaphysics, such as, “every event has a cause”.
Since the proposition is necessary, it is then a priori; however, as the predicate concept is not contained in the concept of the subject, it is not analytic, but synthetic. In so doing, Kant creates an avenue for the possibility of Metaphysical propositions, as the nature of reason, for him, is not tautological. Kant then equivocally defines Metaphysics as a categorical science that studies synthetic a priori propositions, though he holds that apart from the synthetic a priori propositions that ground the possibility of experience, metaphysical 'knowledge of the nature of ultimate reality' is inaccessible to human thinking.

V

As seen from the preceding, it is pertinent to note that, despite the apparent logicality of Hume's argument against Metaphysics; he, nonetheless, proposes his hermeneutic largely influenced by a strong bias. As according to Francis Bacon, in order for one to arrive at objectivity, one needs to do away definitively with the various idols that tend to impede an unprejudiced stand. It is, then, on the basis of this understanding, that we can judge Hume's critique to be lop-sided, as he does not undertake the job of deconstructing Metaphysics on a common ground with the opponent. Hence, due to his empiricist background, he, invariably, rejects the possibility of any knowledge outside sense experience. Evidently, this standpoint is not bereft of its weak points, as though a form of knowledge may have an ontological status, its possession of epistemological access is of a totally different issue. This in no way negates the existence of such knowledge. Applied to Metaphysics therefore, Hume cannot suppose the tautological nature of the a priori, simply because it is not open to access through the senses.

Secondly, as was enunciated by Kant in his work, Hume was not thorough in his distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori, as he overlooked the existence of referential propositions which were tied to reality, as the a priori conditions for the possibility of experience. These according to Kant, represent the a priori truths concretized in experience.

In conclusion, it is then consequent that Hume's hermeneutic of the a priori being replete with numerous discrediting flaws and swayed by various intrinsic predispositions cannot prove to be conclusive in dismissing Metaphysics, as represented in a priori propositions.
References


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Email: nikibertx@gmail.com