

British Empiricism

Early Modern Philosophy

We identified Descartes as beginning the period of Modern Philosophy.

From Descartes, will come two traditions of Early Modern Philosophy:

1. British Empiricism (Locke, Berkeley, Hume)
2. Continental Rationalism (Spinoza, Leibniz)

Molyneux's Problem

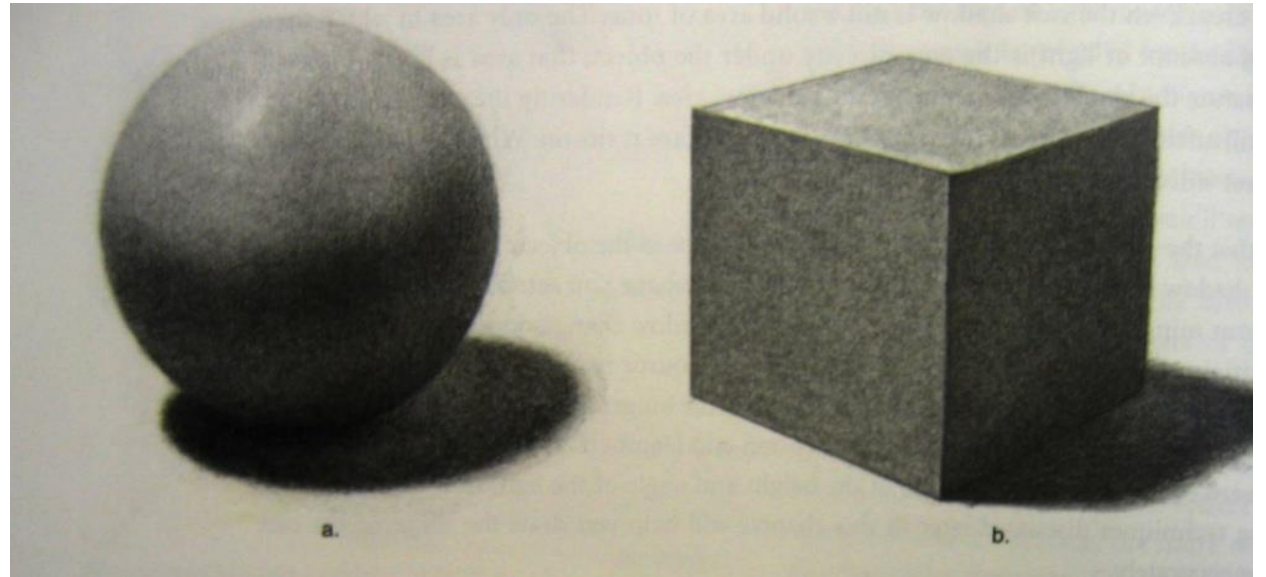


In a letter to John Locke, William Molyneux (1656-1698) set forth the following problem:

Suppose someone blind from birth is suddenly made able to see. They already know the difference between a cube and a sphere by touch. Would they be able to tell the difference by sight alone?

Molyneux's Problem

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Molyneux's Problem

The Rationalists will say *yes*.

The Empiricists will say *no*.

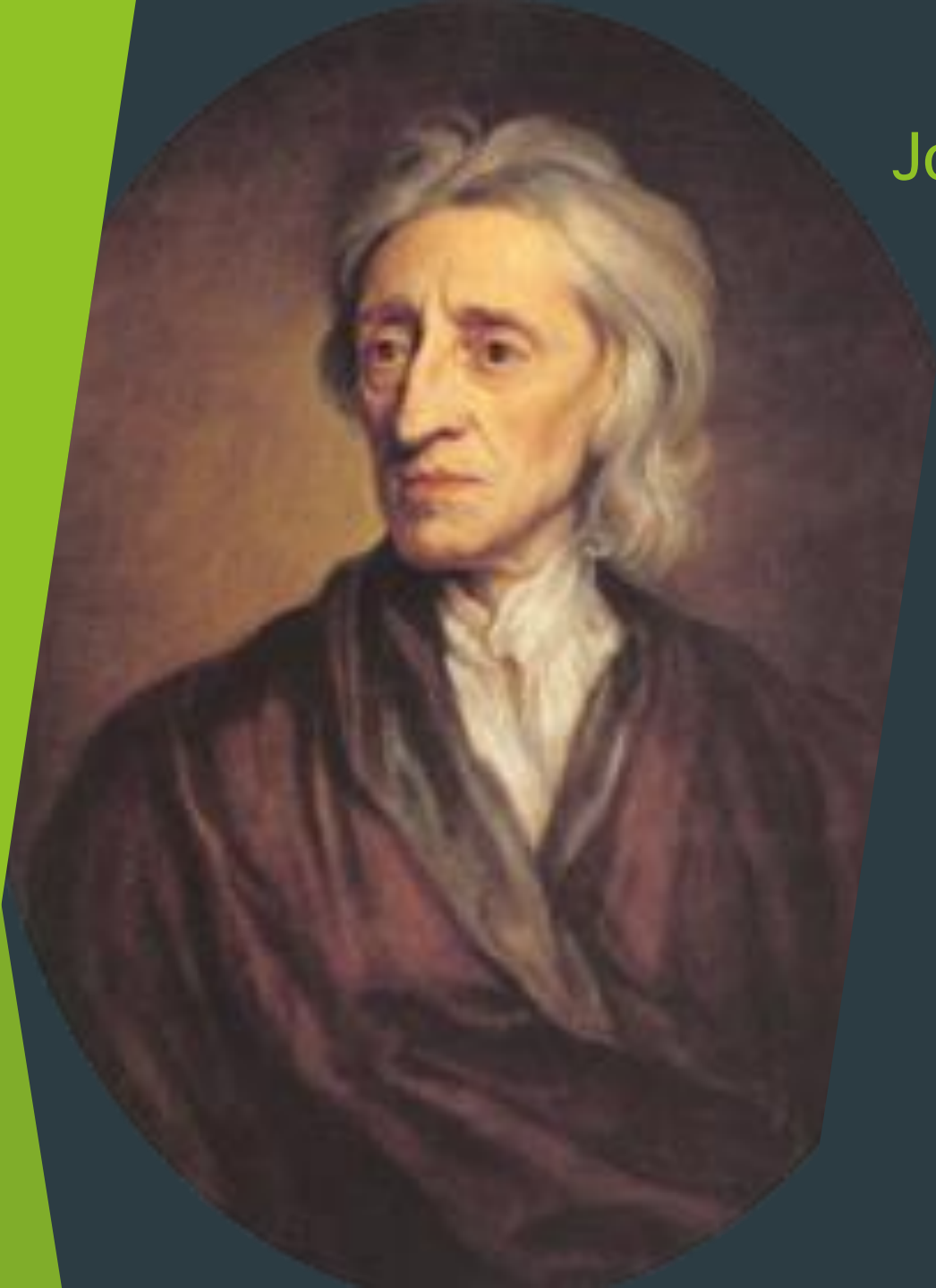
(By the way, although this is a really difficult thing to test experimentally, as far as we can tell, the Empiricists are right.)

What's the difference? They disagree about whether humans have innate ideas.

John Locke (1632-1704)

Essay Concerning Human
Understanding (1689)

Key idea: Nothing is in the
understanding that was not first in
the senses (sometimes called *tabula
rasa* or “blank slate”)



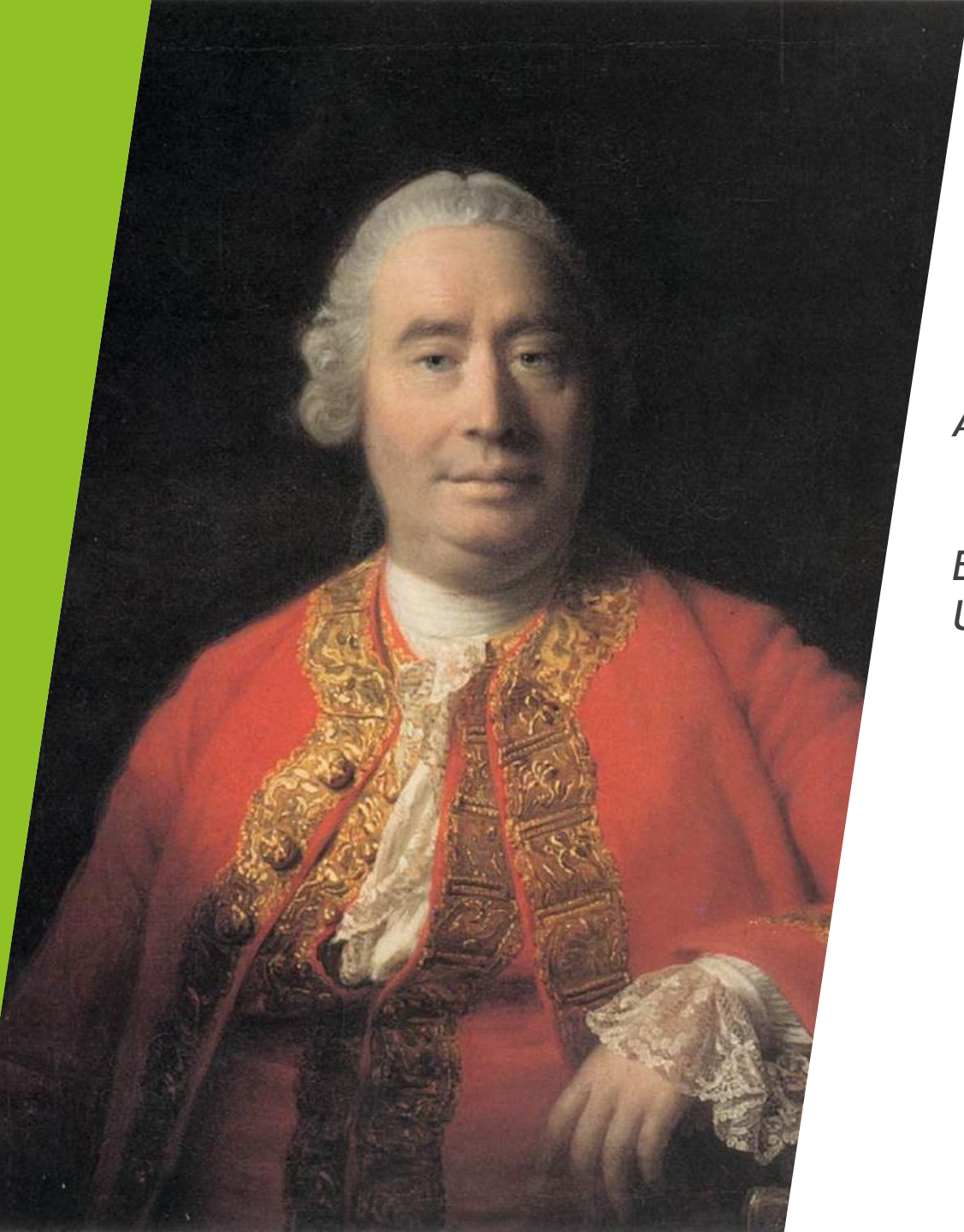


George Berkeley (1685-1753)

Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous
(1713)

Berkeley argues that there is no material substance on empiricist grounds- we never observe such a thing as “matter,” but only ideas. So Berkeley is a metaphysical “idealist”.

Key idea: “To be, is to be perceived.” So, for Berkeley, the answer to the question “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” is that there is **no such tree as that!**



David Hume (1711-1776)

A Treatise of Human Nature (1738)

*Enquiry Concerning Human
Understanding* (1748)

Perceptions

Hume says that “all activities of the human mind” fall under the class of perceptions.

He divides all perceptions into impressions (like your current sensory experience) and ideas (like if you imagine a tree.)

What’s the difference? First, impressions are more “forceful and lively,” and second, all ideas are copies of impressions.



The Copy Principle

So, all of our perceptions are in some way constructed out of impressions, and we are therefore limited to the sense data we have had.

Hume's Fork

In Section IV of the *Enquiry*, Hume divides all “objects of reason” into two classes: relations of ideas and matters of fact:

Relations of ideas

a priori

Analytic

Necessary

ex. “1+1=2”

Matters of fact

a posteriori

Synthetic

Contingent

ex. “Water is H₂O”

Compare: Kant



Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) doesn't accept "Hume's Fork" but instead has:

	Analytic	Synthetic
<i>a priori</i>	"All bachelors are unmarried"	"7+5=12"
<i>a posteriori</i>	<i>none</i>	"Water is H ₂ O"

The Problem of Induction



“Cause and effect” isn’t on the “relations of ideas” side of things. I clearly learn about such relationships only through experience.



All reasoning about “matters of fact” is based on “cause and effect” type reasoning. But you can never see a “cause,” you can only speculate that one thing causes another.



There are no *deductive* proofs for such things (like I might use in math or geometry.) But why should we rely on our experience? Well, because *in our experience, experience is reliable.*



OXFORD

Hume's Problem:

INDUCTION AND THE
JUSTIFICATION OF BELIEF

Colin Howson

The Problem of Induction

This problem, and related problems, are still around.

One way of stating this is that we know that science “works,” but we can’t really say *why*, and we can’t really *prove* that it does.