



Source And Classifications Of Idea: John Locke's Perspective

Subrata Das

Assistant Professor in Philosophy,
Ramananda Centenary College, Purulia, West Bengal, India.

Abstract:

Epistemology deals with the question of the source of knowledge or, in what way we acquire knowledge from the world. Rationalists and empiricists in their viewpoint emphasis on rationality and experience as the source of knowledge. As empiricist philosopher, John Locke declares sense experience as means to acquire knowledge. But the key-point of Locke's philosophy is we directly do not receive any knowledge form experience but only ideas of substance. Our mind process these simple data to build knowledge. In his renowned book 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' John Locke beautifully expressed his own vision.

Keywords: Sense experience, empiricism, perception, idea.

John Locke was an empiricist philosopher. Empiricism is the theory of knowledge which affirms that experience is the only source of knowledge. In another word, our senses can give us knowledge. In everyday life, we face various situation and by which we gain knowledge is called experience. An empiricist philosopher accept everything that comes to our knowledge through sense data. As a philosophy empiricism emphasis on sense experience as the guide to understand the nature of the world and which is not established through sense experience is uncertain. So, to be certain, an empiricist assume that one can justify any object of knowledge from sensory perception. Our ideas originate experience.

Rationalist view on the nature and possibility of our knowledge upholds a view that some knowledge are in our intellect before experience. It is known as innate idea. Certainty of these ideas do not depend on perceptual experience. But for the empiricism there are no innate idea. Everything we get from sense data.

If we take a look on Indian philosophy we can see that Cārvākas possessed the view that perception is the source of all kind of knowledge. Our sense organs supplies the elements of knowledge through direct perception.

John Locke as an empiricist Philosopher started his view by rejecting the rationalist idea of innateness mainly of Decartes theory. Decartes, a great mathematician and rationalist philosopher regarded as the father of modern western philosophy. He categorised the ideas in three divisions- Simple ideas, Complex ideas and Innate ideas. Simple ideas we get from the ordinary sense experience . such as, the idea of hill, tree, man, cow, chair, table etc. Our sense organs directly perceives the ideas through external experience. For complex ideas, our mind creates these ideas from the raw elements we get through experience. We receive the idea of mountain and gold from our sensory data. Our mind join these and creates an idea of golden-mountain that is not existed in our sensory world. These kind of ideas are called complex ideas.

Now the most significant theory of Decarte is about innate ideas. For Decartes our mind has the capacity to produce such kind of ideas beyond experience. The idea of eternity, supremacy, honesty, God etc. are innate ideas.

John Locke, as an empiricist focuses on only experience. In his first chapter of his renowned book ‘An Essay Concerning Human Understanding’ published in 1689, rejected the notion of innate ideas critically and in the second chapter established his own theory of knowledge. To Locke, process of getting any knowledge is sense experience and the elements are ideas. In the first chapter of Essay he showed that no ideas are innate. If there are existence of innate ideas it must be present in every mind equally. Children, mad, idiots and illiterate persons are not conscious about innate ideas. If there are innate ideas in mind it must be same in all minds. Some innate ideas like God, morality is different for societies and countries. Even if we accept that an idea universally present in all mind it is not proved that this is an innate idea. Such as, everybody may possess the same idea about fire but it does not prove that it is innate.

*“Idea of God not innate. This is all could be inferred from the notion of a God, were it to be found universally in all the tribes of mankind and generally acknowledged, by men grown to maturity in all countries. For the generality of the acknowledging of a God, as I imagine is extended no further than that which, if it be sufficient to prove the idea of God innate, will as well prove the idea of fire innate; since I think it may be truly said, that there is not a person in the world who has a notion of God, who has not also the the idea of fire. I doubt not but if a colony of young children should be placed in an island where no fire was, they would certainly neither they have any notion of such a thing, nor name for it, how generally soever it were received and known in all world besides...”*1.

In the second book of Essay, Locke establishes his notion of empiricism. He declares that every human mind is like a blank page at the time of birth. It has no idea. The mind receives all ideas through the path of experience. To him, following two steps we form our ideas. First, we receive simple ideas through experience and after that recombine those to build complex ideas. There are two main source through which we get simple ideas- Sensation and Reflection or introspection. We get all external experiences through sensation. Our sense organs give us the idea of colors, smells, taste, sounds and solidity. These builds our ideas about the external world. There are some ideas we get from our mental process. We feel happiness, sorrows, emotional pains through introspection.

“...The better to understand the nature, manner and extent of our knowledge, one thing is carefully to be observed concerning the ideas we have and that is, that some of them are simple and some complex. Though the qualities that affect our senses are, in the things themselves, so united and blended, that there is no separation, no distance between them; yet it is plain, the ideas they produce in the mind enter by the senses simple and unmixed.”2.

“...these simple ideas, the materials of all our knowledge, are suggested and furnished to the mind only by those two ways above mentioned, viz. Sensation and reflection. When the understanding is once stored with these simple ideas, it has the power to repeat, compare and unite them, even to an almost infinite variety, and so can make at pleasure new complex ideas.”3.

To understand Locke's notion let's take an example- I can get a complex idea of an orange by combining together the simple ideas of roundness, orangeness, sweetness, sourness and moistness. We form complex ideas from simple ideas.

According to Locke our mind is passive in the matter of receiving sensations. After that it becomes active to compare them with one another, combines them into complex ideas. Mind can form complex ideas out of simple ideas. Simple ideas of colour, sounds, tastes, smells and touch are received from eyes, ears, tongue, nose and skin. Likewise simple ideas of extension, figure, rest and motion are derived from sight and touch. Ideas like pleasure, pain, existence, power, unity are derived from sensation and reflection. At first our mind receives ideas from experience data and makes complex ideas. Here we can assume that the process of getting knowledge is inductive. It starts with particular facts of experience and later generalize them.

Complex ideas are divided into three categories- Modes, Substance and Relations. Modes are ideas that cannot exist separately. It depends on any substance. Such as, beauty, gratitude etc. Modes can be divided into two categories- unmixed modes and mixed modes. When we repeat or multiply the number 2 by ten times we get 20. It is the unmixed mode as we get it from single number. The mixed mode is produced with two or more number or substance or qualities. For example, when a person attracts with the structure and colour of something it creates the idea of beauty in him.

According to Locke, Substance is the unknown and unknowable substratum of qualities. Qualities cannot exist on their own. From which they come out and inhere, to Locke, is Substance. We can't know it directly

by sense contact. We can only know the qualities that impress our mind. From those impression we infer the existence of substance.

And for relations, according to Locke, when we compare two things or discuss, an idea occurs in our mind that is the idea of a relation. For example, father and son, teacher and student etc. All ideas, simple or complex, can be compared with each other and it produce an idea of relation.

Thus Locke has given explanation of his empirical thinking. All ideas are basically produced by sensation and reflection. When a man taking senses of outer world personally he or, she uses their sense organ both external and internal. Few qualities are different in the cases of personal sensation of the idea of same thing. Taste of sugar and spice always man to man differ accordingly. Even taking the same food for a person may be changed. Mental state of hunger regarding a food not gives same kind of sensation as it was first time. Then the question arises, is there no way to know the idea of taste of a particular food? The answer is, we know the world both limited and universal with the guidance of Locke's theory of ideas. Ideas consists with simple and complex that gives us an useful meaning of the practical world.

Locke's view on source of an idea that the mind is a blank page(tabula rasa) and human idea comes from experience is criticized. " 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 proved him wrong. It must be admitted that human beings are born with differences in various capacities both physical and mental."4.

Locke defines substance as unknown and unknowable substratum of qualities. Now a question may arise, if we cannot perceive the actual substance but only ideas through experience, it limits our knowledge to qualities only. From perception we only perceive primary or secondary quality of a substance. For example, in the perception of sugar we see its colour, taste its sweetness. But we can only infer the substratum of these qualities, not to see that. We may assume that Locke's idea theory can't reach to the reality as it is unknowable or not perceived through qualities. All our perceptions, our think process, our queries will be limited in the world of qualities. Locke's theory of idea limits human beings to think about the ultimum as it bounded its experience to the world of quality. If we perceive only ideas, then ideas are only real. We can not say that there is any substance rather ideas. Thus Locke has given explanation of his empirical thinking.

In conclusion, we may say that Locke did not formally define the concept of ideas. He offered empiricist theories. To him, we acquire ideas through our sense experience of this world and human knowledge always linked with this material world. Earthly life is more valued in his opinion. Locke's philosophical contribution is about the area of the nature of human meaning rather than reality. He showed the path of empiricism to the later philosophers and left his impression in the history of modern western philosophy.

References:

1. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding(1690)Book-I, Chapter-III, Copyright by Pennsylvania State university(Electronics Classics Series), 1999. page-72.
2. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding(1690)Book-II, Chapter-II, Copyright by Pennsylvania State university(Electronics Classics Series), 1999. page-101.
3. John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding(1690)Book-II, Chapter-II, Copyright by Pennsylvania State university(Electronics Classics Series), 1999. page-102.
4. Myint Myat, Nyein Nyein Hlaing, Critica Study og Locke's view on " source of idea", Dagon University research journal, vol-11,2020, page-72-73

Other sources:

1. Richard Falckenberg, A History of Modern Philosophy, Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2012.
2. Y. Masih, A Critical History of Western Philosophy, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, 1993.
3. J.N. Sinha, Introduction to Philosophy, Kolkata: New central book agency pvt, ltd.,2016.
4. Dr. Abdul Hai Talukdar, Adhunik Paschatya Darsaner Itihas (Bengali Version), Dhaka, Bangladesh: Ananya, 2011.
5. Dr. Md. Sowkot Hossain, Adhunik Paschatya Darsaner Alo(Bengali Version), Dhaka, Bangladesh: Tithi Publication, 2016.
6. Swapna Sarkar, Paschatya Darsan Samikkha(Bengali Version), Kolkata: Progressive Publishers,2015.
7. Dr. Kalyan Ch. Gupta, Paschatya Darsaner Itihas(Bengali Version), Kolkata: Mitram,1993.
8. Jaydev Vedalkar, Bharatiya Darsansastra ka itihas(Hindi Version), Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2012.