



Research Article

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A Critical Analysis on the Refutation of Innate Ideas in John Locke's Philosophical Thoughts

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Abstract

Epistemology is an attempt to understand the role of knowledge, its origin, development and validity. The scientists, psychologists, educationalists, moral philosophers – all are analyzing the importance of epistemology in the knowledge process. Epistemology is considered one of the branches of knowledge, and it supports logic by emphasizing the interrelation between the two. While explaining the significance of epistemology R.M. Chisholm says that it deals with issues like the distinction between knowledge and true opinion and the relation between conditions of truth and criteria of evidence. Such issues constitute the subject matter of the theory of knowledge. In the history of Western philosophy, the modern period is significant because, during this period, there were two schools of thought regarding the validity of knowledge and emerged. One is Rationalism, and the other is Empiricism. Rationalism emphasizes that the source of knowledge is the reason. However, the Empiricism emphasizes experience as the basis for knowledge. In both movements, namely, rationalism and empiricism, epistemology has been attempting to find the answers to some questions: What do we know? How do we know? What are the sources of knowledge? What is the difference between belief and knowledge? Furthermore, is it possible to get valid knowledge? The prominent empiricist John Locke read the writings of Descartes. He rejected Descartes' innate ideas logically, and he has elaborately explained the source of knowledge, the limit of knowledge, validity of knowledge, and its kinds in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. His empiricism received much criticism from the latest philosophers because he adapted some philosophical ideas from the pioneers. This article aims to justify whether John Locke's epistemology is neutral by explaining the basic characteristic of empiricism and its critiques. This study as a qualitative approach depends both on the primary as well as secondary sources related to the study as books. This study attempts to understand Locke from a critical standpoint. In the end, an attempt is made to show how Locke's central and bias philosophy has relevance even today.

Keywords: Innate ideas, source of knowledge, epistemology

1. Introduction

While searching for the validity of knowledge in the modern period, two schools of thought played an important role. The ontological position of Rationalism and Empiricism is exhibited in their approach to the theory of knowledge. Rationalists like Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza claimed that valid knowledge comes through reason. For example, Descartes asks the following question: How is it that we know the essential qualities, for example, of a piece of wax? His methodology depends on reason, and he argues that we have specific innate ideas and are *born with a certain disposition or propensity*.

Contrasting the above ideas, Empiricists like Locke, Berkeley, and Hume emphasized that valid knowledge comes through experience. Locke, for example, has stated that the scope of our knowledge is limited to and by our experience. He questioned the basic assumptions of Descartes, thus showing how both the Rationalist and Empiricists differ among themselves with regard to the process of knowledge. This essay critically analyses the chief empiricist John Locke's refutation of Innate Ideas and the significance of empiricism in modern Western philosophy.

In the history of philosophy, many attempts have been made to identify the source of knowledge. Even from the ancient period until now, there are many arguments and counterarguments made by scholars; there are no notable ideas that fulfil the requirements of epistemologists. Therefore, this research is attempted to analyze the problem, namely, whether the philosophical idea of Locke against the innate ideas are acceptable or not.

This article attempts to explore the salient features of innate ideas in the shadow of rationalists and the strong refutations by Locke and explain the well-organized philosophical ideas of Locke against innate ideas. It further tries to clarify how many other notable thinkers influenced Locke's philosophical thoughts.

2. Literature Review

The book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, is the prime source to this research topic. This is an original work by Locke and the edited version by John W. Yolton and published by York University at Toronto in 1976 as the fifth edition is available, and this edition has been used here. This book had been divided into Book I, Book II, Book III, and Book IV. In the history of philosophy, Locke spent his part of his life refuting the innate ideas coined by great rationalist Descartes. Hence, his masterpiece *Essay* brings out the ideas of rejecting innate ideas in Book I. This Book I has three chapters, and those chapters have valuable arguments against innate ideas. The first and second chapters deal with the argument that there are no innate speculative principles and no innate practical principles.

The third chapter of Book I, discusses other considerations about innate ideas. Here Locke makes his first attempt to find out the sources of knowledge, thereby establishing a method to find the particular knowledge. First, he would like to examine the notion of ideas. Then, he moved to endow the knowledge by those ideas and finally, he had to inquire about the nature and grounds of faith and opinion. Locke begins the first chapter to show that innate is not a speculative principle. Here he says that there is no universal fact in human beings, and without using reason, no one could be imprinted or assent a truth.

In Book I, he establishes the distinction among ideas. After this, he tries to prove that innate ideas are not a practical principle. Lock begins his argument with these questions: Where is that practical truth universally received, without doubt, or question, as it must be if innate? Here, Locke argues that the mind cannot imprint practical principles derived from nature and natural tendencies from the first instances of sense and perception.

In this study, the book *Locke on Human Understanding* by E.J. Lowe, published by Routledge, is used as a guidebook. This book is divided into eight chapters, and the second chapter lays on *ideas* where Locke establishes his philosophical thoughts against innate ideas. Here Lowe attempts to account for Locke's ideas against innate as theoretical and practical principles. Meanwhile, he points

out another view of Locke based on logical and metaphysical principles. In addition, this writing brings out the way that Locke's logical proofs against universal assent. At the end of this chapter, modern innatists have some thoughts to challenge Locke's arguments against innatism.

Problems from Locke, written by J.L. Mackie, has been selected for this research. This book is a deep study of John Locke works, and also many articles of this book have already been published in various journals. The author tried to show how the arguments emerged from Locke and related ideas and criticisms of those concepts by the empiricists and rationalists. Out of seven chapters, the last chapter deals with empiricism and innate notion. In this chapter, the author provides information against innate notions, but, on the other hand, he speaks about the possibilities of innate knowledge. Hence, the researcher could analyze this work with the source of information about the subject matter discussed here.

Next, *British Philosophy and the Age of Enlightenment* from Routledge. This is a notable work by Stuart Brown, and as an editor, he has made a pivotal contribution to compiling the collection of articles on British philosophy. This edition brings out the details of the intellectual arguments on various sectors by the British philosophers. This text is a collection of ideas of great scholars in the history of philosophy on knowledge, science, ethics, and political philosophy. In this text, chapter three considers Locke's approach to knowledge and its limits. This article entirely depends on the notable work, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* of Locke. The author provides a detailed account of the entry of John Locke into the field of philosophy and his lifelong works on knowledge. The writer examines Locke's work and discusses the limits of knowledge. Here, the concepts like qualities, ideas, modes, substance, and sense intention are discussed. The author had attempted to show how Locke's works against innatism

Finally, *A History of Western Thought – From ancient Greece to the Twentieth century* by Gunnar Skirbekk and Nils Gilje from the Routledge. This is a critical work of Locke. In this book, the eleventh chapter deals with the critique of knowledge of Locke. Here, we could find some criticisms of the earlier concept of knowledge and the new ideas of the origin of knowledge. We can understand that Locke sought to know what knowledge is and its acquisition method through this chapter.

According to the literature review related to this research title and problem, such as books, journals, and articles, we could find a detailed account of John Locke's entire philosophical works and the criticism of innate ideas. In the meanwhile, there are massive sources against Locke's view on knowledge. However, this research is trying to connect all the philosophical works of Locke to fill the gaps that how the entire works shaped to establish the concept of knowledge against innate ideas.

3. John Locke and Innate Ideas

John Locke, born in 1633 in England, was a bright scholar from his childhood. The reason for his popularity was reading philosophy related books and forward progressive ideas. The rebel of rights in England caused the young Locke to involve in politics, in consequence, made him expatriate from England in 1633. Found asylum in Poland started to read Descartes' philosophical books. We may say Descartes' philosophical books turned him into philosophy. As a result, he wrote a book of *An Essay concerning human understanding* in 1682. It is said that it is an essay that could be described as rubbish-removal, from the attack on innate principled in Book I (Brown, 1996: 72).

It means human beings are born with specific innate ideas. The rationalists said that it is the cosmetic universal. God, ethics, mathematically related measurement, logic all are the acceptable cosmetic universe. So all those are innate ideas. Locke explained that all those ideas are created in the mind itself. The two principal candidates for the status of innate propositions which Locke considers are, 'what is, is,' and second, it's impossible for the same thing to be and not to be.' (Schacht, 1995: 106). All these innate ideas differ from the ideas received from the external world. Innate ideas, rather than requiring reason, requires authority. On the question of what sources of knowledge we possess, Locke says, "whence has it (the mind) all the objects of cause and wisdom? All our wisdom is identified, and it eventually stems itself" (Skirbekk & Gilje, 2000: 214). Therefore, he rejects logically

the innate ideas which give hurdles for freewheel.

In An Essay concerning human understanding, Locke attempts to inquire into human knowledge's origin, certainty, and extent. He concluded that knowledge is restricted to ideas, but not in the Platonic sense. Further, he says that all of our ideas come to us through sense experience. As a result of this, he rejects innate ideas. He considered that innate ideas are dangerous tools in the hands of those who could misuse them. He believed that the doctrine of innate ideas is superfluous because it contains nothing as it cannot give an account in terms of practical experience.

Logically refrain from the God-related thought, Locke says that if the Ideas of God innate, there won't be different testament (worship) among the races and the countries. According to Locke, if the ideas are innate to the mind, they must be familiar to all minds. This, however, is not the case. Furthermore, some minds are not aware of it. The idea of God is not present in the mind of children, atheists and idiots. Locke points out that it is self-contradictory. Because according to Locke, to be in the mind is to be known by the mind. Therefore there can be nothing in the mind of which the mind doesn't know. If the rationalist says that the idea of God is innate and yet we require a reason to discover it, Locke says that this will be wrong. Because in that case, the idea of God becomes a creation or invention of human reasoning, and therefore, it cannot be innate.

Likewise, if morality were innate, there would have been no difference among the people's moral values. Likewise, mathematical measurements are not innate. Because the persons in the world are not in the same knowledge level. Understanding ability differs from person to person. Furthermore, we couldn't find intelligence and foolishness among the people.

On the other hand, Locke argues that thought could not be stated to be in the sense until realized. However, children do not think about metaphysical concepts including God, ethical values, logic, and mathematical facts, but instead of obvious evidence, they regard it as an unambiguous guess to maintain a place. Moreover, itinerants to lands far away announce that they will meet with the public, without knowing God and who think it is virtually just to feed their opponents. Religious and ethical values could not be described by the theory of intrinsic ideas (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

They believe people have in God specific moral values and some mathematical truth. For example, $2+2=4$ are familiar to all persons. Therefore they emphasize that these are innate. However, Locke explains that the above thoughts are not innate, but those are omnipresent. Sun, chilly, heat, fire, water connected ideas are common to all the person. We don't name it as innate. Even $2+2=4$ also received clear and distinguished characteristics of experience.

The children and mentally disordered people failed to accept the cosmetic acceptability; they didn't know it briefly. "...if such universal agreement existed, it would not prove knowledge of the principles to be innate; but there is no such universal agreement, for they are not present in the minds of children and many adults" (Grayling, 1995: 490). Among people, a group only understand the innate. The majority of people are in a position how to accept the matter. How can we accept rationalist ideas that each person knows the innate ideas and the universal character of their sayings?

Furthermore, to abolish the obstacles in acquiring knowledge, he explained the beginning of knowledge, its quality, its limit, activities and character, and attempts to define it. Locke identified experience as a source of knowledge. At the time of human birth, the mind is like a blank plate or paper (*tabula rasa*). When we have communication with the external world, knowledge is registered as ideas in mind. Ideas are also we get by sensation or experience.

Thinking, belief, skepticism (doubting), acquiring knowledge, freewheel all are embodied by sensation. These sorts of ideas are two kinds. They are simple ideas, example sound, flagrancy, moment, sight, assumption, analysis, assessment, happiness, pain, and unit. The other is complex ideas. Thinking repeats again the simple ideas, and by collecting them, we create complex ideas.

Even though the mind is like blank paper, as soon as it receives senses, it takes its movement. It may change the ideas in different ways – combine, divide, and connect all these ways mind create thousands and thousands of ideas Locke named it as fictional skills of the mind (Locke, 1682: 41). The complex ideas are of two types: modes and substance. A mode is a complex idea that cannot exist in

itself murder; gratitude etc., are modes. A substance is a complex idea that can be supposed to exist in itself. The substance is of two kinds, viz. spiritual (mind) and material (matter). A spiritual substance is that which is capable of knowing or experience the world of objects. All minds are spiritual substance. They support and maintain several ideas which they receive. A material substance is not capable of knowing or experiencing anything else. However, it is capable of being known or experienced by the spiritual substance. A material substance supports (physical) qualities, and According to Locke, mind and matter are opposite realities. They have nothing in common.

These ideas come to as knowledge concepts in mind that must have a connection or conflict. By incorporate knowledge, we receive the optimistic knowledge that sugar is sweet. As there is a contrast to say the stone is soft, we can understand that the stone is not soft. These two actions are subjective modes. This subjective mode is compromised only with beliefs. Belief is essential for knowledge, but it can't be a cause for the perfection of knowledge. Whenever the knowledge acts through the channel of belief, then the subjective wise belief becomes objective wise knowledge, stresses Locke.

4. Results and Discussion

Can we accept the position of Locke in epistemology? This question can be analyzed critically and it is the objective of this research. The following questions become pertinent in this context. If mind and matter are opposites, how can there be any relation between them? How can the mind know matter? Because knowledge is impossible without there being any contact between mind and matter? The latter being opposites, how can knowledge be possible?

Locke answers the above questions with his "Representative theory of perception". By this, he means that a material object, which is outside, sending its sensation of mind through the eye. He states that refute not that normal trends engraved on human minds exist (Locke, 1682: 48). The sensation impresses its self upon the mind. This impression, image or copy of the object is called an idea. Thus an idea is a representation of an external object. From this, it follows that material object is not directly present to the mind. "As a mirror reflects the object in front of it, or as a camera produces likenesses inside itself of the object outside, so the mind is thought to mirror the world or to form copies or representations of external things, with the help of the mechanisms of the sense organs, nerves, and the brain". (Harris, 1969: 198). However, it only represents using the idea it causes. The mind perceives the idea, which is a copy of the material object, and through this medium of idea or copy, it knows the material object. Thus according to Locke, there is no direct relation between mind and matter. There is only indirect relation, and this indirect relation takes place through the idea.

The above theory is criticized as follows. If the human mind does not directly know the material object, how can we say that the material object exists? We can only say that idea exists. If Locke says that the idea must have a cause and therefore the material object must be accepted, Berkley says that the cause of the idea need not be a material object. It may even be God.

Moreover, Berkley argues that Locke's claim that ideas of primary qualities resemble the objects themselves is unsupportable (Warburton, 1999: 63). A supersensory power may be causing the idea in mind. If we accept Locke's theory, it would be difficult to distinguish between a factual idea and a false idea. Because we have no direct relationship with the object, we cannot compare the idea with the material objects and decide whether it is true or false.

When Locke rejecting the innate ideas, he considered only the weakness in argument for his rejection and not telling the general aspect of the above matter was his partiality (imbalanced). How did the word God come into a language? Specific morality values are common for all people. Furthermore, telling no, no gives emphasizes the possibility of availability. This was the meaning of philosophers, and Locke is not an atheist. He believes in the existence of God. He has given the cosmological and teleological proofs for the existence of God. According to cosmological proof, the entire world must have a cause or creator. Under the teleological proof, he points out that there is a

sense of purpose in all the things in the world, which can be philosophically explained only by accepting the existence of God.

Both these pieces of proof are inconclusive. Therefore Locke says that the existence of God should be accepted mostly as a matter of faith. Thus like Descartes, Locke also accepts three realities in his system, viz, mind, matter and God. That is why he is said to be significantly influenced by Descartes in his philosophical thinking. Locke started his thinking by criticizing Descartes. However, in the course of his philosophy, he accepted some of the main principles of Descartes. Locke articulates that human beings have an instinctive knowledge of man's survival and a dependable inner insight that human beings are (Stumpf, 1966: 285). Hence Locke is sometimes called *Cartesian*.

Locke couldn't go beyond the limit because he explained valid knowledge through empiricism. He attempts to go beyond but could not do so. Receiving experience by senses, knowledge registers in our mind as Ideas. Locke says two things in the creator of Ideas. Those are sense and perception. Here we find it difficult to connect the experiences with perception. We can connect this with rationalists' intuition ideas, or the alternative word is Locke's perception.

Furthermore, Locke agrees that he has no distinctive preference for the word idea, but after dealing with dissimilar words, he finds it to be the most convenient of all possible. Emotional data, recollections, pictures, thoughts, philosophical ideas vary significantly from each other and calling them all by the same name is called muddle. Locke needs an exact word to grip all the instant meanings of sympathies. However, his usage of the word idea in this broad way leads to vagueness. Gilbert Ryle indicates that how Locke shines a new light on where there was darkness before. Ryle grasps that knowledge, confidence, estimation, trust, sensation, view, wisdom, judgment, notion and study of the remaining ideas are not laboratory work (Rubaia, 2017: 141).

The direct combination of sensation and perception create simple Ideas. With these simple ideas, the mind has created several complex Ideas by thinking more and more. So Locke creates a question how the mind gets this skill? He doesn't mention this. There is no skill to create Ideas in mind without the help of sense organs. Colour, sound, perfume (smell), extension, figure, and movement all come through by sensation. They are straightforward and remembering, comparison (coherence), collection, dividing, skeptic (doubting), all are actions of the mind, and the three primary mental operations involved are combination, comparison, and abstraction (Olscamp, 1971: 182). According to Locke, the mind's above-said actions can be done because the mind has passive power. Because of these characters, the mind accepts the external world situation. Here we find difficulties in how the passive mind changes the complex ideas accepting the sensations? Therefore the mind is not passive.

According to Locke, number, extension, figure, cubic measure all have primary qualities which we can't separate from these objects. From the primary quality, the mind gets secondary qualities like scent, taste, sound, etc. Berkeley didn't accept Locke's above explanation. All the subjective ideas are not the ideas that are separate from the mind. All the primary characters are figures, and they are separate from the mind.

The knowledge that is given by complex ideas can't be compared with experience. These are not received directly by senses. Therefore we cannot measure experience quantitatively. It ensures by reasoning power. Regarding this matter, Locke's explanation goes beyond experience. The theory of the substance was also brought into the idea by Locke. The substance appears as core substances as the collection of characters in the external world. Likewise, the soul is there as the collection of actions by the mind.

Furthermore, it is impossible to inactive ideas are created. So there must be something as a base that is called soul. Our sense organs observe all the materials in the external world one by one and become knowledge. Rejecting Locke's above explanation, the Gestalt theory concludes that observing the objects part by part cannot bring holistic knowledge. Absolute knowledge of an object should observe as a whole.

Locke emphasizes experience that we can't gain general knowledge from experience. So how the valid knowledge will be given by experience. How the knowledge without generalization be a base for

science? These questions were raised. Modern psychologists say that naturally, the sensation only could not bring meaning without the actions of the mind. Therefore, experience without reasoning can't bring an acceptable theory of knowledge, not only that the knowledge received from individual experience cannot bring a valuable solution to the Philosophical problems. Indeed, it will not give a common acceptable knowledge. For all these reasons, the logical solution of Empiricism puts us in a skeptical position. When explaining the validity of knowledge, Locke derives from his empiricism, going with the rationalism of Plato and Kant. When he accepts that the mind makes simple ideas into complex ideas, he can't reject that the mind is important and has active power. This experience provides needed data for knowledge, but the mind only makes them into knowledge. Locke says rationalist knowledge is superior to the other. In this way, Locke hugs rationalism.

5. Conclusion

Philosophy is always a search for wisdom. In this process, criticism is unavoidable. Criticism is the foundation for progress. In that way, a problem in philosophy is the source of knowledge. To find the answer to this problem, Locke refuses to accept the answers of the rationalist. So his empiricism is not without limitation. On the other hand, it has a neutral position in epistemology. Furthermore, Locke's empirical theory in the world of philosophy created revolutionary thinking and was a walking stick in the elaboration and growth of philosophy.

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