

John Locke's theory of ideas: a critical appraisal

Ijeoma Ene

Philosophy, Department of General Studies, School of Foundation and General Studies, Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Rumuola, Rivers State, Nigeria

Abstract

The fact is that philosophy is epistemology and epistemology is philosophy is not an overstatement. As a branch of philosophy, epistemology or theory of knowledge is mainly concerned with the nature, sources and scope of human knowledge. Much of the debate in this deal with the means of production of knowledge, and so, the issue of how knowledge is acquired being several millennia old had been tackled by many philosophers and one of them was John Locke, the first British empiricist and the father of empiricism. Contrary to the rationalists' view, John Locke believes that there is nothing like innate ideas and following Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics, he believes that there is nothing in the intellect which was not first in the senses. For him, all human ideas and knowledge derive from sense perception and reflection but the immediate objects of human knowledge are according to Locke, ideas. Since we have no direct knowledge of things themselves but only of ideas about them, the question is, how do we come about these ideas of things? For Locke in this regard, things impress or impose themselves on our minds, leaving in them their images or copies which for Locke are the immediate object of our knowledge are really the proper representation of things as to guarantee the certainty of our knowledge claims.

Keywords: philosophy, epistemology, empiricism, ideas, impressions

Introduction

That knowledge is certain is an accepted fact, though there are other schools of thought who deny this fact for example, the skeptics but skepticism as a philosophical position in the final analysis cannot be accepted because it is self-refuting. With the certitude of human knowledge established, the obvious question is, how is knowledge acquired? I mean, what are the sources and instrumentalities of knowledge and which one is the primary source of knowledge? Locke following the views of other empiricists emphasized so much on sense experience/reflection and consequently on ideas as the immediate object of our knowledge. The question is, how in Locke's view is sensation the primary source of our knowledge and ideas the proper representation of things. Since for him, we have no direct knowledge of things themselves but only of our ideas about them.

In the light of the heated epistemological debate on the primary instrumentality of human knowledge, this work throws more light on Locke's views on the roles of ideas as the immediate object of our knowledge and the proper representation of things. This work is limited to the empiricists' theory of knowledge as represented by the first British empiricist, John Locke and narrowed down to the roles played by sensation/reflection and ideas in the acquisition of true knowledge.

The expository method is used here and the focus is on Locke's view on ideas as the immediate object of our knowledge and the proper representation of things. The significance of this study cannot be over emphasized. This is a contribution to our knowledge claim in general and to philosophical and epistemological skepticism in particular as to bring about a true justification of our empirical knowledge claims.

Biological Sketch of John Locke

John Locke was born at Wrington Somerset on 29th August, 1632. His parents John Locke and Agnes Keene were married in 1630 and John was their first son, being called the same name as his father. His father was a lawyer by profession. In his boyhood, Locke knew the severe discipline of a Puritan home. He was trained to sobriety, industry and endeavor, he was made to love simplicity and hate excessive ornament and display.

In 1647, Locke entered Westminster School under its Royalist headmaster, Richard Bushy. In 1652, he was selected to a studentship at Christ Church, Oxford. The puritans who governed the university persisted in the traditional subjects which were Aristotelian in origin but scholastic in exposition. Four years later he got a master's degree. After spending eight years at Oxford, Locke had to still decide upon a career. There were various alternatives- the life of a Christian Church don to take holy orders, Medicine – a vocation which so much attracted him and a diplomatic post.

In the midst of all these attractions, Locke gradually realized his true vocation. It was neither the church nor medicine nor diplomacy, but philosophy. This was a diligent quest for a philosophical and practical issue which faced his generation. No wonder then he took to empiricism. His central work was in epistemology, where his new way of ideas has led to his being regarded as the main first 'British Empiricist'. Among his earlier influences was the first philosophy, Scholastic, which he had learnt. Other writers who influenced him even more than the scholastics were Descartes, Sir Robert Boyle and even Lord Ashley who was later Earl Shaftesbury. His works among others include; *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), *Two*

Treatises of Civil Government (1690), Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693), The Reasonableness of Christianity (1695), Letters on Toleration (1689, 1690 and 1693). Although other philosophers before him had written about human knowledge, Locke was the first to produce a full length enquiry into the scope and limits of the human mind and so, his book "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" became the foundation of empiricism in Britain. In his aging days, Locke was attended to by lady Masham, the wife of his friend Francis, and he later died on the 28th of October 1704. Though physically dead, he has immortalized his name as the first and greatest British empiricist.

Locke and Ideas

John Locke is of the opinion that knowledge and its acquisition is not a delusion. He refuted skepticism through his reliance on the activity of the senses in the acquisition of knowledge. To express what he meant by knowledge, he made use of certain key concepts like ideas. His entire epistemology hinges on this concept as revealed by his great work- "Essay Concerning Human Understanding". In fact, no term is met with more frequently in the passages of the *Essay* than the term idea. Acknowledging this himself, Locke (1959:viii) had this to say " Before I proceed on t hereto what I have thought on this subject, I must here in the entrance beg pardon of my reader for the frequent use of the word idea.

For one to understand Locke's philosophy and his theory of knowledge, it is necessary to first of all explain and understand his notion of this keyword and the different uses to which he puts it. Being aware of the importance of this term in his philosophy, Locke (1959: viii) at the beginning of the *Essay* defines it as:

That term which, I think serves best to stand for whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks. 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.

Idea for Locke is the object of understanding when a man thinks, where thinking is used frequently to cover all cognitive activities. We are made to know that the objects of the mind are ideas and it would appear that the mind is fitted to deal with all its ideas. Idea may mean two things- a representation, representing either an existence in the physical world outside or secondly, it has a universal and logical content.

According to Locke, all knowledge originates in sense experience and is limited to knowledge of ideas themselves. That of which we are immediately aware and that which constitutes the immediate object of our knowledge is according to Locke an idea and only an idea.

Our satisfaction with what we experience in Locke's view means that we know only our ideas of sensation (drawn from the external world) or reflection (drawn from the internal operations of the mind). Knowledge then, seems to him to be nothing but the perception of the connexion and agreement or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas.

The implication of the definition is that first we can have knowledge no further than we can have the perception of agreement or disagreement among ideas.

Empiricism stresses experience but experience is not immediately of objective reality rather the object immediately experienced is the idea. When mention is made of Locke's conclusion that knowledge is restricted to ideas, he does not mean Plato's ideas or forms but ideas that are generated by objects we experience. They are the prototypical representation of those objects. From Locke's use of the word *idea*, the following senses could be distinguished. In the first place, it is used to express what philosophers should nowadays call *sense-datum* or *sensum* or the contents of our experience. The second meaning that is deduced is what Locke calls *simple ideas of sense*. Images, whether they occur in memory or in imagination are the third or meaning of idea. Another use of the term by Locke is when he was referring to characteristics or properties in a general sense which is not restricted to sense qualities. In this sense, idea means general property or concept. In summary, anything whether act or object, of which we are conscious is by definition an idea. As for the function of these various types of idea, it is easily seen that they cannot represent the world to us in the same way hence he distinguishes between primary and secondary qualities which we shall explain later. Locke does not recognize the existence of innate ideas. For him, there are no principles or ideas that we have any reason to believe we have prior to, or independent of, our sense experience.

Commenting on what Locke upholds, Mascia (1964:335) opines:

Hence there exists no innate idea; our intellect, at the first Moment of its being, is a tabula rasa, a clean sheet of paper on which nothing has yet been written. All impressions we later find thereon (which for Locke are ideas) come from experience.

So, when rationalists talk of innate ideas, the empiricists, Locke for example, talks of ideas not as innate but as facts of knowledge which originate from some other things. If ideas according to Locke are not innate all, the question is, what is the Origin that is the sources of our ideas?

Origin and sources of ideas

In x-raying the views of his immediate opponents and critics, the rationalists, Locke (1:1:1) says

There are in the understanding certain innate principles; some primary notions, characters, as it were stamped upon the mind of man; which the soul receives in its very first being and Brings into the world with it.

In displacing the above position and theory of the rationalists. Locke (1:1: 5) replies that " *No proposition can be said to be in the mind which it never yet knew, which it was never yet conscious of*". In his solution therefore, he said that the human mind is a clean slate on which nothing is written. It is through experience then that it is furnished with ideas. In acknowledging this Locke (11:1:2) commented:

Let us then suppose the mind to be as we say, white paper, Void of all characters, without any ideas; how does it come To be furnished? When has it all the materials of reason and Knowledge? To this I answer in one word, from Experience.

In that, all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself.

Since the origin of knowledge has been confirmed to be experience. Locke analyses experience into sensation and reflection. For him all our ideas spring from these two sources. Through sensation, we experience the world external to us and by reflecting upon these ideas we have an experience internal to us. It means that we cannot have the latter unless we have first had the former. For the latter, reflection simply means the mind's taking notice of its own operations; but its operations begin when the mind is provided with ideas which come from without through the senses.

This means that between the raw materials out of which knowledge is made, sensation has an upper hand. He would admit that these raw materials or ideas maybe worked upon by the mind into many complex forms; it maybe that the final products of experience when worked on by a developed human mind will no more resemble the idea of sensation and reflection from which they originated, still no new materials were given a new shape and order.

Locke at the beginning of the *Essay* does not propose to inquire into the correlates of sensation on the physical and physiological side. He will not as he said (ii) "Examine by what motions of our spirits, or alternations of our bodies we come to have any sensation by our organs, or any ideas in our understanding". Instead he proposes to adopt the historical plan method of accepting facts as they are, and the fact he accepts is that we have ideas from sensation. As our ideas rest on sensation according to Locke, in describing sensation. He writes (11:1:3) "Our senses conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to these various ways where in those objects do affect them". Again, it is through sensation that we come about the ideas of yellow, black, sweetness, cold, soft, hard, bitter, heat and all those such-like sensible qualities. Apart from sensation we have another facet of experience called reflection and which Stumpf (1977:276) describes as

An activity of the mind that produces ideas by taking notice of previous ideas furnished by the sense. Reflection involves perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing and all those activities of the mind that produces ideas as distinct as those we receive from external bodies affecting our senses.

This operation of our minds have nowadays been described as introspection. By reflection Locke (11.1.4) expresses himself thus " By reflection then...I would be understood to mean that notice which the mind takes of its own operations and the manner of them, by reason whereof there come to be ideas of these operations in the understanding." Such ideas involved and gotten here are perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing and all the different acting of our own minds. Now, reflection comes late. The child's first experiences are sensory as reflection, introspection and inward-looking are marks of developed and mature life.

Locke (11.1.8) further says:

The first years are usually employed and diverted in looking abroad. Men's business in them is to acquaint

themselves with what is to be found without; and so, growing up in a constant attention to outward sensations, seldom make any considerable reflection on what passes within them till they come to be of riper years.

Classification of ideas

Proceeding to analyse our ideas Locke classifies them in the following ways. The first distinction he makes is between simple and complex ideas. Simple ideas are ones that are not compounded of any other elements. They are presented to us only in sensation and reflection. The mind has the power, we are told to store up, to repeat and to combine these basic ideas once it has experienced them. They referring to simple ideas, constitute the chief raw materials for knowledge and they are received passively by the mind and they produce uncompounded appearances.

Locke (11.11.1) states:

Nothing can be plainer to man than the clear and distinct perception he has of those simple ideas; which being each in itself uncompounded, contains in it nothing but one uniform appearance, or conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different ideas.

Although an object has several qualities blended together such as white lily that has the ideas of whiteness and sweetness of odour without separation, the mind receives the ideas of white and sweet separately because each idea enters through a different sense of sight and the sense of smell into our minds in a single file. The simple ideas such as colour, heat, cold and taste are indivisible whereas complex ideas are made up of the combination of simple ideas. Such combination of simple ideas may result to things that have no corresponding entities in the real world such as ghost, unidentified flying objects, square circle etc.

Commenting on simple and complex ideas, Omoregbe (1991:58-59) has this to say:

Simple ideas are the impressions that things make on our Minds: they are the copies or representations which things leave in our minds when they impress themselves on them. Simple ideas are therefore directly caused by things and these ideas resemble their causes and correspond to them. Thus, Locke affirms that there is correspondence or resemblance between simple ideas in our minds and the things they represent. When two or more simple ideas are combined into one, we have complex idea. Complex ideas therefore, are combinations of simple ideas.

For Locke complex ideas can be exhaustively divided into modes, substances and relations. The mind can actively frame complex ideas using simple ideas as its materials hence complex ideas are *made by the mind out of simple ones* (Locke, 11.Xii.1.) The mind can combine two or more simple ideas into one complex idea bearing in mind, the fact that Locke first distinguished between three activities of the mind on which he bases his classification namely: Combining, Comparing and Abstracting our ideas.

The Senses, Reality and Cognition

According to Locke (iv.1, 2) "Knowledge is nothing but the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas". Replying on the scholastic dictum the empiricists claim that for there to be

knowledge at all, the individual who possesses the senses and the reality which is the object outside us must come in contact. In relation to this opinion, Locke (iv. 3) says

“Our knowledge therefore is real only so far as there is a conformity between our ideas and the reality of things”

Few people would doubt either the reality of the object perceived or the reality of the perceiving organs. Ideas or perception of our minds represent to us the physical objects which cause these ideas or perceptions. He holds that objects have within themselves certain objective *primary qualities* such as solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest and number which are capable of producing *sensation* or *perception* that is *ideas* in our minds. These primary qualities *really do exist in bodies themselves*. Roundness and hardness, for example, really do exist in a hard, round object.

The primary quality as a power of any external object to produce ideas in our minds is inseparable from the body. Again, they are the exact and correct representation of the external object and lastly, they actually exist in them.

About the secondary qualities, they *in truth are nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce the various sensation in us by their primary qualities* (11.viii.10). The secondary qualities produce ideas in our mind that have no exact counterpart in the object. Colours, sounds, tastes, odours which are secondary qualities do not belong to or constitute bodies except as powers to produce these ideas in us. Within this scope they are produced in us by the operation of the insensible qualities on our senses, or to be more precise, through the operation of light rays on our eyes, sound waves on our ears, chemical effluences on our nose and so on. Commenting on this Locke opines (11, viii. 14)“ Whatever reality we by mistake attribute to them (secondary qualities) are...nothing in the object themselves, but powers...depending on those prime qualities”

In contrast to primary qualities, secondary qualities are separable from bodies and they neither exist nor are they resemblances of realities or objects. From this, it is evident that Locke upholds the objectivity of the primary qualities and at the same time maintains the subjectivity of the secondary qualities. The importance of Locke’s distinction between these two qualities presuppose the existence of a substratum which is generally called the substance. The idea of substance lies beyond experience and is obtained by abstraction.

Again, it is through this distinction that he sought to demarcate appearance from reality. The empiricists’ insistence on the senses as the main source and guarantee of knowledge is as a result of its primary nature and functions in the process of cognition. For them, the senses give us an indubitable knowledge and one in which error does not come to play. In acknowledging this, the evident question I will throw in here is this- Is there any contribution the subject makes in order to make it knowledgeable or intelligible or is that end process knowledge? If the answer is in the positive, it means that an individual is active in the cognitive process but if the contrary is the case, the individual is passive. Traditional empiricists uphold the latter.

For me, they cannot be right because this would be a mere dehumanization of man to the level of ordinary lower animals and objects.

Critical Evaluation

Locke’s concept of ideas as the immediate objects of human knowledge, though very laudable and plausible in our knowledge claims, raises a lot of epistemological questions and problems. According to Locke, when we perceive things, they impress themselves on our minds and leave their images (copies) there and these images are the representatives of things in our minds and in turn our ideas of things. The implication of this is that we have no direct knowledge of things themselves but only of our ideas about them, a representation of things in our minds. A further hybrid of this implication is an epistemological dualism of a direct knowledge of things themselves and indirect knowledge of things themselves that is, a representation of things in our mind. In other words, he created two worlds of knowledge – things themselves and ideas of things.

Furthermore, how do we know that the impressions, copies or images left in our minds by things when we perceive them really represent them since we do not have direct cognitive contact with the thing themselves. How can we be sure that our ideas of them are correct, in other words, how can we be sure and certain that these images or copies are true resemblances of things which they represent. To drag this view further, Locke’s position leads to skepticism, since for him we never know things themselves, only ideas; it therefore implies that we cannot even verify whether our ideas of things are true representation of things themselves.

Critics have pointed out that if Locke constantly held to his empiricism, he would have had no basis for contending that any of our knowledge is objective about the real nature of things. The substances which are the objects of our knowledge are not known as ideas. Hence, can we know anything about them if knowledge is the perception of agreement or disagreement among ideas? If all knowledge is restricted to ideas how can we determine that our ideas must have an objective cause or source and then conform in some degree to the real nature of things? Thus Avurum (1967: 104) contends:

Locke’s empiricism seems to lead to skepticism about the reality of our knowledge and to any genuine assurances that we can know something about the world outside our minds. Thus, if Locke’s account is true, the consequence is that nothing can be known of reality.

Such being the case, Locke’s empiricism failed in its attempt to prove the existence of a world distinct from thought and as a consequence lost itself in skepticism. Going further to another extreme, there is the danger of subjectivism in this philosophical system as most of our experience is something private.

Locke’s formation of ideas which is as a result of our perception of things and their impressing themselves in our minds, leaving their images (copies) there, makes the human mind passive while the objects of perception imposed themselves on the mind. This is in fact a wrong conception of human knowledge as that which derives all and only from the object.

Kant in his Copernican revolution in epistemology argues that things do not impose themselves on the mind but it is the mind that imposes itself, its own structure, on things forcing the things we perceive to conform to its own

structure. This results in things appearing to us not as they are but as the mind makes them to appear to us. The human mind is not at all passive but active in the cognitive process. Hence Kant distinguishes between *things in themselves* (which he calls noumena) and *things as they appear to us* (which he calls phenomena). For him, we can only know the latter but we cannot know the former.

The skeptical conclusions of the empiricists especially Locke's theory indicate the dangerous consequences of ignoring or denying the existence of non-empirical ideas. This conclusion may suggest that Locke's theory is defective in that it ignores a class of ideas, non-empirical ideas that would provide a more certain basis for our information.

Conclusion

Locke is faced with an acute dilemma. If the immediate object of knowledge is an idea, then man possesses only a derivation knowledge of the physical world. To know the real world adequately requires a complex idea which expresses the relationship between the qualities that we perceive subjectively and the unperceived existent. The substance which unities the common perceived qualities of figure, bulk and colour into the existing brown table is in Locke's terms, an "I don't know what". His honesty almost brought Locke to a modern relational definition of substance instead of the traditional notion of a thing characterized by its properties. But the conclusion drawn from the Essay is that knowledge is relational, that is, it consists in the perception "of the agreement or disagreement among ideas". For if Locke had argued that knowledge expresses an adequation between the complex idea in the mind and real object, then man would have the power to go beyond ideas to the object itself. But this is impossible, since every object is, by definition, an idea, and thus ironically, experiential knowledge is not about real objects but only about the perceived relations of ideas.

References

1. Avurum S. Introduction to Philosophy. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc, 1967.
2. Locke J. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (Collated and annotated by A.C. Frazer, New York: Dover Pub. Inc, 1959.
3. Mascia C. A History of Philosophy (4th Edition). New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1964.
4. Omoregbe J. A Simplified History of Western Philosophy. Lagos: Joja Press Ltd, 1991.
5. Stumpf SE. Philosophy: History and Problems (3rd ed.)U.S.A: Mcgraw-Hill Book Camp, 1977.