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History as a Weapon: T. H. Green, Early Modern Empiricism, and the New Science of Mind

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Abstract

This paper examines the surprising role historical scholarship played in a late 19th-century controversy over the scientific status of psychology. One side—led by T. H. Green and other erstwhile students of the Plato scholar Benjamin Jowett—contended that the history of philosophy is a more appropriate tool than naturalistic psychology for uncovering the nature of mind. Interestingly, defenders of naturalistic psychology—including T. H. Huxley, E. B. Titchener, and others—looked to admired historical figures of their own to provide credibility for the view that philosophical reflection must be based on a properly empirical science of mind. The upshot is that the controversy over psychology's viability as a natural science was partly fought on the battlefield of historical interpretation. This battle has an under-appreciated legacy: I contend that our contemporary notion of a British Empiricist tradition whose central figures are Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, is in part a by-product of the exigencies of this now-forgotten fight over psychology.

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1. Titchener Reads Plato

Less than two years before his death, the Regius Professor of Greek joined an intellectual rumble. Benjamin Jowett—master of Oxford’s Balliol college and an admired reverend—had made ancient philosophy his life’s work. Yet the fight had little directly to do with his masterpiece, a five-volume translation of Plato’s *Dialogues* first published in 1871 (Plato 1871).¹ It had little to do with his unorthodox sermons and lectures on Christian doctrine, such as those his prized student T. H. Green had edited (Jowett, Green, and Smith 1861).

The fight was over psychology—over whether there could ever be a natural science of the human mind—and it had been instigated by his former pupils, Green chief among them. Jowett entered the fray by inserting a tirade against the new science of mind into his third edition of Plato’s *Dialogues*. The essay was entitled “On the Nature and Limits of Psychology,” and he incorporated it into the *Theaetetus*’s scholarly introduction (Jowett 1892).

Supplementing a translator’s commentary on an ancient Greek text might seem an unlikely way to participate in a debate about a new science. Yet the *Theaetetus* introduction drew a rejoinder from one of the preeminent experimental psychologists of the English-speaking world. E. B. Titchener, himself a product of Jowett’s Oxford and later of Wilhelm Wundt’s Leipzig laboratory, responded vigorously in *The Philosophical Review*.²

¹ The first edition consisted of four volumes, with the fifth appearing only with the second edition of 1875.

² During his undergraduate years at Oxford, Titchener apparently had some interaction with Jowett. Titchener wrote that he felt “much personal regret” at having to publish “a so generally adverse criticism” of his former teacher (Titchener 1893, 455).

The year before Jowett's essay appeared, Titchener had founded an outstanding psychological laboratory at Cornell—it was possibly the most advanced such laboratory outside of Germany at that time.³ He quickly became the *de facto* leader of Wundt-style experimentalism in the English-speaking world, so he responded to Jowett with considerable authority.

The core of the controversy concerned experimental psychology's aims and ambitions (Titchener 1893, 454). Jowett had complained that the science of mind pretended to be “a kind of metaphysic”—that is, that psychology sought to provide a scientific alternative to a priori metaphysics (Jowett 1892, 176, quoted at Titchener 1893, 454). But Jowett called psychology a “sham” science, one “which no logic ever put to the test” (Jowett 1892, 177). Psychologists were guilty of making a “false analogy [to] Physical Science” for their field (Jowett 1892, 176). So not only could it never replace metaphysics—the science of mind could never even be a science, according to Jowett.

Why did he think psychology could not be a science? His central concern was that psychology's observational evidence came principally from introspection on the researcher's own mind. But he held that minds are at least partly *constituted* by their own intellectual and religious environment, so that one cannot generalize from observing a single mind, particularly when that mind is taken in isolation from its wider intellectual circumstances (Jowett 1892, 176). Jowett also claimed (following Kant)⁴ that psychology cannot be a natural science because it

³ This was James McKeen Cattell's judgment, who suggested that the Cornell laboratory was then better funded than any in the world, with the exception of Wundt's (Cattell 1898, 655). Titchener described the design, function, and funding of his laboratory in (Titchener 1898).

⁴ Kant's famous claim, that empirical psychology could never achieve the status of a natural science because experience is neither mathematizable nor experimentally manipulatable, can be

studies conscious experience, and conscious experience supposedly cannot be “subjected to observation and experiment” (Jowett 1892, 176). He ridiculed psychologists for acting as though they had invented a magic lens “through which, as through some new optical instrument limiting the sphere of vision, the interior of thought and sensation is examined” (Jowett 1892, 176).

Jowett’s claim that empirical psychologists sought to develop a scientific replacement for speculative metaphysics was not entirely uncharitable, at least when it came to figures like Titchener. In his rejoinder Titchener suggested (vaguely) that empirical psychology *should* take priority over metaphysics, though in some sense he did not precisely specify:⁵

There can hardly be a sound metaphysic without a sound psychology; and, until this has been furnished, the psychologist naturally distrusts metaphysical construction. (Titchener 1893, 458)

Going back to Hume (or maybe Locke or Hobbes) one finds a strain of British thought that mistrusts the endless dialectical disputes of a priori metaphysics, and that regards empirical investigation of the mind as providing the only real basis for philosophical progress. Some of the more radical psychologists in the 19th century regarded their field as finally fulfilling the promise of providing just such a scientific basis for philosophy.

found at (Kant 1786/2004, 7-8 [4: 471]). See (Hatfield 1992) for a nuanced discussion of Kant’s actual views on psychology. Readers also interested in Hegel’s related critique of empirical psychology should consult (Tolman 2001).

⁵ Perhaps he had in mind the view he would later sketch, e.g. at (Titchener 1896, 3, 127). Taking what was then a common position (as we shall see) among psychologists, Titchener claimed that that the job of metaphysics is to synthesize the special results of all the department sciences, including psychology.

So what is Jowett's proposed alternative to a scientific study of the mind? He gives a clear answer: "one of the deepest and noblest modes of studying" the human mind is when the mind's development is "traced in the histories of religions and philosophies and in the thoughts of nations." This is a striking suggestion. For Jowett, to understand the mind we must not look to science, but to *history*—specifically, to the history of philosophy and religion. Thus he wrote that psychology was "not a branch of natural science" at all, but more properly "a part of the history of philosophy, ... an aspect of Metaphysic" (Jowett 1892, 185).

I have sketched a few of Jowett's reasons for thinking that science cannot give real insight into the mind. But why did he think that historical scholarship was more promising? About a decade earlier, a rationale for this sort of view had been laid out by the Scottish idealist William Ritchie Sorley, who had written:

But while every science has its history more or less closely connected with it, the historical part is in some cases merely a new department of investigation added on to the old without exerting any modifying effect upon it. This is the case with all those sciences whose subject-matter is definite and unchanging. ... But the case may be ... more complicated The customs, conduct, and relations of which the *social sciences* treat are in many ways modified by the theories about them held by those whose relations to one another and to circumstances are being traced. (Sorley 1883, 102 – 03, italics mine)

This is an intriguing thought. Human minds are unlike virtually anything else we study in science at least in that minds self-represent—that is, they form *theories of themselves*. Jowett and his idealist students supposed that the actual operation of

any given mind—perhaps even the perceptual phenomena on which empirical psychologists often focus—is continually being modified by such self-representation. If they are right, then the study of mind must take account of *theories* of mind, particularly as those theories developed historically.⁶

In fact, Jowett seems to think that our minds are so thoroughly determined by their self-representations that psychology’s proper task really must be to study intellectual history.⁷ This is why Jowett holds that we learn what we need about the mind not from any supposed experiment or introspective observation, but from the history of philosophy and religion.

Jowett’s view helps shed light on what might seem like a bizarre quirk of the late 19th century controversy over psychology—namely, why one finds a debate over the mind’s scientific tractability carried out in texts on the history of philosophy. For it is not only Jowett who attacked Victorian psychologists in the pages of books on history. Perhaps the most important such attack came from T. H. Green in his scholarly introduction to Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, a text I will discuss later.⁸

⁶ Another idealist who made a similar argument was David Ritchie, who wrote: “We can only properly and fairly study the human Mind by studying what man has done in the world (language, institutions, religions, art, &c.),” and went on to parlay this idea into a criticism of empirical psychology (Hodgson et al. 1887, 9, 21). Thanks to Anthony Fisher for calling my attention to Ritchie’s position and to the symposium in which Ritchie’s remarks appear.

⁷ We now know that the last major phenotypic changes we see in the evolution of humanity occurred roughly 30,000 years ago. So the time scale relevant to the *evolution* of mind does not match the much shorter scale of time from which we have written records of *theories* of mind, though Jowett would not have been in a position to know that.

⁸ Other examples of late 19th-century historical texts that weigh in on the controversy over psychology include, e.g., (Caird 1889, II.96 – 101, Huxley 1874/1894, 1879, esp. 48 – 50, 74, Robertson 1886, 230 – 31). Anthony Fisher points out to me that James Ward’s famous entry on psychology in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* also connects a “time-honoured” clash between “Empiricism and Rationalism” with a dispute between psychologists and “epistemologists

These idealist criticisms generally operated on two levels. First, historians directly attacked some Lockean assumptions on which they thought the new science of psychology was premised (this was Green's primary strategy). Attacking Lockean assumptions was a job for 19th-century *historians* because Hume had supposedly exposed the essential flaws in these assumptions, and then promptly been forgotten. But at a deeper level, the historians were also contending that *history itself* was a more appropriate tool for understanding the mind than naturalistic psychology. *Through* history of philosophy you get an account of mind.

Now psychology's critics were not the only ones to appeal to history. For psychologists and their allies themselves construed the British philosophical tradition as providing groundwork for the science of mind. For instance, in a book on Hume, Thomas Huxley wrote that in order to answer philosophy's most basic questions, "we must have recourse to that investigation of mental phenomena, the results of which are embodied in the science of psychology" (Huxley 1879, 48). He claimed that Hume's great insight was to have developed this important point. Hume

clearly recognized the fact that philosophy is based on psychology; and that the inquiry into the contents and the operations of the mind must be conducted upon the same principles as a philosophical investigation, if what he calls the "moral philosopher" would attain results of as firm and definite a

(notably Kant)." This remark appears in the eleventh edition (Ward 1886/1911, 549), but not the ninth (Ward 1886/1899). I have not been able to examine the tenth edition.

character as those which reward the “natural philosopher.” (Huxley 1879, 50 – 51)

Hume’s lesson, according to Huxley, was that philosophy will only make genuine progress when it begins its investigations with an empirical, scientific study of the mind. In other words, philosophy must be based on psychology.

To summarize the situation, Jowett and his allies saw the study of our intellectual history as the only real way to explain the human mind as it is now constituted. Titchener and psychology’s other defenders (like Huxley) looked to admired historical figures of their own to provide credibility for the view that philosophical reflection must be based on a properly empirical science of mind.⁹ The upshot is that the controversy over psychology’s viability as a natural science was partly fought on the battlefield of historical interpretation.

In what follows, I argue that the exchange between Jowett and Titchener was not just an unusual quirk, but was emblematic of a deeper trend in the late 19th century. As empirical psychology was attempting to establish itself as a natural science, some of its staunchest critics were, of all people, historians of philosophy. I have argued elsewhere that the historians’ criticisms shaped the emerging practice of empirical psychology—some of William James’s empirical work on spatial perception, for instance, was clearly crafted with an eye towards circumventing idealist criticisms of the very possibility of there being a science of mind (Klein 2009).

⁹ A slightly younger figure who was both inspired by the new psychology and sought to defend some basically Lockean ideas about the mind—indeed, to defend them from Green’s criticisms, which I examine below—was Samuel Alexander, who had studied at Balliol College, Oxford, during Green’s final years. See (Fisher Forthcoming).

Here though, I want to turn the arrow around—that is, I want to examine how the fight over psychology shaped the way the *historians* did their work. In particular, I want to focus on the rise of the dichotomy between so-called British Empiricism and Continental Rationalism. I’ll be focusing mainly on the former concept, so let me now say a few words about why one might be puzzled about this historical category.

2. A Puzzle about Empiricism

By the late 1890s, William James would famously adopt the label “radical empiricism.” But in 1878 when he published his first major article, the word “empiricism” was not widely used by English-speaking philosophers. Even the most scholarly dictionaries listed no philosophical sense of the term, from Noah Webster’s erudite *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1860) to John Ogilvie’s then-authoritative¹⁰ *Imperial Dictionary of the English Language* (1883).

Such dictionaries listed two senses of “empiricist,” both pejorative. In the medical fields, an empiricist was a quack, one with no formal education who practiced medicine anyway. In common language, the word signified an ignoramus, an uneducated person who had pretensions to knowledge (Ogilvie and Annandale 1883, 155, Webster 1860, 391).

¹⁰ The first fascicle of the *Oxford English Dictionary* appeared in 1884, covering A to Ant in 352 pages. It would be years before the *OED* would seriously rival Ogilvie’s 4-volume behemoth, which was aptly subtitled: *Complete Encyclopedic Lexicon, Literary, Scientific, and Technological*.

If there is any doubt that these dictionaries did not give a philosophical gloss to “empiricism” because they did not cover philosophical terms of art at all, consider that Ogilvie’s *Imperial Dictionary* has entries for the following philosophical terms: “metempiricism” (“transcendentalism” is given as a synonym), “mode” (a special sense is devoted to Locke’s use of the term), “doctrine of occasional essence” (refers to the Cartesian explanation of how mind and matter interact), and “realism” (contrasted with “idealism” in metaphysics), to take just a few examples.

It’s not that the philosophical sense of the word had fallen out of fashion. There never had been a consistent philosophical meaning of “empiricism” in English. None of those we think of as canonical British Empiricists described themselves using this term. Even J. S. Mill, on some accounts the last of the classic empiricists, explicitly disavowed commitment to any position bearing the name (Van Fraassen 2002, 207).

I’m far from the first to notice that the concept of an empiricist tradition was created and applied *ex post facto*. Much hay was made over this point in a literature on the meta-history of philosophy that flourished especially between about the late 50s and the early 1980s. But that literature was motivated by a *negative* project—historians like Bracken, Loeb, Norton, and Popkin argued that there is something *illegitimate* about the idea that there were two major schools in modern philosophy, Rationalists and Empiricists.¹¹ But the question where we get

¹¹ The literature I have in mind includes (Bracken 1977-1978, Kuklick 1984, Loeb 1981, Norton 1981, 1982, Popkin 1959, 1964, Van Fraassen 2002, 201-25) (cf. Ayers 1984, Wiener 1959).

this standard narrative from was generally handled, I think, in an unconvincing way.

Following Alberto Vanzo (Vanzo 2016), one can usefully organize the most common answers to this question into three groups. Some think Thomas Reid is the key architect of the standard narrative; some think it was Kant and his students; and others think it was late 19th century Hegelians in Germany and the UK, especially Kuno Fischer and T. H. Green.¹²

I won't go through the various deficiencies in calling each of these figures "the" author of our standard narrative of early modern philosophy.¹³ Instead I

¹² On Fischer's Hegelian methodology in history, see (Beiser 2011, 370).

¹³ Still, the second answer appears to be particularly popular, so I sketch some worries in this long note.

There is something curious about the first dictionary appearances of a philosophical sense of "empiricism." The earliest such entry I can find is in 1889 (see Appendix), and the entry cites then-recent examples. But when the "E" fascicle of the *Oxford English Dictionary* appeared in 1891, it not only included a philosophical usage of "empiricism," but supported the usage with examples dating back to 1803. It is peculiar that the *OED* suddenly found a 90-year history of a usage of "empiricism" that had been in English dictionaries only two years, up to that point.

Two factors might explain this. First, "empiricism" appeared with more frequency in German-language philosophy (especially in connection with Kant) during the 19th century than in English-language philosophy. Since English-speaking philosophers sometimes engaged with German philosophy, there are scattered examples of early English usages of "empiricism" in discussions of Kant. The *OED*'s first historical citation is just such an example. The citation is to an 1803 article in the *Edinburgh Review* of a French book on Kant (the citation is reproduced in the Appendix).

Kant had used "empiricism" in the first *Critique*, in the "Antinomy of Pure Reason." He identified four antinomies, or inconsistent pairs of cosmological ideas that could neither be given in experience nor brought by reason into harmony with the laws of nature. In "Section 3", Kant associated one side of each inconsistent pair with a type of philosophy. Empiricism (*der Empirismus*), exemplified by Epicurus, was associated with what Kant called the "antitheses" of the antinomies. Dogmatism (*der Dogmatismus*), exemplified by Plato, was associated with the "theses" of the antinomies (CPR, A466/B494 - A476/B504). Kant's second use of "*Empirismus*" came in the final chapter of the *Critique*, where he gave a "History of Pure Reason." He wrote that philosophy had made progress primarily in its treatment of three controversies. The first controversy was over the object of rational knowledge. Sensualists think reality is only to be found in objects of the senses. Intellectualists think the senses only give illusion. The second controversy concerns the origin of rational knowledge. Empiricists (*Empiristen*) hold that experience is the source of such knowledge, while noologists (*Noologisten*) hold that reason alone is the source. Curiously, in this passage empiricism is exemplified by Aristotle, and sensationalism by Epicurus (whereas earlier Epicurus was the exemplar of empiricism). It is also interesting that Locke, not

want to focus on T. H. Green. Loeb, Norton, and Garrett all claim Green was not just someone who attacked empiricism, but that he was one of the inventors, or chief popularizers, of the very concept of empiricism (Garrett 2004, Loeb 1981, 31, Norton 1981, 332-3). Green was a founder of British Idealism, of course. He and Thomas Grose brought Hume's philosophical writing back into print after a

Hume, is the chief recent spokesman for empiricism. The third controversy concerns the methods of philosophy. Naturalists eschew reason. Those who use a scientific method ("*einer szientifischen Methode*") can be dogmatists, like Wolff, or skeptics, like Hume (CPR, A854, B882). Even though one can find occasional English-language references to Kant's discussions of empiricism, this seems not to be a prominent strain of English-language Kant scholarship in the 19th century. It was not prominent enough for the Kantian sense of "empiricism" to reach English dictionaries before 1889; but it was just prominent enough that the *OED* could retrospectively identify some scattered usages dating back to Kant's day. Moreover, when philosophers used the word as a term of art, they often injected the word with quite different meanings before about the 1880s. In the English-speaking world, then, the philosophical notion of empiricism was used at best very rarely before the '80s, even in connection with Kant; and when it was used, authors could not assume their readers would be familiar with the concept.

The second factor in pre-1880 usages of "empiricism" in English is that philosophers sometimes used the word in one of its everyday senses. Thus, the next earliest example cited by the *OED* of a distinctively philosophical sense owes to James Mill. But Mill simply used "empiricism" to mean pretense to wisdom in the absence of rational methods: "Mere observation and empiricism, not even the commencement of science" (*see Appendix*). This is exactly the older, pejorative usage of the term. Perhaps the usage appears distinctively philosophical to *OED* editors simply because the cited author was himself a philosopher.

One might make a similar point about van Fraassen's otherwise excellent discussion of early usages of "empiricism." He cites Bacon's use of the word as a "clear and early precedent" for our modern usage. Bacon wrote that the sciences have been practiced by

empiricists or dogmatists. The empiricists, like the ants, merely collect and use: the rationalists, like spiders, spin webs out of themselves. But the way of the bees lies in between: she gathers materials from the flowers of the garden and the field and then by her own powers transforms and digests them; and the real work of philosophy is similar. (Quoted in Van Fraassen 2002, 203)

Van Fraassen cites a similar usage in Leibniz. But these usages are not distinctively philosophical. In these cases, the word was being used not as a term of art, but in its everyday, pejorative sense. Below, I will make a similar case about T. H. Green's use of the word "empiricism" to denote a simplistic reliance on pre-theoretical, common knowledge. So again, the fact that philosophers before the 1880s use the word "empiricism" is consistent with my claim that its distinctively philosophical usage only became established in about the 1880s.

To sum up, "empiricism" does appear from time to time in English-language philosophy before the 1880s. But in the rare cases where it appears as a philosophical term of art (*e.g.*, in connection with Kant), it does not appear regularly enough to have established itself as a working part of the language of philosophical English.

long absence. Green's 374-page "Introduction" to the *Treatise* grouped together Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and criticized all three from a neo-Kantian perspective. That historical grouping is one reason historians suspect Green of inventing the empiricism concept.

A second reason for suspecting Green as the author of our narrative is that he studied and taught at Balliol College, Oxford, eventually becoming Whyte's Professor of Moral Philosophy there. His students included such Idealist luminaries as F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, Edward Caird, John Caird, and R. L. Nettleship (Loeb 1981, 31.n7). So his students eventually gained the stature and influence to spread widely whatever philosophical classifications they had learned from Green.

A third reason has to do with the full version of the modern-philosophy narrative as widely taught, today. Most philosophers have been trained to read modern philosophy not just as a battle over epistemological empiricism between Descartes-Spinoza-Leibniz and Locke-Berkeley-Hume. A crucial part of the story is that *Kant* is supposed to have ended the battle by showing how to synthesize what was right about the two respective positions. This is superficially similar to Green's version of events. He argues that we must read Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in order to appreciate "the intellectual necessity of the Kantian answer" (Green 1874/1894, §3, 3).

Now, Green may have contributed to the creation of British Empiricism by grouping Locke, Berkeley, and Hume together as the key figures of a philosophical tradition. The problem with this interpretation is that Green's *basis* for grouping these figures together was quite different from the reasons that the

standard narrative offers. The culmination of my argument for this claim comes in section five, below.

3. *Empiricism* as Historical-Theoretical Concept

Whether we are historians or not, contemporary philosophers tacitly treat concepts like *empiricism* and *rationalism* as what I shall call a “historical-theoretical concept,” or HT concept for short. I mean that we typically take the concept to refer not just to a philosophical thesis. We also take it to refer to a set of philosophers we group together precisely in virtue of their common commitment to the aforementioned thesis.

Thus we usually identify the *tradition* that “empiricism” denotes by citing the founding work of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and perhaps by contrasting these figures with Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. And we usually recognize a family of characteristically empiricist *theses* that concern either knowledge or meaning. In particular, empiricists typically hold that experience is in some sense the source of all genuine knowledge, of all legitimate meaning, or both.

One can inquire about the history of *the philosophical thesis* that “empiricism” now denotes. That is to say, one can ask about the history of (some version of) the view that knowledge must be justified by appeal to experience. I’ll use “*epistemological empiricism*” to refer to this first, theoretical sense of the word “empiricism.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Philosophers commonly distinguish between *concept-empiricism*, the view that all concepts are derived from experience, and *knowledge-empiricism*, the epistemological view that all propositional knowledge derives from experience. Note that the former version of empiricism is a semantic thesis, but it is typically of interest for its epistemological implications. On this distinction as it relates to Locke, see (Ayers 1991/1993, 14 – 15). Ayers thinks Locke is only a

But one can inquire about the history of *the historical narrative* to which “empiricism” refers, as well. In other words, one can ask about the history of the story that describes early modern philosophy as a dispute between British Empiricists and Continental Rationalists. I’ll use “British Empiricism” (capital E) when I want to refer specifically to this second sense of the word “empiricism.”

It’s difficult to trace the evolution of bicephalous concepts like *empiricism*. The problem is that the theoretical and historical sides of the term are mutually constraining. Thus we typically see epistemological empiricism as the *basis* for grouping Locke, Berkeley, and Hume together. And when we designate some contemporary thesis in, say, philosophy of science or metaphysics as “empiricist,” we evoke something more than just bare epistemological empiricism. We think epistemological empiricism has rich philosophical implications particularly in metaphysics, ethics, and meta-ethics, implications that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume’s work is supposed to exemplify.

In my view, the reason we philosophers use historical-theoretical concepts like “empiricism” and “rationalism” is that they afford us intellectual economy. Because we expect to have shared similar professional training, we expect one other to share a roughly common interpretation of the *historical tradition*—and this allows us to use words like “empiricism” as shorthand not just for an epistemological thesis, but for an entire philosophical project, very broadly construed.¹⁵ No surprise, then, that we see the consolidation of these historical-

concept-empiricist; Green appears to saddle Locke with a version of *knowledge-empiricism*, though Green himself does not employ this distinction. It is important to note that Green’s chief interest in Locke is not epistemological, but metaphysical, as we shall see below.

¹⁵ We find a straightforward example of a definition of empiricism with two mutually-constraining parts in the preface to Garrett and Barbanell’s *Encyclopedia of Empiricism*. “Empiricism,” we

theoretical concepts in English occurring in the late-19th century—right around the time of the rise of the modern research university.¹⁶

I am suggesting that we tacitly treat empiricism as a kind of higher-order concept—it picks out a philosophical thesis *and* a historical narrative, both of which are mutually constraining:

SCHEMA FOR HISTORICAL-THEORETICAL (HT) CONCEPT X:

1. Thesis: concept x expresses a philosophical thesis or stance, and the thesis or stance was affirmed by the philosophers mentioned in (2).
2. History: a canonical set of historical figures, S, are to be grouped together on the basis of their common commitment to the thesis or stance mentioned in (1).

It seems clear that these higher-order concepts *themselves* can have histories. Historical interpretations, after all, are not simply views from nowhere, but are created—often *by* philosophers, and sometimes for interesting philosophical reasons. To keep things clear, I will refer to the history of an HT concept as a *meta-history*.

Here I am primarily interested in the meta-history of empiricism. When one seeks such a meta-history, what is immediately confounding is that the historical

read, can be used to refer to a “philosophical emphasis” on experience over a priori reasoning. It can also indicate

a particular philosophical movement or tendency of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, originating and centered in Great Britain Its ... most important representatives are John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume. (Garrett and Barbanell 1997, ix)

True, the authors continue, these thinkers did not call themselves “Empiricists.”

Nevertheless, they and the thinkers most directly influenced by them clearly conceived of themselves as seeking a more experiential basis for philosophy. In that sense, although they lacked the term, they conceived of themselves as empiricists. (Garrett and Barbanell 1997, x)

¹⁶ I have examined connections between the professionalization of philosophy in the late 19th century and the increasing use of HT terms in (Klein 2007).

and theoretical parts of this concept do not seem to have developed in parallel.

Here is what I mean. I take it that the structure of our *contemporary* concept of empiricism looks something like this:

EMPIRICISM AS (HT) CONCEPT, TODAY:

1. Thesis: genuine knowledge claims must be justified by appeal to experience, a view the philosophers mentioned in (2) developed in detailed ways.
2. History: Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are to be grouped together on the basis of their common commitment to the thesis mentioned in (1), epistemological empiricism.

But when this concept first started gaining currency in the late 19th century, the key thesis associated with Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume was *not* epistemological empiricism, but something closer to what we today call “naturalism”—to the view that scientific psychology should in some way play a foundational role for philosophy. That is certainly the case with Green. What is worse, those using the word “empiricism” to describe this form of naturalism often didn’t operate with a Locke-Berkeley-Hume historical narrative, as we will see in the next section.

4. The Rise of “Empiricism”

The first figure I can find who positively embraced the “empiricist” label—G. H. Lewes, in 1874—did so in virtue of a strident commitment to empirical

psychology as playing a central role in philosophy.¹⁷ Lewes did not, however, cite Locke-Berkeley-Hume as the key ancestors of this position.¹⁸

Some background on Lewes—he was a philosopher, literary critic, and psychologist who published a widely discussed, five-volume series, *Problems of Life and Mind*.¹⁹ The first two volumes were entitled *The Foundations of a Creed*, and Lewes *called* his creed “empiricism.” His use of the word was cheeky and defiant, as it had broadly pejorative connotations:

By way of preliminary I will ask permission to coin a term that will clearly designate the aspect of Metaphysics which renders the inquiry objectionable to scientific thinkers, no less than to ordinary minds, because it implies a disregard of experience; by isolating this aspect in a technical term we may rescue the other aspect which is acceptable to all.... If then the *Empirical* designates the province we include within the range of Science, the province we exclude may fitly be styled the *Metempirical*. The terms Empiricism, Empiricist, Empirical, although

¹⁷ This is not the first usage of “empiricism” in philosophy, of course. Indeed, Kuno Fischer’s use of the term in his 1865 *Geschichte der Neuern Philosophie: Descartes und seine Schule* (Fischer 1865) is remarkably close to our current usage. (The work was only translated to English in 1887; for an illustrative example of his use of “empiricism,” see Fischer 1887, 160.) But Fischer’s usage is attributional. Lewes is the first philosopher I can find writing in English who espouses the term, himself.

¹⁸ In an earlier, historical work (Lewes 1867, I.307), Lewes does say that Aristotle’s critics have been “prone to despise him as an empiricist”; but this seems to be a use of the term in its pejorative sense.

¹⁹ See (Lewes 1874a, b, 1877, 1879a, b). Lewes’s work was often discussed by, for example, William James who reviewed the first and second volumes of *Problems of Life and Mind* for the *Atlantic* and *Nation*, respectively; see (James 1987, 303-07, 42-45). James calls Lewes’s “first principles ... admirable,” but ridicules the book for offering up *only* first principles and no concrete psychological discoveries—ironic given Lewes’s recommendation that the “Method of Science” be employed in philosophy.

commonly employed by metaphysicians with contempt, to mark a mode of investigation which admits no higher source than Experience (by them often unwarrantably restricted to Sensation), may be accepted without demur, since even the flavour of contempt only serves to emphasize the distinction. (Lewes 1874b, vol I, pp. 15, 17, §§13, 14)

Lewes used the word “Empiricism” to mark what he called a “mode of investigation” where one treats experience as the only source of authority. This looks similar to the sort of epistemological empiricism we now associate with the British tradition.

The *point* of being an empiricist, for Lewes, was the application of what he called the “Method of Science” to metaphysics:

It is towards the transformation of Metaphysics by reduction to the Method of Science that these pages tend. Their object is to show that the Method which has hitherto achieved such splendid success in Science needs only to be properly interpreted and applied.... (Lewes 1874b, vol I, p. 5, §4)

Lewes was particularly concerned with the project of elevating empirical psychology to the status of a genuine science. But we see here that he was *also* concerned with what we would today call *naturalism*—with the view that “metaphysics,” insofar as it is worth pursuing, should be pursued as a branch of psychology. His idea is that *empiricists* want to make psychology a foundation for philosophy (Lewes 1874b, vol I, vi-viii).²⁰

²⁰ Fisher suggests to me in correspondence that G. F. Stout and Samuel Alexander are two figures of the era who were broadly supportive of psychology’s scientific status and of its relevance to

Lewes friend T. H. Huxley shares this idea that philosophy should begin with empirical research. The latter helps us make sense of the connection between naturalism and epistemological empiricism.

On whatever ground we term physiology, science, psychology is entitled to the same appellation; and the method of investigation which elucidates the true relations of the one set of phenomena will discover those of the other (Huxley 1879, 49)

This passage helps bring a meta-historical point into focus. For Huxley as well as for Lewes, psychology is based on observations of the human mind in the same way that physiology is based on observations of the body. So to commit to an epistemology that says that all substantive knowledge claims must be justified by experience is to commit to an observational (they would say “scientific”) methodology for studying the mind.

Thus epistemological empiricism is *part* of some late 19th century conceptions of empiricism. But note that figures like Lewes and Huxley were not interested in epistemology for epistemology’s sake, so to speak. What was *at stake* in defending this epistemological thesis is that it lent theoretical support for the naturalistic project we have seen them defending.

Now how does the theoretical part of the empiricist concept we have been discussing—the naturalist meta-philosophy and the sensationalist epistemology—

philosophy—contra the Oxonian idealists—but who might nevertheless demur in endorsing Lewes and Huxley’s claim that psychology is a *foundation* for philosophy. I would add William James to this list as well.

fit with the developing narrative that identifies Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume as key *historical* proponents of this tradition?

The answer is perhaps not as clean as one might expect. I can find one place where *Lewes* cites Locke-Berkeley-Hume (along with Condillac, Hartley and James Mill) as in some way ancestors of his project—he says they made key contributions to refining observational methods in psychology (Lewes 1879a, 4). But the reference is only a passing one. In Lewes’s earlier, more explicitly historical works he does not group Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume into any special group. And *Huxley*, I think interestingly, does not seem to recognize the Locke-Berkeley-Hume triad *at all*. Here is Huxley again, from his 1879 Hume book:

[P]hilosophers are likely to be successful in their inquiries, in proportion as they are familiar with the application of scientific method to less abstruse subjects. ... And it is accordant with this presumption, that the men who have made the most important positive additions to philosophy, such as *Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant*, not to mention more recent examples, have been deeply imbued with the spirit of physical science; and, in some cases such as those of Descartes and Kant, have been largely acquainted with its details. ... In truth, the laboratory is the fore-court of the temple of philosophy; and whoso has not offered sacrifices and undergone purification there, has little chance of admission into the sanctuary. (Huxley 1879, 49 – 50)

Notice that the important philosophical predecessors to Hume are Descartes and Spinoza, for Huxley.²¹ He elsewhere says Hume is a “spiritual child and continuator” (58) of Locke. But of the moderns, it is Descartes—the scientist who also did philosophy—to whom Huxley most often turns to help place Hume’s views into context.²²

So here is the situation. Lewes apparently coined the term “empiricism” to denote a philosophical thesis closely connected to what we now call “naturalism”—viz., the view that metaphysics should be “reduced” to the science of psychology. I have appealed to Huxley to help us get a further sketch of what this form of naturalism is supposed to look like. But Lewes and Huxley do not have a consistent view (between them) about exactly how this form of naturalism hooks up with a narrative about early modern philosophy.

To flesh out the historical narrative, we do well to turn to Jowett’s erstwhile student, T. H. Green.

5. Green’s Historical Narrative

I suspect that it is T. H. Green who is chiefly responsible for wedding Lewes’s theoretical “empiricism”—which I have characterized as something closer to what we today would call “naturalism”—to a lineage of early modern philosophers. Green’s purposes were critical, as he explicitly sought to saddle Lewes with the same mistakes he (Green) claimed to have identified in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Three years after Green’s 1874 *Introduction*, he published a

²¹ And Hume is the “parent of Kant” (58).

²² Descartes was a favorite figure of Huxley’s; see (Huxley 1870/1894, 1874/1894).

direct attack on “empirical psychology,” entitled “Mr. Herbert Spencer and Mr. G. H. Lewes: Their Application of the Doctrine of Evolution to Thought.” Here are the opening lines of that piece:

At the conclusion of an inquiry, recently published, into the course and result of that philosophical movement which is represented by the names of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, I ventured to speak of the systems of philosophy, which since their time have found favour in England, as anachronistic, and to point by way of contrast to Kant and Hegel, as representing a real advance in metaphysical inquiry. ... With those who look to ‘mental philosophy’ for discoveries corresponding to those of the physical sciences, the German writers referred to have become almost a by-word for unprofitableness, while the ‘empirical psychology’ of our own country has been ever showing more of the self-confidence, and winning more of the applause, which belong to advancing conquest. It had seemed to me, indeed, that a clear exposition, such as I sought to furnish, of the state of the question in metaphysics, as Hume left it, would suffice to show that it has not been met but ignored by his English followers.

(Green 1877-1878/1894, 373)

Green’s claim to have written his “Introduction” as a way to warn away those who treat “‘mental philosophy’” as a kind of “‘physical science’” is not hard to find support for in the *Introduction* itself. For one thing, at the start of the *Introduction*, Green says he is trying to show that Hume’s “successors” in “England and Scotland” have been unable to look his skepticism “in the face” (Green 1874/1894, §3, 2). Green’s choice of words for describing those

“successors” is deliberate—he calls their project “empirical psychology,” and refers to them as “psychologists,” “popular psychologists,” and associationists (people who “have gone on elaborating Hume’s doctrine of association”).

I think we get an especially clear insight into Green’s project from his discussion of “empirical psychology” at §§198 – 200 of the 1874 “Introduction.” Though this passage occurs almost halfway through the work, its position in the whole is important. Green is of course writing an introduction to *Hume*; but he has been discussing *Locke and Berkeley* through §194. So the transition to Hume from §195 – 202 finally gives a direct story about why Green thinks it important to engage with *Hume* specifically. He writes:

The quarrel of the physiologist with the metaphysician is, in fact, due to an *ignorantia elenchi* on the part of the former, for which the behaviour of English ‘metaphysicians,’ in attempting to assimilate their own procedure to that of natural philosophers, and thus to win the popular acceptance which these alone can fairly look for, has afforded too much excuse. The question really at issue is not between two co-ordinate sciences, as if a theory of the human body were claiming also to be a theory of the human soul, and the theory of the soul were resisting the aggression. The question is, whether the conceptions which all the departmental sciences alike presuppose shall have an account given of them or no. For dispensing with such an account altogether (life being short) there is much to be said, if only men would or could dispense with it; but the physiologist, when he claims that his science should supersede metaphysic, is not dispensing with it, but rendering it in a preposterous way. He accounts for the formal conceptions in question, in

other words for thought as it is common to all the sciences, as sequent upon the antecedent facts which his science ascertains—the facts of the animal organisation. But these conceptions—the relations of cause and effect, &c.—are necessary to constitute the facts. They are not an *ex post facto* interpretation of them, but an interpretation without which there would be no ascertainable facts at all. (Green 1874/1894, 164-65)

Psychologists pretend to dispense with speculative metaphysics altogether, according to Green, and instead offer their work as a kind of scientific account of scientific knowledge.²³ But any would-be science of science must leave out an adequate account of the “formal conceptions”—he had in mind the familiar run of Kantian categories, it seems—employed in the sciences. This is because *qua* science, psychology must *use* the very concepts it pretends to explain. Therefore, psychology can never provide the sort of meta-criticism of scientific knowledge that a priori metaphysics provides, for Green. My purpose here is not to spell out the details of his argument, but rather to draw attention to a crucial goal of Green’s analysis of Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume—namely, to undermine the pretensions of his *contemporaries* to substitute empirical psychology for metaphysics.

So where are we? Lewes adopted the disparaging phrase “empiricism” to describe his own naturalistic project (in 1874), and we saw Huxley recruiting Hume five years later (but not Locke or Berkeley) as a naturalist pioneer. Green

²³ This conception of psychology is surely indebted to Green’s reading of the preface to the *Treatise*, where Hume says he wants to develop a “natural science of man.” Indeed, Green’s sharpest attack on psychology is entitled “Can There Be a Natural Science of Man?” See (Green 1882a; Green 1882b; Green and Bradley 1882).

strung the Locke-Berkeley-Hume *triad* together (also in 1874) as a way to criticize the historical progression of this naturalist idea, and then directly adapts his criticism to Lewes (and to Herbert Spencer) in a multi-part essay published in 1877 – 1878.

Now, Green's *basis* for grouping Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume was not that they shared naturalist philosophical aims. Green saw their philosophy as the “progressive” development of a core idea, an idea I have called “the reality principle,” and which is illustrated in the following passage.²⁴ Here, Green is summarizing his own treatment of Locke:

We have now sufficiently explored ... [Locke's] system which it was Hume's mission to try to make consistent with itself. We have found that it is governed throughout by the antithesis between what is given to consciousness—that in regard to which the mind is passive—as the supposed real on the one side, and what is ‘invented,’ ‘created,’ ‘superinduced’ by the mind on the other Stripped of these superinductions, nothing has been found to remain of it but that of which nothing can be said—a chaos of unrelated, and therefore unmeaning, *individua*. (Green 1874/1894, §153, 31 – 32)

Locke's system is “governed throughout” by the principle that we can draw a distinction between reality and fantasy by appealing to a distinction between what is given in sense and what is created by the mind, on Green's reading. This is the reality principle. On the one hand, we get genuine information about reality

²⁴ I have given a more detailed account of Green's articulation of the reality principle in (Klein 2009, 418 ff.).

through what is passively stamped on our minds in sensation. On the other, we get fantastical representations when the mind manipulates material it first receives from the senses.²⁵

This is the core principle for which Green saw Locke, Berkeley, and Hume as “vehicles” (§4, 4). Green cited the reality principle throughout his discussion, and indeed referred back to it in his later attack on Lewes:

We are thus brought to the contradiction which underlies all Locke’s doctrine, and which current philosophy must show that it has overcome if it is to be proof against the charge of being anachronistic—the contradiction between that conception of the real on the one hand [viz., the real as what is received in simple impressions], which alone allows of its being knowable, but at the same time, by finding it [reality] in relations, implies that it [reality] is a work of thought, and a conception which leaves it the unknown negative of consciousness on the other hand. Only if the latter conception is the true one, is there any reason for taking feeling, on the ground of the mind’s supposed passivity in it, to be the organ which reports the real; only if the former conception be the true one, has feeling anything real to report. ... It was the presence of this contradiction in Locke’s system that led to its disintegration at the hands of Berkeley and Hume. (Green 1894, I.379)

Green’s way of picking out the Lockean tradition has the structure of what I am calling an HT concept. He identifies a theoretical principle—what I’m calling “the

²⁵ Other passages where Green treats the reality principle as central to Locke’s philosophy include §51, 113, and 194. *See also* (Green 1882, 15-16), where he (curiously) cites II.xii.1 of Locke’s essay (Locke 1700/1975) as a basis for attributing such a principle (he might have done better to cite II.xxx).

reality principle”—as the core commitment that ties Locke, Berkeley, and Hume together.²⁶ The purported defectiveness in this principle is supposed to augur the tradition’s impending downfall.

What role, then, did Green play in the advent of our concept of *empiricism*? Unfortunately, there is yet one more difficulty in answering this question. Green never actually calls anyone an “empiricist,” so far as I can find. The term “*empiricism*” does appear in the “Introduction,” but far too rarely to serve as any organizing concept—I can find only four occurrences in the entire 371-page work (Green 1874/1894, §118, §19, §224, §27). Neither “*empiricism*” nor “*empiricist*” appears at all in Green’s lengthy discussions of Hobbes, Spencer, Lewes, Mill, or Kant, either. That is, neither word appears in the first two volumes of the *Collected Works* (Green 1894), save for the four mentioned instances in the “Introduction” to Hume.

In each of the four instances where Green does use “*empiricism*,” he uses the word not to associate Berkeley and Hume with Locke, but to associate Locke with philosophical views to which the *common person* subscribes. What is more, it is clear that Green does not have the accompanying contrast-concept of “*rationalism*” in the way we now use it, and indeed he actually called Locke and Hume “*Rationalists*”:

The genius of Locke and Hume was their readiness to follow the lead of

Ideas: their spirit was the spirit of Rationalism—the spirit which, however

²⁶ Brink is one of the few commentators who accurately pinpoints what I am calling the “reality principle” as the core philosophical commitment (and alleged failure) of empiricism. He writes, “In this tradition, reality is associated with simple ideas delivered to the senses and contrasted with the workmanship of the understanding and relations, which are in some sense illusory or conventional,” (Brink 2003, 10).

baffled and forced into inconsistent admissions, is still governed by the faith that all things may ultimately be understood. (Green 1874/1894, §5, 5)

“Rationalism” contrasts here not with empiricism in any recognizable sense, but with a religious orientation in philosophy that takes some facts to be explicable only by revealed theology. So whatever Green meant by “empiricist,” it was clearly not a word meant to contrast with his label “Rationalist”—for he used both in connection with Locke.

So Green did not use the rhetoric, at least, of employing “empiricists” and “rationalists” to demarcate people according to their answer to a key epistemological question.²⁷ This is important because it suggests that at least in 1874, Green did not expect his readers to understand “rationalist” and “empiricist” to characterize either opposed positions in the theory of knowledge or opposed movements in early modern philosophy.

What is more, Green made no attempt to distinguish Locke, Berkeley, and Hume from people we now call “Cartesian Rationalists”, under *any* name. The person, and position, with which Green contrasted Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume is Kant and Kantianism. But Kant does not play the role of *synthesizer* of two traditions. Rather, Green says that Hume “...with full and reasoned articulation asks the question, which the other [Kant] with equal fulness [sic] seeks to answer” (Green 1874/1894, §3, 3). (Green never mentions Descartes in the “Introduction”;

²⁷ Here is evidence that our contemporary interpretation of empiricism is closely linked to our contemporary interpretation of rationalism. The *Stanford Encyclopedia* does not have an independent entry for “empiricism”—they only have an entry for “empiricism vs. rationalism.” Note that the entry characterizes the debate between the schools as fundamentally epistemological: “The dispute between rationalism and empiricism concerns the extent to which we are dependent upon sense experience in our effort to gain knowledge” (Markie 2004).

he once mentions Spinoza, saying that Hume showed Berkeley to be “a Spinozist” concerning substance (Green 1874/1894, §341, 293); and he mentions Leibniz on two early pages as an influence on Kant (Green 1874/1894, §2-3.)

I take myself to have established the following. First, Green manufactured a tradition that was meant to extend all the way to cover his *contemporary* philosophical opponents. Second, like our contemporary interpretation of empiricism, Green’s *conception* of that tradition consists of a historical group of philosophers (Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume) who are supposed to have developed a core thesis—what I have called “the reality principle.” But third, although Green’s tradition has a similar structure to our contemporary concept of empiricism (that is, both are instances of HT concepts), the two are not precisely the *same* concept. This is because the particular thesis that ties Green’s tradition together is not the same as the thesis implicated in our contemporary concept of empiricism. In Green’s hands, the thesis that his tradition was to have jointly developed was a metaphysical thesis—viz., the reality principle. In contrast, what characterizes the empiricist tradition as we now understand it is a shared *epistemological* commitment—viz., to the view that knowledge must be justified by appeal to experience.

I began by canvassing an attack on the scientific status of empirical psychology by Green’s teacher, Benjamin Jowett. That attack, jammed in the middle of his translator’s introduction to the *Theaetetus*, seemed to come from nowhere. But in light of the episodes we subsequently examined, Jowett’s attack can be regarded as the culmination of a long-running dispute between empirically-oriented figures like Lewes and Huxley who saw the new science of

psychology as offering a more rigorous starting-point for philosophy, and Hegelians like Green and Caird, who denied that psychology could replace speculative metaphysics, and who doubted that psychology could even be a proper science at all. The former group often adopted the label “empiricism,”²⁸ whereas the latter identified a kindred tradition that included Locke, Berkeley, and Hume as central figures.

I close with a passage from Richard Rorty, who often claimed that our current understanding of history impacts the way we practice philosophy:

The self-image of a philosopher—his identification of himself as such (rather than as, perhaps, an historian or a mathematician or a poet)—depends almost entirely upon how he sees the history of philosophy. It depends upon which figures he imitates, and which episodes and movements he disregards. So a new account of the history of philosophy is a challenge which cannot be ignored. (Rorty 1982, 41)

I agree that a philosopher’s self-image is likely to be *tied up* with a particular way of understanding the history of philosophy. But I do not agree that a philosopher’s self-image often or even typically “depends” on his or her view of history.

Sometimes it does. But at least as often, the position a philosopher wishes to take in this or that contemporary research project drives the understanding of history.

²⁸ One should also mention Alexander Bain and William James as figures who were broadly sympathetic with the Lewes/Huxley way of understanding psychology’s relationship to philosophy, and who also adopted the label “empiricist” early on. See, e.g., (Bain 1889, James 1884).

At any rate, in the dispute I have examined in this essay, I suggest that it is more plausible to see the controversy over psychology's scientific status as driving the historical narrative, rather than the other way around.

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