

Critical Study of John Locke's View on "Source of Idea"

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Abstract

This paper is an exposition on why sense-experience alone is not sufficient to obtain knowledge and idea? Locke accepts experience as the only valid source of ideas. He is not a consistent empiricist himself because he recognizes unknown and unknowable substance. If people depend only on sense-experience, their knowledge will be narrow and limited. The contribution of this paper is to enlarge understanding through sense-experience which is the foundation of the human quest for knowledge and idea, in order to make complete the other sources such as reasoning, creative and reflective thinking are necessary. The descriptive and evaluative methods will be used. The research paper will be proved and evaluated by using the principle of addition.

Keywords: Empiricism, idea, knowledge, experience, substance

Introduction

An intellectual transformation had taken place in the life of human beings when mathematical physics was created and developed during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There were two components in the new physics. One was a mathematical component and the other is an empirical component. As a result, two tendencies in epistemology that correspond to the two components of physics appear. One is rationalism which takes after the mathematical component and the other is empiricism which takes after the empirical component.

Philosophers are characterized as rationalists or empiricists according to the answers they gave to the question of the sources of knowledge. Rationalists declare that only apriori truths are clear and distinct as they have a reason as their sources, and empiricists assert that only empirical truths are clear and distinct as they have a perception as their source.

John Locke (1632-1704) was one of three great empiricists together with George Berkeley (1685-1753) and David Hume (1711-1776). Locke was an English philosopher in the seventeenth century but his philosophical thought has remained vitally important from the time he wrote until today. Empiricism, however, became an explicit theory of knowledge only in modern time in the hands of Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Locke accomplished the first significant formulations of empiricist philosophy in modern times. He employed the exact method of measurement using observation and experiment. It was held that the aspects of the universe are given to the senses. This attitude is clear in the works of Locke. The aim of this paper is to show that all human beings are equal at birth and no one is superior to anyone else; if they relied only on sense perception, to achieve new ideas their horizons would be very much limited.

Objection to Innate idea

The philosophical work of John Locke is mostly found in "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding". The main problem of his essay is concerned with the extent and limit of human knowledge. The criterion of knowledge laid down by him is not much different from Descartes' (1596-1650) criterion of knowledge. Descartes declares that there are apriori truths

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and these are certain. He believes in the certainty of self which is known intuitively. By certainty, Locke does not merely mean a subjective state of conviction, but some kind of objective or logical necessity that cannot be questioned.

Locke thinks that one ought to study the source and origin of ideas that constitute the content of his or her knowledge. If there are innate ideas as Descartes had believed, i.e. ideas not derived from experience but known intuitively, the bounds of human knowledge would be very extensive and many things which lie beyond the range of experience would be known. Therefore, the starting point of Locke's empiricism is a denial of innate ideas.

Locke criticizes Descartes' doctrine of innate ideas by arguing that if there are innate ideas, they must be present in all minds equally. But Locke holds that there are no such ideas, which are universally present in all minds. Children, savages, idiots and illiterate persons are quite unconscious of innate ideas. Locke goes on to argue that if there are innate ideas in the mind, they must be the same in all minds. But the innate ideas of God and morality differ in different societies, countries, and ages. Hence it cannot be innate even if there were the same ideas in all minds. The innateness cannot be proved. The universality of an idea does not prove its innateness. For example, everyone at one time agreed that "The sun revolves around the earth" and "The earth is flat". But these statements are neither innate nor true. The so-called innate principles are general truths, which are inductively generalized from particular facts of experience. They are empirical truths, not intuitive and prior to all experience. Hence, Locke rejected Descartes' doctrine of innate ideas.

The Source of Knowledge and Idea

Human beings have several ideas in their minds like whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness and others. For Locke, the mind is like a white paper which is void of all characters and without any idea. Therefore, Locke says that such ideas come from experience. All our knowledge is based on experience. Locke holds that prior to experience the mind is a tabula rasa or empty slate, and the source and origin of all our ideas is experience.

According to Locke, ideas are furnished by experience and can be derived from two sources namely sensation and reflection. It is through sensation that understanding becomes aware of all knowledge of the external world. Through reflection, it becomes aware of all the operations that it performs itself. Therefore, ideas are of two kinds. One is derived from sensation and the other is derived from reflection. Therefore, for Locke, these two are sources of knowledge, from which all ideas spring.

Locke introduced a new definition of an idea. Locke states that an idea is perceived either by sensation or reflection. Ideas which are received either by sensation or reflection are simple ideas. But understanding has certain faculties by virtue of which it can be reproduced, compared, and combined simple ideas to form complex ideas. Simple ideas of sensation are color, sound, smell, number, extension, figure, rest and motion. Simple ideas of reflection are those of mental operations such as remembering, comparing, compounding and abstracting.

In sensation, the actual qualities of objects are not directly perceived. A sensation is an image or reflection thrown upon the mind which is a sort of mirror. Sometimes the sensation is a true copy of the real quality of things but sometimes it is a sort of sign or symbol of some real quality which itself is not truly reflected in the sensation. In order to avoid confusion between the mental existence of ideas and those physical facts that give rise to them, it is better to call the latter, not ideas, but qualities. Locke believes that the ideas of number, extension, figure, and motion represent the primary qualities of things, whereas color, taste,

smell and sound are secondary qualities. Arthur Rogers discussed Locke's two kinds of qualities as follows:

"Certain qualities are entirely inseparable from a body, whatever its state; these are called original or primary qualities, and include solidity, extension, figure, motion and number. Secondly, such qualities which in truth are nothing in the objects themselves but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities, i.e., by the bulk, figure, texture, and motion of their insensible parts, as colors, sounds and tastes, etc., these I call secondary qualities".³

According to Locke, the simple ideas of the mind cannot frame one until it is presented by experience, so far the mind has been passive. But it has power. After receiving these simple ideas, it acts upon them in the following ways.

"1. Combining several simple ideas into one compound one and thus all complex ideas are made. 2. The second is bringing two ideas, whether simple or complex, together, and setting them by one another so as to take a view of them at once without uniting them into one, by which way it gets all its idea of relations. 3. The third is separating them from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence; this is called abstraction, and thus all its general ideas are made."⁴

All possible combinations of ideas can be grouped under three heads. They are modes, substances, and relations. Modes are complex ideas considered as affections of substances. The ideas of substances are combinations of simple ideas to represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves, where the supposed or confused idea of substance like it is, is always the first and chief. The last kind of complex idea is the relation that consists of the consideration and comparing one idea with another. Locke, from this point of view, shows that all the terms of which metaphysics has made are thought to have grown out of the everyday experience. Even the idea of God itself can be brought back to definite simple ideas in so far as they have meaning at all.

The Notion of Substance

From Aristotle (384-322B.C) onwards the notion of substance plays a significant role in western philosophical thought. Traditionally, substances are knowable, but certain simple ideas always seem to appear together. For example, yellow color with solidity, malleability, and heaviness. Hence, a name for that substance 'gold' was invented. It is not yellowness, nor heaviness, nor just the collection of all those qualities together. But gold is the thing that has those qualities.

An important part of our idea of substance is made up of our idea of the power of the substances. Substances are unknown in themselves. These are known to exist as causes of the ideas they produce in people. Locke holds that knowledge does not start with some self-evident innate ideas or principles, but deduces other truths from them. Hence, Locke is an empiricist. But he believes in the existence of matter, mind, and God. According to Locke, we have certainty of the existence of matter by sensation. We are certain of our own minds intuitively and we are certain of the existence of God demonstrably. Knowledge is not the mere reception of sensations as Locke admits but the interpretation of them, which is an act of reason. Both experience and reason contribute to the building up of knowledge. Experience gives only particular and contingent truths that reason reduces to a coherent system. The role of reason, the acquisition of knowledge cannot be ignored. Hence, the empiricism of Locke is

³ Arthur Kenyon Rogers. (1964). *A Students History of Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan Company. P 284

⁴ Ibid, P303

as one-sided as the rationalism of Descartes because Locke ignored reason in the acquisition of knowledge.

According to Locke, the existence of material substance must be assumed, though we have no idea what it really is. Locke's position was doubtful on the subject of material substance. It was still more doubtful on the question of spiritual substance, whether finite in the sense of the individual consciousness or infinite in the sense of God. Locke is not a consistent empiricist himself. He admits the validity of the ideas of infinitude and eternity but fails to derive from experience. He declares that the mind has the power of forming abstract ideas or general notions which represent many individuals of the same kind, which produce only particular ideas through experience. Hence in spite of the restrictions which he places upon knowledge, Locke adopts a metaphysical position in the substance which Descartes had organized into a system. Locke's teachings form the starting point of many schools of thought and his influence like Descartes extended for beyond his age and to the movement.

Conclusion

It is generally believed that knowledge is necessary for life and people always attempt to have knowledge of facts around them as much as possible. So questions are asked: Are there the sources of knowledge? Where does genuine knowledge come from? Philosophers have given considerable attention to questions about the sources of knowledge. Concerning some of the main views in the history of western philosophy are sense-experience, reason, intuition, authority, revelation and faith, and tradition and common sense.

Where philosophers are concerned however most regard sense-perception and reason as being more dependable than the other sources. Some philosophers emphasize sense-perception alone and some take reason to be the only source of knowledge. Thus there has been an ongoing debate especially in Western Philosophy concerning Reason versus Perception (Experience), or to put it in philosophical terms Rationalism versus Empiricism. Empiricism maintains that experience is the original source of knowledge. Rationalism upholds the view that true and certain knowledge can be obtained only through reason. So empiricism is considered to be the instrument of natural sciences and rationalism as the instrument of formal sciences.

However, there was nothing in the mind that had not come through the senses. So knowledge is impossible without experience: without experience, nothing can be sufficiently known. Human beings abstract the qualities common to certain objects and so form concepts and universals. Such universals, however, exist merely as ideas or thoughts in the mind and are expressed in words. They denote many particular similar things. But, just observation of facts given is not knowledge. It is mere information. People need to think in order to make the best use of the given information and to deduce 'what ought to be' from 'what is'.

Thus, in the search for knowledge, philosophy as a thinking activity necessarily involves critical thinking, speculative thinking as well as creative thinking. With a creative attitude, people want to move forward to something new. Creative thinking is crucial for research. It is for opening up new frontiers of knowledge. Moreover, one has to reflect on what has been learned, and to reason and think critically and constructively, in order to advance further to new ideas, we should accept sense data as the foundations of our knowledge.

Locke's view on 'source of an idea' is criticized by modern psychologists, biologists and medical physicians. They doubt his view that the mind is a tabula rasa and that human idea comes from experience. Later modern scholars held that human beings inherit genes which are given by ancestors; they have both instinct and rational power by nature. Although genetic

science may have proved him wrong, it must be admitted that human beings are born with differences in various capacities both physical and mental.

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