

What is Empiricism? Critically Evaluate its Value When Writing History

Zaryan D. Kareem

Salahaddin University, Collage of Arts

Received: April 02, 2023; Received in revised form: April 11, 2023; Accepted: April 29, 2023; Published by OTS Canadian Journal.

Abstract— Empiricism is one of the crucial theories for writing history which appeared in late nineteenth century while it focuses only on primary sources and sensory experience. It uses an inductive method of reasoning, which means moving from the specific to the general. Empiricism has become one of the most popular methods that has been used by a large number of historians and academics in the last four centuries which they argued that only primary or original sources should be used by historians. Empiricists believe that investigating primary sources and use only evidence for writing history, however, rationalists believe that examining past events can lead to truth because history is always written by elites of society. In addition, the historian's position is connected with statements about history this demonstrate the association of empiricism with relativism. Finally, it can be argued that historians cannot obtain facts without evidence, although historian's interpretation is necessary for writing history while criticising the documents may obtain the truth. However, historian's explanations can also be problematic, because as empiricists argue their perspectives tend to be a fiction and they cannot agree on a single explanation.

Keywords—Empiricism, value, history, critically evaluate.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are many approaches to the writing of history. A number of new methods arose in the twentieth century, which saw a variety of new historical methods used in writing history. Empiricism is one such method, and has played a vital role in the writing of history particularly after the nineteenth century. Its use made the study of history more academic because it focuses on the use of evidence. It is a theory which focuses on primary sources and suggests that true knowledge can only come from sensory experience. In addition, empiricists argue that historian's interpretations are fiction and their explanations

are not important to the writing of history. However, empiricism has also been criticised by many historians whom believe in using the historian's perspective to obtain facts. This essay will focus on the value of empiricism for the writing of history.

This paper will begin by discussing the origins of the word empiricism. It will then provide a definition and discuss how empiricism was first used in writing history. Next, it will go on to explain how historians developed the use of empiricism in their writing. After this, this essay will elaborate on the value of empiricism in writing history and examine its strengths and

OTS Canadian Journal

weaknesses. It will highlight the importance of using primary sources and historian's interpretations of these in finding out the truth about events and people. Finally, this paper will show that although evidence always has some problems, finding the truth is difficult without them. However, the historian's interpretation of evidence is always important to discovering the facts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Meaning and Definition of Empiricism

There are a number of different arguments about the meaning and origins of empiricism. Firstly, the origins of the word must be known. The word comes from ancient Greek, and means 'experience' (Suchting, 2012). It entered the English language in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Kant used it and introduced it as a philosophic term in his book *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Suchting, 2012).

Before discussing the value of empiricism, an illustration is required. It is a theory of knowledge, an epistemology, and a technique for historical enquiry (Green and Troup, 1999). Hersh states that empiricists believe that knowledge can only be based on either primary sources or sensory experience (Hersh, 2009). Empiricism is a strategy which manages the correspondence hypothesis of truth and the connection between information and facts (Davies, 2003). This can have ruinous ramifications for knowledge which has been broadly held (Davies, 2003). Empiricism simply means that all knowledge derived from experience or an independence of experience (Suchting, 2012).

In addition, the vital characteristic of historical knowledge is proof, which means evidence (Davies, 2003). Furthermore, Hankinson claims that according to empiricist thought there is no compelling reason to hunt down regular associations between things. Moreover, empiricism is a goal to offer records of reason and the empiricists make use of forerunner reason while it is fitting to receive a Pyrrhonian

demeanour to forerunner reason (Davies, 2003). Willer claims that there is a strong association between empiricism and conservation because empiricism is concerned with finding facts about the past (Willer and Willer, 1986). Finally, Green believes that the core of empiricism is the thorough examination and analysis of historical evidence using references. It uses an inductive method of reasoning, which means moving from the specific to the general (Green and Troup, 1999).

The Origins of Empiricism

The origins of empiricism are also controversial. According to Hersh, empiricism first emerged in the seventeenth century (Hersh, 2009). In addition, the empirical approach to historical research emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the 'scientific revolution', and originated with Francis Bacon who believed that information ought to be derived from perceptions of the material world (Green and Troup, 1999). However, Kant used empiricism for the first time and believed that all knowledge starts with experience, is inferred or emerges out of experience (Suchting, 2012). Falkenstein states that it is appropriate to say Kant was an empiricist (Falkenstein, 1997).

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, many scholars used empiricism in their research and historical writing. For example, Edward Gibbon was the first historian to use empiricism in his book, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This work focused on the accessible secondary writings while he gave reference to his statements, connections and explanations (Davies, 2003). Rank is one of the historians who strongly believed in empiricism. He argued that only primary or original sources should be used by historians, especially those which were created at the time of the event being examined (Green and Troup, 1999). Empiricism was the most effective school of historical thought in the twentieth century (Green and Troup, 1999).

OTS Canadian Journal

The Development of Empiricism

Many historians and scholars have taken an empirical approach in their works. Rank was an empiricist and a member of the American Historical Association while he was against universalistic and materialistic (Novick, 2005). Rank believed that historical advancement could not be judged by rational or moral standards, and can be described as a total philosophical idealist (Novick, 2005). Rank's empiricism comes from his phrase for 'judging the past' which means 'as it was really was'. This phrase simply means determining what really happened or what primary sources reveal to be true. This is why Emerton suggests that Rank's works can be seen as 'the doctrine of true historical method' (Green and Troup, 1999).

However, Rank has also been criticised by a number of historians. Evans suggests that Rank's idea was misunderstood, and that Rank tried to understand the inner being of the past (Green and Troup, 1999). In addition, a number of German historians believe that Rank's ideas were the direct opposite of non-philosophical empiricism (Novick, 2005). Moreover, Hersh argues that new facts can always be found by investigating the primary sources, while Rank believed that historians cannot judge the past using their own particular criteria (Hersh, 2009). Finally, Carr believed that historians should be judged themselves before using their sources (Carr, 1986).

The Value and Features of Empiricism

The value of empiricism in writing history is controversial. As mentioned previously, empirical research should be based on primary sources. This idea has many problems, as Leary wrote: "The meaning of the data may always be problematic but that does not mean that we could operate effectively without it (Leary, 1991)." Davies states that the fact based on evidence which means only investigating primary sources could obtain the facts on the past events (Davies, 2003). However, Marwick criticised Davies by claiming that the materiality of the past is not important,

and that history is the construction of historians themselves (White, 1995).

In addition, empiricism focuses on the use of primary sources. Green argues that the use of evidences leads to the discovery of facts (Green and Troup, 1999). Evans claims that the historians should use only primary sources and avoid using secondary sources while they have to test the sources (Evans, 2000). In other words, criticising primary sources can give historians an accurate view of the past. In addition, Elton in his book *The Practice of History* claims that using secondary sources should be avoided, and the truth can only be obtained by using real historical methods (Elton, 2002).

By contrast, sometimes theory can obtain the facts; however, empirical research may never show theoretical contentions (Leary, 1991). Marwick also criticised the use of primary sources by investigating who had written the source and why (Marwick, 1989). Historians should thus always investigate the author of the documents they are using. Furthermore, Green claims that history has always been written by the elite of society, and they did not write about all people. As a result, their writings cannot be considered a true reflection of the past (Green and Troup, 1999). Another problem with sources is their date of creation, because this is often unknown (Marwick, 1989). Moreover documents tend to be damaged or destroyed over time, which make it difficult for new historians to use them (Green and Troup, 1999). Different primary sources can also tell different stories about the same event, and it can be difficult to uncover which is closest to the truth (Hersh, 2009). Finally, historians can face difficulties in understanding sources, especially if they use foreign or archaic language (Whitford, 1989).

Another feature of empiricism is the idea that all knowledge comes from sensory experiences, as has been discussed. Davies states that theories should be based on empirical knowledge. This means that facts should come before hypotheses and general rules while theories should not be constructed solely on pure reason. However, Hankinson questioned empiricists by saying that they prevent the likelihood from claiming finding anything about the hidden things (Hankinson,

OTS Canadian Journal

1987). Whilst theories may be true, empiricists just trust in what is evident to the senses (Hankinson, 1987). This suggests that facts can be obtained from the historian's imagination, and not only from their sensory experiences.

Objectivism is another feature of empiricism. Hersh believes that this is another of the advantages of empiricism which can create a kind of historical truth (Hersh, 2009). In addition, Appleby states that "The past cannot impose its truth upon the historian, but because the past is constantly generating its own material remains, it can and does constrain those who seek to find out what once took place (Appleby, 1994)."

Elton argues that prior views and opinions should not be imposed upon the historical evidence by historians (Elton, 2002). Although historian's interpretations could be totally unrelated, their contrasting viewpoints can definitely not be (Appleby et al., 1994). However, historian's interpretations are necessary to obtain facts. Abrams (as cited in Green) argues that each account contains certain explanations on the grounds that historians should choose how to manage the evidence, while the device of narrating a story permits historians to dodge discriminating investigations of the theorising supporting structure (Green and Troup, 1999).

This prompts discussion of another important aspect of empiricism: its association with relativism. Relativism is the conviction that by definition truth is unattainable, and the historian's position is connected with statements about history (Green and Troup, 1999). However, Hersh states that the present cannot play a significant role in finding out the truth about the past, because historians thinking come from now when they work on archives (Hersh, 2009). The tragedy of documentary and oral records is the base of interpretation, which demonstrates the ethical insufficiency of a qualified subjectivist stance (Green and Troup, 1999). This suggests that historians may always have their own interpretations of events, which may obtain the facts.

The connection between empiricism and the inductive method of reasoning is controversial. Davies points out that the link between them is that empiricism is a theory of knowledge and

induction is a method of organizing knowledge, while individuals should learn just the particulars if knowledge comes from experience (Davies, 2003). Induction is thus the thinking process that arranges and comprehends this experience and classifies the information picked up from the senses into ideas.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, empiricists see all knowledge as coming from sensory experience, and believe that facts can only be obtained from primary sources. It was an effective method used in the twentieth century. Many historians have used empirical theory in their research. Empirical research has made the study of history more truthful and effective by giving priority to primary sources and documents. In other words, empiricism made history into a more academic discipline. The modern study of history has a more academic centre as empiricists investigate documents to discover the reality.

However, the major criticism of empiricism is that problems can arise with primary sources and documents, and historians need to investigate the authors of documents before using them. Histories should also be aware that different primary sources can portray the same event differently, and sometimes they can be difficult to understand. Another problem with this approach is that it fails to take historians interpretations into account. This paper has argued that historians cannot obtain facts without evidence, although historian's interpretation is necessary for writing history while criticising the documents may obtain the truth. However historian's explanations can also be problematic, because as empiricists argue their perspectives tend to be a fiction and they cannot agree on a single explanation.

REFERENCES

- Appleby, J. L. Hunt and M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (London, 1994), p. 255.
Carr, E. H. *What is History*, (penguin books, 1986), pp. 21-24.

OTS Canadian Journal

- Davies, S. *Empiricism and History*, (New York, 2003), pp. 5-24.
- Elton, G. R. *The Practice of History*, 2nd edition, (Blackwell, 2002), pp. 42-84.
- Evans, R. J. *In defence of history* (London, 2000), Pp. 18.
- Falkenstein, L. 'Kant's Empiricism', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 50, no. 3 (1997), p. 547.
- Green and K. Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth- Century History and Theory* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 1-8.
- Hankinson, R. J. 'Causes and Empiricism: A Problem in the Interpretation of Late Greek Medical Method', *Phronesis*, 32, no. 3 (1987), pp. 330-343.
- Hersh, D. *Qwtabxanakany Mejw 'Schools of History'*, (Slemani, 2009), p. 19-124.
- Leary, D. E.' History, and Empiricism, and Pseudorationally', *Psychological Inquiry*, 2, no. 4 (1991), P. 351.
- Marwick, *The Nature of History*, (London, 1989), pp. 223-224.
- Novick, P. *The Noble Dream, objectivity question, and the American Historical profession*, 2nd edition (New York, 2005), pp. 26-28.
- Suchting, W. 'Empiricism', *Historical Materialism*, 20, no. 3 (2012), pp. 213-214.
- Whitford, W. C.'Critical Empiricism', *Law&Social inquiry*, 14, no.1 (winter, 1989), pp.61-64.
- Willer D. and J. Willer, *Systematic Empiricism Critique of a Pseudoscience* (London, 1973), p. 5.