

Chapter 14

Fundamentals of John Locke's Empiricism

Key Words: empiricism, knowledge, substance, "I know, not what", innate ideas, ideas, simple idea, complex idea, material substance.

The empiricist school of philosophy had exerted phenomenal influence in the development of modern philosophy in Europe, with the British philosopher John Locke being its first major proponent. The epistemological turn in modern philosophy acquired a new dimension with the publication of Locke's *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, where he explicates the foundational doctrines of the empiricist school of philosophy. Apart from his contributions in epistemology, Locke was also a chief proponent of what is known as the social contract theory in political philosophy. Here his writings are still considered as very important in the development of liberalism.

John Locke's philosophy expresses dissatisfaction over the fundamental theoretical positions held by the Scholastic thinkers. Initially he was influenced by Descartes, but later criticized him and developed the foundations of empiricism, which became a very important and influential philosophical system during the modern age. This chapter will deal with his contributions in the area of epistemology which he began with a criticism of the foundations of rationalism. It will discuss Locke's refutation of innate ideas which the rationalists consider as important and then tries to elaborate his theory of knowledge and its various components like the notions of ideas, qualities and substances.

Locke begins with an enquiry of how knowledge is obtained and tries to establish the importance of experience in the process of knowledge acquisition. He asks, with what objects are our understandings fitted to deal and with what objects are they not fitted to deal. Locke's influential work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is, according to the author, "An inquiry into the understanding, pleasant and useful. Since it is the understanding that sets man above the rest of sensible beings, and gives him all the advantage and dominion, which he has over them." He thus ventures enquiring into the original, certainty, and extent of human

knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent. The *Essay* deals with both the psychological question concerning the origin of our ideas and the epistemological questions concerning the certainty, grounds etc., of our knowledge.

The Refutation of Innate Ideas

Innate ideas are those ideas, which are native to the mind and such a notion constitutes the foundation of rationalistic tradition. Locke seeks to refute this for establishing his empiricist conception of knowledge. The concept of innate ideas stands for the innate principles or primary notions present in our understanding from the very beginning. The soul receives them in its very first being and brings into the world with it. One example for such an idea would be the speculative innate idea which affirms that “whatsoever is, is and it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be” this is a classical example for an innate idea, which human beings do not derive from experience, but something which we already know.

Locke examines the arguments that were advanced by the rationalists to support the notion of innate ideas. The most prominent one is the conviction that all men agree about the validity of certain speculative and practical principles. This is the theory of universal consent. Accordingly, it has been argued that these ideas are originally imprinted on men's minds and we have brought them into the world with us as necessarily and really as we do with any of our inherent faculties.

Locke advances a series of objections against this. He says that even if it were true that all men agree about certain principles this would not prove that these principles are innate. He argues that the origin of all our ideas can be explained without postulating innate ideas and hence the hypothesis of innate ideas is superfluous. Here we should apply the principle of economy and do away with such a postulation.

To clarify his points, Locke examines the speculative innate idea, “whatsoever is, is”. It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be. This is the most universally accepted candidate for an innate idea, as no one can doubt its claim. But Locke is not prepared to allow such propositions having an universal assent and he points out that they are not known to many human beings in the

world. For instance, children and idiots have minds but do not have assent to these truths. Locke points out that, it is a contradiction to say, that there are truths imprinted on the soul, yet it does not perceive or understand them. Locke wonders how can they be innate, if they are not notions naturally imprinted and how can they be unknown if they are notions imprinted? Therefore, concludes Locke, there are no such ideas.

Locke then considers an objection to his argument. It is possible that all men know and assent to them when they come to the use of reason. The use and exercise of reason helps man discover these principles. Responding to these objections Locke argues that reason itself is nothing else but the faculty of deducing unknown truths from principles or propositions that are already known. If then, how can reason discover innate principles? He then affirms that the notion of innateness is a contradiction. He contends that, if men have innate truths originally, they must have it before the use of reason. But as his opponents would argue, they are always ignorant of them till they use reason. This, according to Locke, is to say that men know and know them not at the same time, which is a contradiction.

He then points out that children do not know them, but they use reason. Illiterate people and savages are not aware of many such innate truths, though they are also rational. Therefore, men use reason before they get the knowledge of those general truths. The general abstract ideas are framed in the mind only after men come to the use of reason. They are framed in the same ways other ideas are framed. Locke thus contends that the mind comes to be furnished with ideas from experience. The mind gets all the materials of reason and knowledge from experience. Therefore, all our knowledge is founded on experience and is derived from two basic sources: sensation and reflection. In sensation, the senses convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things and in reflection we perceive the operations of our own minds. In sensation things of external world affect the senses and we get ideas about them. In reflection we get ideas about the operations of our own minds like perceiving, thinking, doubting, believing and willing.

An idea, according to Locke, is the object of thinking, which we get from sensations and reflection. None of our ideas are innate as our mind has none

before experience writes on it. An idea is defined as whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding. Locke argues that ideas are coeval with sensation, as the soul begins to have ideas when it begins to perceive. Locke says in the *Essay* that to ask, at what time a man has first any ideas, is to ask, when he begins to perceive. Having ideas, and perception are one and the same thing. He affirms that a man begins to have ideas when he first has sensation.

Locke further says that the ideas are divided into simple and complex. The mind receives the simple ideas passively from external sources and it produces the complex ideas by combining the simple ideas. Here the sources of simple ideas are referred to. Among simple ideas of sensation we have ideas received from one sense organ like the coldness and hardness of a piece of ice, the scent and whiteness of a lily, the taste of sugar etc. We also have ideas furnished by more than one senses as in the case of pace or extension, figure, rest, and motion etc. Similarly there are simple ideas of reflection, and of sensation and reflection. The former include ideas of perception or thinking, and volition or willing and the latter include ideas like pleasure or delight, and its opposite, pain or uneasiness, power, existence, unity etc. Hence there are four classes of simple idea; of one sense, of more than one senses, of reflection, of sensation and reflection.

After explaining in detail the different types of simple ideas, Locke takes up the notion of complex ideas, which are actively framed by the mind, using simple ideas as materials. The mind combines two or more simple ideas into one complex idea. It may also combine the data of sensation and reflection to form new complex ideas. For example, the ideas of beauty, gratitude, a man, an army, the universe etc., the mind combines simple ideas of whiteness, sweetness and hardness to form the complex idea of a lump of sugar.

There are complex ideas of substances, of modes and of relations. The idea of a man or of a rose or of gold are examples for the complex idea of substances and the idea of an army is an example for a collective substance. The idea of a figure or of thinking or running are examples for complex ideas of modes or modifications and when we see the relationship between two ideas like fire and warmth, then the complex idea of relation is formed.

Locke says that the complex ideas are produced by the mind through certain activities like combining, comparing and separating. We combine several simple ideas into one complex idea or compare two ideas, whether simple or complex, without uniting them into one in order to obtain ideas of relations and we separate certain ideas from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence to obtain abstract general ideas.

Idea of Substance

The notion of substance has been at the center of philosophical contemplations since the time of Aristotle, or even before that. The rationalist thinkers have dealt with this problem elaborately and their respective philosophical positions—dualism of Descartes, pantheism of Spinoza and pluralism of Leibniz—were the result of their responses to this problem. Locke, for whom sensations and reflections are the only two fundamental sources of knowledge acquisition find it difficult to accommodate substance into his ontology. But at the same time, he contended that the qualities we perceive couldn't hang in air and need a substratum in which they subsist. Hence he describes the material substance as "I know, not what". The substances are not perceived by the mind, but we know that they exist for sure.

Now if we do not perceive the substance, then how do we know about them? Locke says that we infer substance as the support of 'accidents', qualities or modes. We cannot conceive the substances as subsisting by themselves. Substance is treated as an unknown substratum, which supports accidents. Locke talks about material and spiritual substances. The example for the former includes any object we come across in the material world. For example, a rose. We have a number of simple ideas of red or white, of a certain odour, a certain figure or shape, and so on which go together in experience, and we call the combination of them by one name, 'rose'. But what is the substance or substratum apart from the qualities or ideas is not known. Hence it is described as "I know, not what". Spiritual substance or mind is again inferred by us by combining simple ideas of thinking, doubting and so on, with the vague and obscure notion of a substratum in which these psychical operations inhere.

About the ideas of modes, Locke says that they are complex ideas, which contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves, but are

considered as dependencies on or affections of substances. The examples cited include the ideas signified by the words triangle, gratitude, murder, etc. According to Locke there are simple and mixed modes. Simple modes stand for the variations or different combinations of the same simple idea, without the mixture of any other ideas and mixed modes are compounded of simple ideas of several kinds, put together to make one complex one.

Ideas of relations are obtained by comparing an idea—simple or complex—with another idea. The idea of causality is an example. Again, we observe the simple idea of fluidity is produced in wax by the application of a certain degree of heat and infer that the simple idea of heat is the cause of fluidity in wax, which is the effect.

Locke's Empiricism: A Brief Assessment

Locke is an important philosopher both because he is the founder of the empiricist tradition in philosophy and because of his influential works in the fields of political philosophy. With his criticism of innate ideas, Locke challenges a long-established tradition of thought that goes back to the days of Plato. He has exposed some fundamental weaknesses of the rationalist tradition, which emphasizes on knowledge that is gained by the mind a priori. With his stress on sensations and reflections, Locke initiates a new beginning in philosophy that makes empirical observation and experience at the center stage. He proposes the ideation theory of knowledge and a representationalist epistemology, which exerted significant influence in the formation of ideas in the history of modern thought. But, Locke encounters difficulties with regard to his theories of substance and qualities. We shall examine his doctrine of qualities in the next chapter.

Quiz

1. Which is not true of innate ideas?
(a) Native to the mind (b) Held by the rationalists (c) Gained from experience (d) The soul receives them in its very first being
2. What are ideas according to Locke?
(a) Innate to the mind (b) Mind has them from the beginning (c) Coeval with sensation (d) Copies of impressions.
3. The ideas of modes are:

- (a) Combination of simple and complex ideas (b) Simple ideas (c) Complex ideas (d) Both simple and complex ideas.
4. The ideas of beauty and gratitude are examples for:
(a) Simple idea (b) Combination of simple ideas of sensations
(c) Combination of simple ideas of reflection. (d) Combination of ideas of sensation and reflection

Answer Key:

1. (c)
2. (c)
3. (a)
4. (d)

Assignments

1. Discuss Locke's refutation of innate ideas.
2. Describe the different types of ideas.

References and Further Readings

Books

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