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Locke

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Introduction

John Locke was born in 1632; he was the apostle of the Revolution of 1688, which successfully brought in reforms in England. Most of Locke's works appeared within a few years of 1688. His chief work in theoretical philosophy is the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. This work was published in 1690.

Locke may be regarded as the founder of Empiricism; according to which sense experience is the only source of philosophic knowledge. The conception of substance was the dominant category during the time of Locke. This was considered vague and not useful by Locke. However, Locke did not attempt to reject it wholly. He allowed the validity of metaphysical arguments for the existence of God. Locke thought in terms of concrete detail rather than of large abstractions. Locke wanted to break from the bondage of words, from the bondage of wrong methods and from the bondage of the assumption that philosopher's business is to speculate. Thus in the epistle to the readers in his *Essay* Locke says, "It is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in cleaning the ground a little and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of Knowledge." Further, in Book-I of his *Essay*, Locke says that his task is "to enquire into grounds and degrees of belief, opinion and assent."

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Polemic Against Innate Ideas

Locke begins his Essay with a critical examination of the theory of innate ideas. In Book-I, Ch. 2 of the Essay, Locke gives his arguments for the rejection of innate ideas. He argues against Plato, Descartes and the Scholastics. Locke attacked the Scholastic maxims, specially the Law of Identity (whatever is, is) and the Law of Contradiction (what is, cannot be, both be and not be). Since they are self-evident, the proponents of the theory of innate ideas felt that they were innate or a part of mind's initial equipment. Locke argued that self-evidence and innateness are not equivalent. Locke says that in particulars our knowledge begins and spreads itself by degrees to generals. Descartes as a rationalist believed in innate ideas that are known a priori and are beyond doubt. However, Locke rejects the views of Descartes saying that if there were 'innate ideas' in the mind, then all minds should be having knowledge about them. But children and idiots do not claim to have such knowledge. Some rationalists try to improve their theory of innate ideas saying that even though such ideas are there in all minds, some minds may not have knowledge about them. Locke rejects this line of argument saying, "No proposition can be said to be in the mind which it never yet knew, which it never yet conscious of." Further, if someone says that ideas are there but we come to be aware of it through reason, Locke asks, then why say that they are innate?

Locke was against the theory that there are certain special ideas which are imprinted on the mind by God or Nature. The proponents of innate ideas held that they constituted a distinct sort of truths, a class apart, having a special authority and distinct from adventitious ideas, that come from outside. Rejecting this theory, Locke says, that there are neither innate speculative principles nor innate

practical principles. He demolishes the universal assent argument. Most moral principles are got through convention and custom. All our ideas can be traced back to an origin in experience. What we can say is that mind has the capacity to know and not that the propositions are already there. Having disposed of the doctrine of innate ideas Locke went on to give his own theories. Locke says that the mind is like a white paper, the mind is empty. It is "tabula rasa", an empty tablet. From where does all the materials of knowledge and reason come? Locke answers in one word- Experience.

Theory of Ideas

Ideas are the central conception of the philosophy of Locke. His view on the concept of 'idea' is presented in Book-II of the Essay. Locke says, "I have used it to express whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking." To Locke idea is 'the object of the understanding when a man thinks' where thinking includes all cognitive activities. Ideas form the materials of knowledge. The meaning of 'idea' can be understood as -

1. The immediate objects of understanding
2. Signs or representations of the world of things.
3. The modifications of the mind.
4. Caused by experience.

Our ideas are derived from two sources (a) sensation and (b) reflection or perception of the operation of our own mind which may be called 'internal sense.'

Our senses convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things. This is what is called sensation. This is a process through which the mind receives ideas

from external objects. By means of inner sense or introspection the mind gets the ideas not from the existing objects but by reflecting on its own operations within itself. This is the process of thinking, doubting, believing, willing, etc. The mind has powers of analyzing and reassembling the raw materials received.

Locke makes a distinction between simple ideas and complex ideas. Sensory experiences of the uniform character are called simple ideas. Color, smell, sound, numbers, extension, etc. are simple ideas. They are the contents of actual experience. Locke says that the mind uses some kind of liberty in forming those complex ideas, in contrast with simple ideas where the mind is passive. But Locke is not able to maintain this distinction successfully. He says that some complex ideas are given in experience. "Some ideas are observed to exist in several combinations united together." Again, Locke says that there are certain simple ideas with a complex content, example, Extension. He further modifies his distinction by saying that some ideas are simple but they are not atomic, for example, ideas of space and time. Locke says that by comparing ideas, mind obtains ideas of relations and by abstracting mind attains general ideas. Complex ideas according to Locke are of three kinds. They are ideas of substances, modes and relations. Complex ideas are combination of simple ideas representing distinct particular things. Locke says substance is the idea of a support or substratum in which the simple contents inhere. The notion of substance is implied because qualities have to inhere in something. It seems to be a necessity of thought.

The idea of modes is dependent on substance. For example, the idea of a dozen or a score is based on the idea of a unit and there is the operation of addition. We give fixity by giving it a name. Complex ideas are

derived from simple ideas. The idea of relation is formulated through an act of comparison. Mind has the capacity to look beyond a particular object and involve in the mental operation of comparison. Of all the ideas of relation, the relation of cause and effect is the most important. Next, Locke speaks of the concept of identity as the relation between the thing and itself. The adjective "same" and "identical" have different senses in their application to different kinds of things, and he distinguishes a number of different senses of the word "identity". In the case of a simple material particle, we trace its identity in space and time. In the compound, identity is established by ensuring that all the particles making up the compound are identical. In a machine, identity consists in the organization or structure of the parts. When he comes to discuss, personal identity, in human beings, he rejects the traditional view that it is the identity of soul. According to Locke personal identity consists in identity of consciousness.

With regard to general ideas, Locke says that no general idea is given to us in sense perception. We form this idea by an act of abstraction. When we abstract something we look at that concept as standing for a whole set of particulars of the same kind.

Locke gives a range of meaning to the word 'idea' and therefore it looks that Locke uses this term very ambiguously. However, this ambiguity does not matter too much because Locke supposes them to have the same function. They are all signs which represent the external world of physical objects and the inner world of consciousness. Commenting on Locke's concept of 'idea',

Gibson says, "The idea for him is at once the apprehension of content and the content apprehended." (Locke's Theory of knowledge by Gibson Page -19)

To discover the nature of ideas 'better and to discover them intelligently', one further distinction must be examined. This is the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. In Book II of his *Essay*, Locke gives his definitions of Primary and Secondary qualities as follows. Primary qualities of bodies are those qualities which are "utterly inseparable from the body in what state so ever it be." Such qualities are solidity, shape, motion, rest and number. The secondary qualities "in truth are nothing in the objects themselves but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities." Under this category come qualities like color, auditory qualities, taste, scent and so on. They do not belong to the objects themselves. We get them as a result of the primary qualities. Our ideas of primary qualities are resemblances of the objects. They are 'real qualities.' On the other hand, the ideas of secondary qualities are mainly effects of certain operations of factors. They represent the powers in the things. One difference between primary and secondary qualities is that the former are perceived through more than one sense while the secondary qualities are perceived through only a single sense.

According to Locke, the objects have a third type of quality, simply called "powers". These qualities are the capacities which bodies have in virtue of their primary qualities. This power causes changes in bulk, figure, texture and motion of a body and it will affect our senses such that we can sense the difference. For instance, the power of fire to make lead fluid. They are also called tertiary qualities.

Locke's Representative Theory of Perception

The distinction between primary and secondary qualities by Locke leads to his representative theory of perception.

He maintains that the ideas of primary qualities are true copies of those qualities and they are caused by those qualities. This is not the case with secondary qualities. Of primary qualities Locke remarks in Book II Viii 15 "Ideas of primary qualities are resemblances of them and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves." Idea is the immediate object of perception. It is the object of understanding when a man thinks. Sense experience is the fountain of all ideas. According to Locke, the material substance is passive and the mind is also passive. So, how does the material substance which is out there get in touch with the mind which is in the human organism? Locke solved this problem with the help of his representative theory of perception. According to this theory, the external object or material substance throws its own image into the mind through the respective sense organ. This image is called the idea and this idea acts as the 'copy' or representation of the external object. The ideas are spoken of as the *tertium quid* (third thing) between the mind and matter. The ideas represent the object. Consequently the mind perceives the external object through the medium of the idea which is a copy. Thus sensation stands as a symbol of external things. Sensation arises by bodily affection and it is representative of real things.

To verify the ideas as true copies, we should be able to see the original which is impossible on this theory. If we would see the qualities directly, then the ideas would be superfluous.

The representative theory is therefore extremely shaky. This representation leads to either, of the two conclusions:-

1. It leads to subjective idealism (like that of Berkeley) according to which ideas are the only objects of

knowledge when we use the term 'copy' we mean resemblance. So how can one idea be a copy of that which is not an idea?

2. The second conclusion is that which is presented by the realists. The realists say that the representative theory is not correct since the mind knows the objects straight away and there is no need for ideas.

The other position that comes out due to representative theory is that of the sceptic who says that we do know that there are objects but do not know what exactly they are – a position taken by Hume.

What encouraged a theory like the representative theory? Firstly, the fact that our perceptions are relative dependent on the position in space from where the perceptual judgment is made. Secondly, the fact that one may have illusions due to certain factors also encouraged philosophers to fall back on a theory of representative perception with "idea" bridging the gulf between matter and mind. In fact, Locke's theory of ideas presupposes Descartes dualism of matter and mind, but Locke gave it an epistemological hue.

Locke's Theory of Knowledge

Locke stresses that the central problem is to assess the nature and possible extent of human knowledge. In book IV he says, "With me, to know and to be certain is the same thing. What I know that I am certain of; and what I am certain of that I know. What reaches to knowledge I think may be called certainty, what comes short of certainty, I think cannot be knowledge." The simplest element of knowledge is for Locke a Judgment or an act of thought by which an affirmation or denial is made. The distinction between these two kinds of judgments is one of degree. Locke is certain that there is nothing like

doubt in knowledge. "What we once know, we are certain is so, and we may be secure that there are no latent proofs undiscovered, which may overthrow our knowledge or bring it in doubt." (IV 16.3)

Knowledge according to Locke's well-known definition consists in the 'perception of the connection and agreement or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas.' This power and the power to perceive the ideas themselves in our minds and apprehending the significance of signs constitutes the 'power of perception, which we call the Understanding.' In this special form of perception, Locke finds absolute certainty, 'where this perception is, there is knowledge and where it is not there, though we may fancy, guess or believe, yet we always come short of knowledge.' In the various forms of judgments we 'think', 'take', 'suppose', or 'presume' our ideas to agree or disagree, but we do not perceive their agreement or disagreement.

Locke distinguishes two forms of knowledge. Viz., intuitive knowledge and demonstrative knowledge. Intuitive knowledge is that which we get by the mere consideration of the ideas themselves. This knowledge is self-evident. On the other hand, demonstrative knowledge is mediate. It depends on certain 'proofs' or 'intervening ideas'. "If we will reflect on our own ways of thinking, we shall find that sometimes the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately by themselves without the intervention of any other, and this, I think we may call intuitive knowledge." This is perceived by the mind just as the eye doth light. In this form of knowledge there is no place for doubt, hesitation or examination.

Turning to demonstrative knowledge we see that it is not always as reliable as Intuition. Demonstration, on every

step is dependent upon intellectual intuition. Memory plays a part in this. Demonstrative knowledge consists of a series of intuitions in which the agreement or disagreement of each idea with its next is immediately perceived. In this way, a mediate relation is established between the first and the last idea. We definitely cannot perceive all the intuitive connection together and thus we fall back on memory. Locke traces the cause of all our errors to memory.

Locke sets forward four ways in which ideas may agree or disagree.

- 1) *Identity and Diversity*- the Mind perceives the agreement between an idea and itself and a disagreement in this respect between it and all others. For example, White is white and not black.
- 2) *Relation*- Mind perceives a relation between its ideas, For example, two triangles upon equal bases between two parallels are equal.
- 3) *Co-existence*- the Mind perceives 'a co-existence or non-co-existence in the same subject' For example, the specific gravity of gold and its solubility in aqua regia.
- 4) *Real existence*- The mind perceives actual real existence agreeing to any idea. Example, God is.

Locke implies that our object of knowledge is always in a proposition or an inference.

Knowledge of real existence is of course real knowledge but knowledge may be real without involving an affirmation of real existence. With only exception of substance, the reality of our knowledge is guaranteed if the ideas are of possible existents. The reality of all simple ideas is according to Locke, guaranteed by their

very simplicity. Each of these ideas corresponds to some element or characteristic in the real world.

Considering the reality of complex ideas, Locke finds no difficulty except in so far as the ideas of substance is concerned. The ideas of relations and modes are formed by the free activity of the mind without any reference to any archetypes to which they conform. What is non-contradictory is capable of real existence.

In the case of the substances, Locke thinks our claim to reality cannot be made easily and by a priori method. We may say that our knowledge of substances is real only when our ideas of these have been derived from experience. Locke says that we have three kinds of knowledge of real existence. Our knowledge of our own existence is intuitive, our knowledge of God's existence is demonstrative and our knowledge of things present to sense is sensitive (Book IV Chapter iii).

Even while talking of complex ideas as made up of simple ideas co-existing, he says we have no knowledge except (1) by intuition (2) by reason examining agreement or disagreement of two ideas (3) by sensation perceiving the existence of particular things (Book IV Chapter iii Sec.2).

Locke's ethical doctrines seem to be in anticipation of Bentham. It is hedonistic saying that things are good or evil in relation to pleasure and pain. He states that morality is capable of demonstration.

Locke makes a distinction between 'instructive' and 'trifling' propositions. Here Locke anticipates the Kantian classification of Judgments as analytical and synthetic.

Under trifling propositions Locke includes the purely identical propositions in which a term is predicted of

itself. Although such propositions have certainty, yet they possess only 'verbal certainty and not instructive.' The Identical propositions just teach what everyone who is capable of discourse knows viz., that the same term is the same term and the same idea the same idea. Again, the analytical propositions can explain the meaning of a name to one who is ignorant but their function is confined to verbal elucidation.

Apart from verbal certainty Locke asserts the synthetic character of all instructive propositions. "We can know the truth and so may be certain in propositions which affirm something of another which is necessary consequence of its precise complex idea, but not contained in it. This is a real truth and conveys with it instructive real knowledge." By such propositions we are taught something more than what a word barely stands for.

For giving us real knowledge, the predicate of our propositions should carry beyond the idea for which its subject stands. His examination of ideas is a curious mixture of psychology and logic together with the introduction of some metaphysics (more apparent in Book IV). Thus Locke traverses many by-paths in order to reach his goal of accounting human knowledge and its extent.

Locke gives three instances of insoluble problems-

- 1) That, things infinite are too large for our capacity. That is our finite minds cannot know the infinite things i.e., those things which it cannot know.
- 2) The essences also of substantial beings are beyond our ken'.
- 3) 'How, nature produces the several phenomenon and continues the species.'

As a matter of logic, we may be in a difficult position to say that certain things are insoluble, but practically speaking, there are certain problems which we know are insolvable for a considerable time to come.

Criticisms

- 1) The controversy of the innate ideas is a problem to the empiricists, particularly the universal and necessary principles. Also, modern psychology has shown that certain ideas may exist at the sub-conscious level.
- 2) The notion of substance raises several difficulties for Locke. By accepting that substance is something 'we know not what', we are accepting that we do not know the essence of either matter or mind. Just to take an example, when we say 'It is an apple' what is meant is that it is red, round, juicy, etc. But what is 'It' apart from these qualities. Common sense presumes that it is the 'thing' or 'substance' in which these qualities inhere. Since this is the knowledge we get from sense experience, Locke was forced to accept that substance is nothing but a combination of ideas of primary qualities and we only look for a support or base for these qualities. Locke did not have the courage to either affirm or deny firmly the existence of a material substance. He was also shaky on the question of spiritual substance. Not damaging the traditional theology which believes in a soul, he says that we must believe in a substance wherein thinking, knowing, doubting, and a power of moving, etc., do persist. After claiming that all our concepts originate from either sensation or reflection, the idea of a substance poses a great problem to Locke. Locke ceases to be a consistent empiricist by his inability to deny the notion of substance altogether. However,

positively speaking, we have to admit that Locke should be credited for beginning the elimination of the metaphysical view of substance. He also begins the elimination of subjective factors from the real world by his concept of primary qualities which are measurable. In Chapter VI of Book III 'Of the Names of substances', Locke is concerned to refute the scholastic doctrine of essence. We can conclude this unit by quoting Bertrand Russell who says that in spite of his merits and demerits, his views are valuable "Not only Locke's valid opinions but even his errors, were useful in practice." (History of Western Philosophy by Bertrand Russell – Page 585)

Conclusion

Locke can be called the founder of Empiricism, a theory according to which knowledge originates from sense – experience. He was against his predecessors who believed in innate ideas. According to Locke, the mind is a blank paper or a tabula rasa. Mind has the capacity to apprehend but it is wrong to say that certain propositions are already there. The material of knowledge comes from experience. Idea is the object of understanding when a man thinks. Our ideas are derived from two sources- Sensation and reflection which can be called the inner sense. Locke makes a distinction between simple ideas and complex ideas. Simple ideas are the most basic impressions and mind has the capacity to combine the simple ideas to form complex ideas. Complex ideas are of three kinds viz., that of substances, modes and relations. The notion of substance is implied because qualities have to inhere in something. The idea of modes is dependent on substance. The idea of relation is formulated through an act of comparison. Idea of a general proposition is through abstraction. One further important distinction brought out by Locke is the

distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are solidity, shape, motion, rest and number and they are measurable and inseparable from the body. They are objective. Secondary qualities are color, auditory qualities, taste, scent and so on. They have a subjective side to them. Ideas of primary qualities are true copies of those qualities. This idea acts as a copy or representation of the external object. Thus Locke believed in the representative theory of perception. Coming to his theory of knowledge, Locke said only what is certain is what qualifies itself as knowledge. Knowledge consists in the perception of the connection and agreement or disagreement of our ideas. Knowledge is of three kinds (1) Intuitive Knowledge which is the ideal, infallible and self-evident (2) Demonstrative knowledge that is relational, analytic, concerning abstractions. Knowledge on morality, God's existence and mathematical knowledge belong to this category (3) Sensitive knowledge which is concerning co-existence, based on simple ideas of sense and complex ideas. Speaking of the limitation of knowledge, Locke says, "We can have knowledge no further than we have ideas."

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