Introduction

The present study concerns the epistemology and ontology of John Locke (1632–1704), one of the pioneers of British empiricism, and David Hume (1711–1776), who brings it to its logical culmination. Although both these British philosophers belong to the same empiricist movement and agree in respect of some points, we shall mark the cardinal differences in their epistemological and ontological positions. With regard to Locke, we shall notice that on the one hand, along with the dualism of Descartes, he takes the Cartesian priority of the mind for granted, while on the other, he makes it his objective to emphasise matter, which is the basis of scientific knowledge. Locke’s effort to reconcile these two opposite trends through empiricism, which Descartes tries through rationalism, results in various contradictions. On the ground of these contradictions of Locke’s philosophy, Hume purports to prove that
empiricism cannot lead us to any knowledge regarding matters of fact or existence.

We shall observe that though Locke, under the profound influence of the rationalist thinker Descartes, accepts that what we directly receive through sense-experience are only 'simple ideas', nevertheless, he attempts to account for our knowledge of the material world by introducing the 'complex ideas' of substance, modes and relations, which are formed out of the 'simple ideas' through the rational operations of the mind. In order to explain our knowledge of the self, God and the logical relations of ideas, we shall find him accommodating intuitive knowledge and demonstrative knowledge also in his empiricist framework. In contrast, we shall notice that though Hume also takes account of the rational knowledge, he confines it to the realm of 'Relations of Ideas' only. According to him, the existence of anything can be known only through sense-perception and as sense-perception furnishes us with mental, momentary 'impressions' only, he denies the possibility of knowing any enduring substances - material or mental.

Through a critical analysis of the epistemological and ontological positions of Locke and Hume, we shall try to bring out the following implications.

First, Locke contradicts himself when on the one hand, because of the unbridgeable gulf between idea and reality, he regards material substance and causal connection as 'unknown' and on the other hand, he strives to imply their knowledge through his accounts of the ideas of 'primary qualities' and 'power'. Similarly, though Hume claims the independent realities of the 'impressions and ideas', all his theories of matter, mind and causal necessity
presuppose the existence of an identical mind.

Second, the epistemological positions of Locke and Hume are actually the logical upshot of their ontological assumptions.

Third, Hume's epistemic division of 'Matters of Fact' and 'Relations of Ideas', when viewed as a division of Existential and Non-existential knowledge, can be traced to Locke's division of knowledge in terms of 'Co-existence', 'Real existence', 'Identity or diversity' and 'Relation' – the first two involving existence, and the last two dealing only with the logical relations between ideas, without concern for existence:

We shall try to carry out our comparative and critical study while endeavouring to establish the above mentioned points, in the light of the three methodological assumptions. These may be stated in the words of Suman Gupta as follows:

"1. We draw a distinction between what a philosopher claims to be doing and what he is actually doing.

2. We regard ontology and epistemology as logically inseparable in a consistent philosophical system.

3. And lastly, in order to uncover what a philosopher is actually doing we have to historically trace the ontological and epistemological assumptions of his theory." 

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In conformity with these methodological assumptions, we shall attempt to comprehend the actual positions of Locke and Hume by tracing them historically from their predecessors.

In the first chapter of the thesis, we shall explore the accounts of substance, causation and knowledge in the philosophies of Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.) and Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650), which go a long way to shape the thoughts of Locke. Similarly, in the third chapter, we shall begin our analysis of Hume’s position with an enquiry into Bishop Berkeley’s (1685 – 1753) criticism of Locke in respect of Locke’s abstract general ideas, distinction of primary and secondary qualities and his realism. All of the these, we shall find, have direct bearings on Hume’s thoughts.

In the second chapter, we shall discuss how Locke’s epistemological and ontological views develop under the diverse influences of Aristotle, Descartes and the scientists of his time. One of Locke’s objectives being to validate scientific knowledge, we shall find him acknowledging its two essential prerequisites, namely, material substance, and necessary causal connections. The three basic presuppositions of scientific knowledge, in Suman Gupta’s words, are as follows:

“1. There is an objective reality - a reality which exists independent of consciousness.

2. There are universal and necessary causal laws which operate in the objective reality.
3. *The objective reality, with its causal connections is knowable through man's practical activity.*

We shall observe how Locke, in his theory of matter, adopts some of the ideas of Aristotle and Descartes, and how he brings modifications in his theory in accordance with the scientific findings of that time.

Several aspects of Locke's theory of matter such as the distinctions between simple and complex ideas, substance and qualities, primary qualities and secondary qualities, and nominal and real essence will be subjected to analysis and critical examination. In this context, we shall take into account the views of a number of interpreters, old and modern, such as G. W. Leibniz, B. Berkeley, G. Ryle, Y. W. Yolton, A. I. Aaron, R. S. Woolhouse, M. R. Ayers, J. L. Mackie, Maurice Cornforth, W. V. Leyden, Adam Morton and Suman Gupta.

In the third chapter of our thesis, we shall notice how under the influence of Berkeley's thoughts, Hume discards the materialistic side of Locke's dualistic empiricism, and accedes to the idealistic side only i.e., all that sense-experience provides us with are 'ideas', which Hume calls 'impressions'. In addition to this, he also assumes that being given through sense-perception is the sole criterion of existence, and consequently claims that 'impressions and ideas' (or 'perceptions') are the only existents of the world.

We shall analyse those arguments of Hume, which he applies, in agreement with Berkeley, to reject Locke's abstract general ideas standing for material substances and their modes. We shall expound and examine his views refuting Locke's concept of material

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substance existing continuously and independently of our mind. We shall find how, on the ground that all that sense-perception acquaints us with, are ‘internal and perishing’ impressions, he repudiates our belief in external enduring material substances. Having argued that the belief in material substance is unwarranted, we shall see how he attempts to explain the origin of this common belief through his principle of association: how he brings in his three laws of Association, viz. laws of resemblance, contiguity and causality, which bind the otherwise unconnected ideas in our mind; and not finding the laws sufficient in themselves to work, how he supplements them with the mental operations of memory and imagination.

In the course of our analysis and examination of Hume’s position, we shall consult the views of N. K. Smith, A. J. Ayer, A. D. Lindsay, J. P. Wright, T. E. Jessop, D. E. Flage, R. G. Fogelin, J. Noxon, G. Strawson, J. Bricke, J. Biro, W. W. Carlile, G. Novack and Suman Gupta. We shall find that while some of them agree with the basic stand-point of Hume, some are critical about his position.

We shall elucidate and examine Locke’s theory of the self in the second part of the second chapter of our thesis. We shall focus on the issue of the identity of the self, which poses a problem for Locke even though like Descartes, he asserts the reality of mental substance. We shall see how he strives to resolve the problem by defining the self in terms of consciousness. Critically analysing the points in respect of which he differs from Descartes, we shall try to find out whether on ultimate analysis, his ‘self’ commensurates with the Cartesian self or not. We shall take into account the
objections raised by Jonathan Bennett, Thomas Reid and Bishop Butler against Locke’s theory of personal identity.

While discussing Hume’s theory of self in the third chapter, we shall find that, he denies the reality of a simple, identical self, on the same ground that there is no empirical evidence for it. In his contention, looking within ourselves, we do not come across anything but succeeding ‘perceptions’; consequently, he reduces the self to a ‘bundle of perceptions’. In this context, we shall expound his attempt to explain the continuity of mind, like the continuity of matter, through the same mechanism of association. We shall note the difference of purpose which ‘memory’ serves in Locke’s and Hume’s theories of self. We shall also mark the difference in the roles which the association of ideas plays in the philosophical systems of Locke and Hume.

With regard to Hume’s doctrine of association through which he endeavours to explain all our fundamental beliefs (in enduring matter, selves and necessary causal connections), we shall raise the following question. Can Hume explain any of the concepts comprised under it, such as resemblance, causation, memory, imagination, and the like, without presupposing a unitary self?

This very question will give rise to the controversy: Is Hume a realist or a subjective idealist? As realism only demands the mind-independent existence of the objects of knowledge without making any claim about the nature of objects, we shall find that philosophers of different standpoints try to interpret Hume as a realist. Subjective idealism, on the other hand, claims the dependence of the objects of knowledge on the knowing mind. Hence, whether Hume can be regarded as a subjective idealist or not depends on
proving the existence of an abiding self or mind in his system. The decision about the basic position of Hume will be taken only after weighing the arguments on both sides of the issue.

As to the existence of God, we shall examine whether Locke can prove it as an exceptional case of demonstrative knowledge. In the context of Hume, we shall try to relate his denial of knowledge about God with his general position in philosophy.

In the second part of the second chapter, we shall discuss the role of intuition and demonstration in Locke’s philosophy. We shall consider how far he is consistent in his empiricist standpoint in grading intuitive and demonstrative knowledge as the higher degrees of knowledge, and sensitive knowledge as the lowest one. It will also be examined whether or not his definition of knowledge is compatible with his accounts of the existence of material objects, self and God. In ascribing only probability to sensitive knowledge, and certainty to intuitive and demonstrative knowledge, we shall observe how Locke’s views come close to those of Hume. However, we shall mark the differences in Locke’s and Hume’s interpretations of ‘probability’ with regard to sensitive knowledge, and ‘certainty’ concerning rational knowledge.

Hume’s views about rational knowledge are contained under ‘Relations of Ideas’, the second part of the third chapter. Here, we shall observe that though Hume accepts the certainty of demonstrative (or mathematical) knowledge, unlike Locke, he denies the ‘instructiveness’ of this kind of knowledge. We shall also note how he brings the faculty of reasoning into question and on that account, reduces rational knowledge also into probability.

In consideration of the immense importance of causal connec-
tions, both epistemologically and ontologically, we shall discuss this issue separately in the fourth chapter. We shall examine how far Locke’s exposition of causation is in accordance with his account of material substance in terms of primary qualities, real essence and ‘power’, and how far he succeeds in explaining our knowledge of necessary causal connections. In the context of Hume, similarly, we shall enquire whether he interprets causal necessity in conformity with his denial of enduring material substances. In this connection, we shall examine the views of different philosophers, who react differently to Hume’s interpretation of causal necessity. For example, we shall reckon with the defending attempts of J. P. Wright and G. Strawson, as well as the criticisms of A. Rosenberg, B. Stroud, W. W. Carlile and G. Novack.

In our concluding chapter, we shall review the overall positions of Locke and Hume in epistemology and ontology. Our attempt will be to assess their positions both from within and outside their systems.

This is the outline of the contents of our thesis, which we shall organise under the following five chapters:

1. Historical Background

2. Analysis and Examination of the Epistemology and Ontology of John Locke

3. Analysis and Examination of the Epistemology and Ontology of David Hume

4. The Category of Causation in Locke and Hume

5. Conclusion