Suyi Liu

Paper 2

Intro to History of Modern Philosophy

Essay on Locke’s Philosophical View regarding the skeptical problem

In Book IV, of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690),* John Locke returns to his argument about the scope and limits of human knowledge. Before going directly into this main topic, Locke first tells readers what knowledge is according to his view in Chapter 1. He states that “Our knowledge conversant about our ideas. Since the mind in all its thoughts and reasoning has no other immediate object but its own ideas, which alone does or can contemplate, it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant about them.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What he means here is that ideas are the only medium that bridges our mind and knowledge, besides which knowledge cannot be acquired through other media. This view is in agreement with Descartes view of where knowledge comes from, in that Descartes says, “Now as far as ideas are concerned, if they are considered alone and in their own right, without being referred to something else, they cannot, properly speaking, be false.”[[2]](#footnote-2) And because of this, Descartes concludes that “But here I must inquire particularly into the ideas that I believe to be derived from things existing outside me.”[[3]](#footnote-3) We can see that Descartes also thinks that although we can’t be certain of what they consist tells us the truth, ideas are the only thing that can give him some clue of the external world. It is also evident that Descartes spends a lot of time contemplating over how much can we be certain of the things perceived through our ideas.

Then at this stage both Descartes and Locke have to face the skeptical problem: How well does our knowledge gained through ideas reflect the external world? To what extent of knowledge do we have truly tells us about the external world? Descartes keeps a skeptical view very seriously toward this problem, putting all the opinions that we used to have about the external world into doubt, because maybe an evil demon is deceiving us of everything we believe to be true. Specifically, he points out that we might be just dreaming because the content of dream cannot be distinguished from the content of our walking life, and that we cannot trust our sensory experience because they cannot represent what external world truly is.

However, Locke addresses a dismissive view towards Descartes’ skepticism, stating that there are things that doesn’t have to be doubted. In Chapter 2, *Of the Degrees of Our Knowledge,* he describes the idea through sensory perception as “whether there is anything more than barely that idea in our minds, whether we can certainly infer from this the existence of anything without us, which corresponds to that idea, is that of which some men think there may be a question to make.”[[4]](#footnote-4) And he answers this question by stating that “we are provided with an evidence that puts us past doubting.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Namely, there is no need to doubt such, what he calls later, sensitive knowledge at this time. What supports his such point of view is that sensory perceptions are so vivid and obvious that it must not be any other case of possibility. For example, when we “look on the sun by day”, “taste wormwood”, or “smell a rose”, the color, taste or smell that render to us are so vivid, that we can plainly find them different from what is stored in our memory. What’s more, he dismisses the skepticism by suggesting people to admit that “dreaming of being in the fire and being actually in the fire”[[6]](#footnote-6) are not the same experience. This argument can be viewed as Locke’s attack to the dream argument posed by Descartes in his *First Meditation*. In the end of Chapter 2, Locke generalizes his opinion that skepticism is unnecessary because as long as applying the certain objects, whose existence we perceive through our senses, gives us pain or pleasure, we achieve certainty, “beyond which we have no concern to know or to be.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This view is very practical, according to Locke, degree of certainty is just as much as what is needed by us, and there is no need to question everything in order to investigate the ultimate truth of what the external world is like.

Locke’s view towards the skeptical problem posed by Descartes can further be exemplified through his discussion in Chapter 11 more obviously, *Of Our Knowledge of the Existence of Other Things*. He proves how we can trust sensation to give us knowledge of the external world through four reasons. Firstly, “they come in by the organs of that sense and no other way.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Which means sensory perception can only be generated through external influence to our organs passively, but not be merely produced in the mind. For instance, if someone wants to get the relish of a pineapple, he has to go to Indies and taste it instead of trying to produce the savor merely in the mind. Secondly, there’s a manifest difference between the ideas lodged in memory and the ideas from actual sensation in that the former can be recalled constantly at one’s pleasure whereas the latter is imposed to one’s mind and cannot be avoided. Since such sensation cannot be avoided, it shows that idea from sensation is controlled by external world. Thirdly, when we recall pleasure or pain, they are “nothing more than ideas floating in our minds without actual sensation.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Which shows that it is external object that renders actual sensations, such as burn, or thirst to the ideas when we are experiencing them. Lastly, our senses coordinate with each other, to demonstrate the existence of outward things. For instance, one “sees a fire may, if he doubts whether it is anything more than a bare fancy, feels it too, and be convinced by putting his hand in it…”[[10]](#footnote-10) In this way, both our visual perception and the temperature of the fire double assures the existence of fire in the outward world. In the later part of Chapter 11, Locke also emphasizes why he address the skeptical problem by dismissively since “this certainty is as great as our condition needs.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The certainty of the existence of external world known through senses is just as needed as we can rely on it to live conveniently in normal life, and gain some experience which can give us certain notice of things, which is our purpose. For example, someone who learns that burning candle is hot through painful sensory experience, will prevent himself from touch the candle again.

Locke’s response is successful regarding to the first three reasons he gives from Chapter 11. His argument rules out the possibility that we can’t generate certain senses without the (passive) interaction with external objects, thus proving the existence of external world. I have the same feeling when I have my desire for certain dish that can only be ordered from a far restaurant. I can’t quench my desire for the dish until I actually eat it. If I can produce the certain good taste of that dish in my mind without tasting the dish external to me, I would not need to spend time and wait for the delivery for a long time. However, his last argument that “our senses assist one another’s testimony of the existence of outward things”[[12]](#footnote-12) is not plausible. According to Locke, “knowledge is the connection and agreement, or disagreement and repugnance, of any of our ideas,”[[13]](#footnote-13) then the agreement of ideas through different sensory experiences can produce sensitive knowledge of the external world. Let’s consider a counter example. When we are watching a 5-D movie with a strawberry cake in the scene, in the same time, the theater generates the smell of such strawberry cake, misleading people to believe that such strawberry cake is really existing. In this situation, even though the visual perception and smell of strawberry cake agree with each other, the cake does not exist in fact. One may argue that through touching, we can easily deny the existence of such cake. So that such agreement among ideas no longer holds, and so senses can still assist one another’s testimony of the existence of outward things. But if an illusion is so vivid to us that we cannot find any disagreement among limited sensory ideas, while such illusion is yet false, we then can no longer trust senses to be the testimony of the existence of external world. Moreover, Locke suggests that senses are past doubting given that they are so vivid that they are different from any idea revived by memory in mind. However, two ideas being different does not guarantee that one is real knowledge and another is not. He cannot rule out the possibility that the vivid idea of senses may also be an illusion, with greater strength of deception power.

Locke’s dismissive attitude towards Descartes’ skeptical problem reflects his practical approach in knowing the scope and limit of human knowledge, which is defensible. For Locke, we are not able, and there’s no use to have understanding of full extent of external world, getting rid of any doubt. Obtaining knowledge of external objects through sensation is only for a purpose, to give us certain notice of things, which are convenient or inconvenient to us. For instance, putting hand into a glass furnace gives us pain for certain. Such evidence is enough for us to learn what leads to “pleasure or pain, happiness or misery”[[14]](#footnote-14), through experience. As long as our purpose of avoiding evilness and achieving goodness is attained, we don’t have concern beyond that. In this way, concerning too much of the real existence of external world will only cause burden in making life convenient (our purpose). As Locke responses to who suspects himself dreaming that “if all is a dream, then he does but dream that he makes the question, and so it does not much matter that a waking man should answer him.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Which means, if one doubts every existence of objects, then any argument will not be meaningful, thus no purpose can be achieved. Actually, Descartes himself dismisses the possibility that he is mad in order to continue his argument in his *First Meditation.* If Descartes even doubts that he is sane, then there is no way he can establish his further discussions. So in this way, certain details that cannot favor one’s purpose can be omitted, even Descartes uses this strategy. Taking nowadays example, Fermat’s Last Theorem that no three positive integers a,b,c can solve equation a^n + b^n = c^n with n greater than 2, is still not solved. However, mathematicians are using this theorem as ground to make more complex proofs, and apply them. If mathematicians worry too much about the validity of Fermat’s Last Theorem, little progress will be made regarding more complex proofs out of it.

Works Cited

1. Roger Ariew, Eric Watkins, Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd Edition, Hackett Publishing Company, *John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), Book IV,* 386-421

1. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Locke’s Essay and Associated Texts*, page 386* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’ Meditation and Associated Texts*, page 49* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Descartes’ Meditation and Associated Texts*, page 49* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 391* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 391* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 392* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 392* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 412* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 412* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 413* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 413* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 412* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Locke’s Essay and Associated Texts*, page 386* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, Locke’s Essay and Associated Texts*, page 386* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Modern Philosophy An Anthology of Primary Sources 2nd, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, page 413* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)