The Problem of Skepticism in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume: English Philosophers’ Progress in Empiricism

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The Continental schools of philosophy have too often overlooked the fact that man’s thinking is organically connected with his conduct. It seems to me to be the chief glory of English and Scottish thinkers to have kept the organic connection in view. The guiding principle of British philosophy has in fact been that every difference must make a difference, every theoretical difference somewhere issue in a practical difference, and that the best method of discussing points of theory is to begin by ascertaining what practical difference would result from one alternative or the other being true. What is the particular truth in question? In what facts does it result? What is its cash-value in terms of particular experience? This is the characteristic English way of taking up a question. … When all is said and done, it was English and Scotch writers, and not Kant, who introduced ‘the critical method’ into philosophy, the one method fitted to make philosophy a study worthy of serious men. (William James 382-83)

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Question and doubt are the very beginning of the science of knowledge. It is interesting to see the whole of the history of philosophy as the history of Western skepticism and of the correlated quest for certainty. So far as knowledge is in question
and its relation to skepticism and certainty is concerned, it places philosophy categorically in a very close relation to science. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries “une crise pyrrhonienne” occurred; all knowledge was cast in radical doubt. The skepticism and probabilism of the 17th and 18th century philosophers had their roots in the skeptical crisis that convulsed European thought in the wake of Reformation. Many of those who lived through the birth pang of modern thought saw Pyrrhonian skepticism as a source of certain problems. Modern philosophy arose in part as a reaction to this crisis. Throughout the 17th and early 18th centuries a running battle was fought with Pyrrhonists to prevent a recurrence of this crisis.

Lewis Beck called Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, “the three great British philosophers” “as classical representatives of empiricism and its development in realism, idealism, naturalism, and skepticism” (8). In order to trace the gradual development of the problems of knowledge and metaphysics in the English tradition of empiricism, we should discuss how Locke, Berkeley and Hume struggled with problem of skepticism on their philosophical writings. The purpose of this paper is to discuss roughly and in a limited way the relationship of the skepticism and empiricism of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume; how they used and refuted the skepticism and finally came to a conclusion for the English empiricism.

The great British empiricist tradition was first proclaimed by Sir Francis Bacon (1560–1620), and developed by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Since then empiricism has been a widespread influence on English thinking and dominated British philosophical investigation for three and a half centuries. Locke’s influence was virtually unchanged. His successors, Berkeley and Hume felt that Locke had not gone for enough in an empiricist direction. British Empiricist