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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### HAS LOCKE'S EMPIRICISM SUCCESSFULLY REFUTED BOTH INNATE IDEAS AND SKEPTICISM?.

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#### Abstract

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#### Introduction:-

In this paper I would like to explore on Locke's project of empiricism against rationalism and skepticism, which led to the evolution of Berkeley and Hume. He reacted against rationalism, especially that of Descartes. As Woolhouse points out, a tradition of constructive skepticism "has been traced to theseventeenth-century England, both in religious and non-religious areas... Locke belongs to this tradition of constructive skepticism."<sup>1</sup> About the nature of Locke's skepticism, Woolhouse further points out that it is "both *limited* and *constructive*. These two features explain how, beginning from a basically skeptical position, he can still hope to avoid the worrying, doubting outlook which often characterizes such a position."<sup>2</sup> Locke's skepticism is limited in the sense that he rejected that kind of skepticism which is general. Locke believes that there are areas where our knowledge claims are free from doubts and uncertainty. Locke, however, recognizes that there are some areas where our understanding cannot reach. About these areas, according to Locke, we should not accept anything to know. We should be content to remain ignorant of these areas. According to Locke, an attempt to go beyond one's mental capacities only leads to frustration and despair. As he remarks, "...men, extending their inquiries beyond their capacities, and letting their thoughts wander into those depths where they can find no sure footing, it is no wonder that they raise questions and multiply disputes, which, never coming to any clear resolution, are proper only to continue and increase their doubts and to confirm them at last in perfect skepticism."<sup>3</sup> This is Locke's constructive skepticism. This suggests a way to avoid skepticism. The way is not to indulge in asking questions and making inquiries about the area where human understanding cannot reach.

Locke has tried to refute the doctrine of innate ideas and principles. Locke's analysis of human understanding presupposes the driving away of all those unacceptable and unexamined things which were put into the human mind by earlier philosophers. The rationalist philosophers from Plato to Descartes and Leibniz have been putting into the human mind all kinds of ideas. Of course they did not take any credit for doing this. Sometimes God has been made responsible for putting ideas into the human mind, at other times nature itself had been made responsible, and yet on some other occasions it was said that the human soul has certain ideas from its very birth. Locke had no wish to increase the stock of things that already existed in the human mind. He wished to start with a clean human mind. Plato was certainly not starting with a clean human mind when he thought that all knowledge was recollection. Ideas were already existing in the mind, man had only to recollect them. Descartes improved the situation by rejecting the mythology connected with recollection and rebirth. Finally, Leibniz considered the human mind having innate abilities to know certain things. From the time of Plato to the time of Leibniz several versions of innateness hypothesis were presented by philosophers. Whose version was attacked by Locke? Locke seems to have attacked only a crude version of the innateness hypothesis. Referring to the innateness doctrine, Yolton points out, "The

doctrine underwent, in general, a transformation from its naive form to a modified version. The naive form claimed that God wrote into or impressed upon the soul or mind at birth certain ideas and precepts (or a developed conscience capable of deciding what is right and wrong, independent of custom or learning) for the guidance of life and the foundation of morality, even though we do not become aware of these innate principles (or of the conscience) until maturity.”<sup>4</sup> The naive form of innatism was introduced to sustain morality and religion. This sort of innatism is easy to criticize. But it is doubtful whether Locke has rejected this kind of innatism. He was certainly not against morality and religion. But the improved version of the doctrine of innate knowledge was difficult to criticize. During the days of Locke himself innate knowledge was given a *dispositional* analysis. It was “claimed not that men are born with completed ideas and principles of morality, but only that such knowledge was implicit in the soul and merely required experience to elicit awareness of it.”<sup>5</sup> This means there is no contradiction between having innate knowledge and using experience to make it explicit. To call some piece of knowledge innate simply means to have potentiality to have such knowledge. Potentialities are not occurrences, but can lead to occurrences.

Lee, Sergeant and Leibniz attacked Locke’s empiricism in order to defend innate ideas. According to Lee, “If all knowledge comes by our *senses* or *Reflexion*, which is his Maxim, then there can be no certain knowledge of the truth of any general Proposition whatever; because our senses can reach but to *particulars* and *Reflexion* no farther.”<sup>6</sup> This would mean the success of skepticism. Skepticism denies the possibility of knowledge, i.e. certainty. Without general propositions we cannot make any progress in any science. According to Lee, man would lose all privileges over brutes. Man, says Lee, is better than brute because he has the ability to use general principles and arrive at general truths. Sergeant’s *Solid Philosophy Asserted* contains criticism of Locke, which is not very unlike the criticism of Lee. According to Yolton, Leibniz’s “criticism of Locke’s empiricism echoes that of Lee.”<sup>7</sup> According to Leibniz, not only mathematics and geometry contain truths that are independent of experience, even theology and jurisprudence contain truths that are necessary. According to all the three, Lee, Sergeant and Leibniz, no knowledge is possible without the help of general principles and general principles cannot come from experience. As Yolton refers to them, “Lee, Leibniz and Sergeant were concerned with laying bare what they took to be the necessary rational presuppositions of any theory of knowledge. All three were committed to a theory of knowledge which in effect removed analysis and investigation from experience and gave it an *a priori* foundation in general principles.”<sup>8</sup> If general principles have to function as the foundations of knowledge, then there is no question of obtaining them as the end product of the process of knowledge. For they themselves make knowledge possible. The present discussion of course does not mean that Locke made no contribution to philosophy through his attack on innate ideas. He certainly made a significant contribution by attacking the innateness hypothesis. It is his attack on the doctrine of innate ideas that led philosophers to give more attention to mind and its capacities.

Locke has rejected innate ideas simply for showing that the child takes birth without having any ideas in his mind. It is his birth in the world that is responsible for ideas arising in his mind. It is not *reason* but *sense* which is causally responsible for the birth of ideas. Sense is again divided into two kinds, outer and internal sense, i.e. *sensation* and *reflexion*. It is the contact of mind with the external world that leads to the generation of ideas. What is the epistemological status of an idea once it has been generated? The epistemological status of an idea is that it is an object of thought when a man is involved in the process of thinking. As Locke points out referring to the term ‘Idea’, “It being that term which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever 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.”<sup>9</sup> In order to explain the meaning of an unfamiliar term we take the help of familiar terms. But the terms *phantasm*, *notion* and *species* are as much familiar or unfamiliar as is the term *idea*. No progress is made in clarity except that the ideas occur in thinking. As Bishop says, “As to the *Terms of ideas*, I have no objection to the use of the word itself; provided it be used in a common sense, and no weight be laid upon it more than it can bear; for I am for no new affected *Terms* which are apt to carry Men’s Minds out of the way; they are like *Ignes fatui* which seem to give light, but lead those that follow them into Bogs.”<sup>10</sup> Bishop means to say the term *idea* has been given a new technical meaning, which is different from its ordinary meaning. Locke has hardly succeeded in explaining the new meaning of the term *idea*.

Several of Locke’s contemporaries including Lee and Sergeant were quite dissatisfied with Locke’s use of the word ‘idea’. Locke, however, is not muddled by his critics’ remarks. The term ‘idea’ was already in use. Rationalist philosophers from the days of Plato to the days of Leibniz who used the term gave it some meaning. Locke too is giving the same meaning to the term *idea* except that it should not be considered as innate to the mind. The mind has not taken birth with any kind of ideas; they have come to one’s mind through the senses. The matter is quite simple but Locke’s critics have unnecessarily made it complicated. The only difference between Locke and the rationalists

is that some rationalists like Plato considered ideas as objective and real, having existence outside the mind of man, they were not restricted to the mind. But for Locke ideas exist nowhere except in the mind. Thinking depends on ideas and ideas depend on thinking, there is a reciprocal type of dependence. Not only that ideas do not exist outside the mind; they do not exist even in the mind without the act of thinking. This point is important because Locke's concept of mind is a little different from the Cartesian concept of mind. Locke does not accept that the mind is occupied in thinking all the time. There are occasions when the mind does not have thoughts at all. On those occasions the mind would fail to have ideas. So ideas are in the real sense thought-dependent objects. This would make ideas into some kinds of objects existing in between the thoughts of a man and the external reality. Man is not directly in contact with the external reality. He is in contact only with his ideas. As Chappell points out, "The epistemological objection is that the presence of such objects in perception creates an impenetrable 'veil' between perceivers and the external world, making it impossible for them to know that anything exists outside their minds;"<sup>11</sup> Our knowledge of the external world would be completely inferential. There is no chance for removing the veil of ideas and looking into the external world. There is no possibility of being acquainted directly with the objects of the external world. The external world is represented through the ideas. So, if we have any knowledge of the external world, it is only through the mediation of ideas.

Locke considers 'red', 'blue', 'hard', 'soft', 'sweet', 'cold' etc. as examples of simple ideas which come through *sensation*. The mind acts on its own operations and produces the simple ideas of reflection such as perception, thinking, doubting, and reasoning. Any simple idea, which is in the mind of a man, has come through either by sensation or by reflection. The mind has no ability to generate any simple idea by itself. However, it can produce compound ideas by joining simple ideas. So, in a way complex ideas also are not generated by the mind except by the compounding of simple ideas. The examples of compound ideas are the ideas of substances, modes and relations.

The mind not only compares ideas and compounds them, but it also involved in the acts of abstraction. For the human mind has not only simple and complex ideas, it also has abstract ideas, which involve generality. The abstract general ideas are possible through the mental activity of abstraction. Consider how the abstract general idea of *man* is formed? Those who are involved in abstraction "make nothing new, but only leave out of the complex idea they had of *Peter* and *James*, *Mary* and *Jane*, that which is peculiar to each, and retain only what is common to them all."<sup>12</sup> The general idea of man is formed by abstracting what is common to Mary, Jane and Peter, leaving out what is peculiar to each one of them. Certain remarks of Locke on the nature of abstract general ideas have exposed him to bitter criticism by Berkeley and Hume. As Locke says concerning the general idea of a triangle, that it "must be neither oblique, nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor Scalene; but all and none of these at once. In effect, it is something imperfect that cannot exist, an *idea* wherein some parts of several different and inconsistent *ideas* are put together."<sup>13</sup> So the general ideas for Locke are self-inconsistent because they are constituted out of inconsistent parts. Both Berkeley and Hume refused to accept that the mind has any such ideas.

According to Locke, the mind is equipped with not only simple, compound and abstract general ideas, but also with ideas of two other kinds--ideas of primary qualities and ideas of secondary qualities. The distinction between perception and secondary qualities was popularized by the scientists of Locke's time. Primary qualities are such as shape, size, number, motion or rest and solidity. The secondary qualities are such as sweet, cold, heat, colour, and soft. Primary qualities are considered intrinsic properties of material objects. But the secondary qualities are only powers of material objects to produce their ideas in the human mind. Concerning the ideas of these qualities in our mind Locke maintains that the ideas of primary qualities are like the qualities existing in physical objects. But the ideas of secondary qualities do not have their counterparts in the physical world. This implies that size and shape are really part of the physical world. But the colour that we see in an object does not belong to it. So also sweetness, softness, etc. do not belong to the world.

Apart from the primary and secondary qualities, there is a material substance. Qualities are always qualities of something or other. Qualities cannot float in the void; they require a substratum to stick on. Material substance is that base. In postulating material substance and its primary and secondary qualities, Locke has broken his ties with rigid empiricism. He has accepted the existence of unobservable entities, for neither primary qualities nor the substance in which they exist, can ever be observed. These entities are unobservable in principle.

Though Locke considered the reality of mind independent of the reality of the body, he was not a Cartesian. He refused to reduce the mind to thinking and the body to extension. There is no doubt that the mind thinks, but not

continuously. It has the ability to think, and ability is not an occurrence. So also is not extension but solidity, which is the real character of matter. Locke's views on mind-body dualism have led him to extremely novel views about personal identity. The specialists on personal identity generally begin their work by quoting Locke. According to Locke, a *person* stands for "a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places."<sup>14</sup> There are two important implications of Locke's views. First is the distinction between a person and a man. A man is a biological entity. Locke is concerned with the identity of a person. The second important implication is that a person is not restricted to one and only one body. A person may occupy more than one body. What is required for an identity of a person is not the identity of the body; it is the identity of consciousness. It is quite imaginable that two persons exist in the same body. So also, it is imaginable that one person is occupying more than one body.

Locke gives the example of a prince, leaving his own body and then occupying the body of a cobbler who has recently died. As Locke remarks, "should the soul of a prince, carrying with the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler as soon as deserted by his own soul, everyone sees he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions."<sup>15</sup> It appears that Locke refuses to define personal identity in terms of bodily identity. He considers continuity of consciousness as the criterion of personal identity. But continuity of consciousness presupposes memory, so memory becomes the criterion of personal identity. There are many other implications of Locke's views, but they are not relevant in the present context.

Let us finally consider Locke's view of knowledge. Most of Locke's contemporary critics considered him as a committed skeptic. How far is the characterization of Locke as a skeptic correct? If he was a skeptic, he was a constructive skeptic. Like Descartes and Leibniz, Locke regarded mathematics as the paradigm of knowledge. He refused to consider empirical sciences as giving us true knowledge. Natural philosophy would cover empirical sciences in our sense of the term. Everything other than the demonstrative and intuitive knowledge was only opinion or belief. His idiom was quite unlike the idiom of our age. We make a distinction between *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge. Locke did not consider a posteriori knowledge as a case of knowledge, because it did not have any certainty in its truth. Locke therefore considered *a posteriori* knowledge as a kind of belief or opinion. For Locke, only that was knowledge which was a case of *a priori* knowledge. It would therefore not be wrong to think that Locke was influenced by skepticism so far as our knowledge of empirical truths is concerned. What may be shocking to the philosophers of our age would be placing morality among sciences capable of demonstration. Locke has put ethics on the same level as geometry. Maybe Spinoza was responsible for Locke's giving as much importance to ethics and morality as to geometry. So, having ideas in one's mind does not mean that one would also have knowledge. Ideas are necessary but not a sufficient condition of knowledge. Sometimes they only succeed in giving opinion.

Locke is the founder of British empiricism, which has placed empirical knowledge in its proper context vis-a-vis mathematical knowledge. Locke did not put empirical knowledge above mathematical knowledge, yet he considered it as a case of knowledge though with less certainty. Certainty in its true sense is found in the domain of mathematics and logic.

It cannot, however, be held that Locke left human knowledge vulnerable to skeptical attack. In so far as empirical knowledge is based on our sense-contact with the world, we cannot doubt its validity. All that we must concede to empirical knowledge is probability, which is as much reliable as certainty in mathematics. Empirical knowledge is surely based on firm foundation in our experience of the world.

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