

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 7 (1), Serial No. 28, January, 2013:1-13

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v7i1.1>

John Locke's Epistemology and Teachings

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Abstract

This paper examines the contributions of John Locke to philosophy especially his epistemology and his idea of the primacy of experience as the basis of all knowledge. For Locke, there is a clear distinction between simple and complex ideas. The paper also examines the concept of primary and secondary qualities, his championship of utilitarian values, features of his teachings and the implications of his practical work of teaching on child curriculum and education generally.

Introduction

John Locke belongs to the epistemological school of thought called Empiricism. Empiricism is a reaction to Rationalism which holds that reason, (in some sense), is the only road to genuine knowledge. The three notable

rationalists are Rene Descartes, Wilhelm Leibniz and Baruch Spinoza. These rationalist philosophers have tried to find a completely certain foundation for our knowledge in terms of certain procedures of human reasoning.

On the contrary, Empiricism is a theory of knowledge which holds that experience, rather than reason is the source of knowledge. The modern empiricists were John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume and they held that no innate knowledge exists and that whatever knowledge man possesses is acquired through experience. In other words, they asserted that all genuine knowledge is derived from sense perception and denied that reason alone without the sense can acquire any genuine knowledge.

Our concern in this paper is not to discuss the Empiricists in detail rather it is to examine Locke's theory of knowledge (Epistemologies). John Locke (1632 – 1704) was the greatest and most influential English philosopher, whose thought became the foundation both for the classical empiricism and for liberal democracy. He studied medicine at Oxford University. His study of medicine, his family background and his flair for politics brought him into contact with the leading Whig Politician, Lord Ashley, whose influence got Locke succession of official appointments with the political and scientific circles of London (Stumpf 273). Locke wrote many books, but the most popular ones are those in which he articulated his epistemological and political ideas, and they are "Essay Concerning Human understanding" and "Two Treatises on Government" (respectively), both published in 1690. Locke's political philosophy is believed to be the theoretical architect of democracy as it exists in most Western constitutions, while his epistemological theory become the foundation of contemporary empiricism.

Locke's epistemology

The beginning of Locke's epistemology is the rejection of the rationalist doctrine that men have innate knowledge of some truth either moral or speculative, which supplies the foundations of knowledge. Against this background, Locke argued that experience is the source and basis of knowledge. He argued against Plato, Descartes and the Scholastics, that there are no innate ideas or principles. According to him, experience gives rise to various kinds of idea. On the basis of sense experience, he tried to construct an account of knowledge. For Locke knowledge is ideas, but not Plato's ideas or Forms, but ideas that are generated from experience.

Locke held that knowledge begins with ideas which are generated by experience. For him, idea is that object about which the understanding is concerned with while thinking. Our ideas are derived from two sources (a) sensation (b) perception of the operation of our mind, which may be called 'internal sense' (reflection). Since we can only think by means of ideas, and since all ideas come from experience, it is evident that none of our knowledge can antedate experience (Russell, 1979:289). The mind originally empty and blank receives, simple ideas of two kinds – those of sensation and those of reflection. Simple ideas of sensation are furnished by 'external objects' or bodies, which produce ideas in us by mechanical action upon our organism, by impulse, the only way which we can conceive bodies to operate in. We have five primary senses through which external world is known to us. They are the senses of sight, hearing, smelling, feeling or touching and taste. Each of these media communicates the external object in terms of idea of colour, sound, odour, hardness and sweetness.

The second of simple ideas is reflection of the mind upon its own operation as it is employed about the ideas it has got. Citing Harris (1954:29) "such reflection produces ideas which are, for the mind as capable to be the objects of its contemplation as any of those it received from foreign things but being wholly internal to the mind and, having nothing directly to do with external things, it is not strictly speaking sensation".

What Locke set out to make clear was that we cannot have experience of reflection until we have had the experience of sensation. In essence, a person's mind was in the beginning like a blank sheet of paper (a "tabular rasa") upon which experience alone can subsequently imprint knowledge. Simple ideas are the first beginning of knowledge. It is when a man first has any sensation that he first begins to have any ideas. Locke also said that though they do not in themselves constitute knowledge, they are the raw materials out of which all the knowledge of which we are capable is constituted.

Locke also distinguished our ideas into simple and complex ideas. Simple ideas, such as yellow, heat, sweet, hard, constitute the chief sources of the raw materials out of which our knowledge is made. These ideas are directly caused by things but are passively received by the mind through the senses. These ideas are not exactly the things rather they are copies or representations of things in our minds when they impress themselves (things) on our minds through the senses. The theory that ideas are not the same with

physical objects but copies representations or resemblance of the physical objects is known as Representative theory.

Complex ideas on the other hand are combinations of simple ideas. Here the emphasis is upon the activity of the mind, which takes three forms – the mind joins ideas, bring ideas together but holds them separate, and abstract. Hence, the mind joins the ideas of whiteness, hardness, squareness and sweetness to form the complex idea of a cube of sugar. The mind also brings ideas together but holds them separate for the purpose of thinking of relationship as when we say “the glass is greener than the tree”. Finally, the mind can abstract, making of general ideas by separation from all others that normally accompany them in their real existence (as when we separate the idea of man from individual men-John and Peter) and thus all its general ideas are made (Stumpf, 1977:277).

Locke’s Distinction between primary and secondary qualities

In an attempt to give in detail how we get our ideas and how they are related to the objects (material substance) that produce them, Locke distinguished between primary and secondary qualities of objects.

According to Locke, there are some ideas that appear inseparable from the physical objects while others change relative to the circumstance of the perceiver. How then do we know which ideas give the likely picture of the object? The answer lies in the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

Primary qualities are those qualities to be found in all bodies (objects) whatsoever. They resemble exactly those qualities that belong inseparably to the object. He included solidity, extension, figure and mobility among others. Locke held that in perception these qualities produce ideas in us which resemble their cause (the physical objects). For instance, the snowball looks round and is round, appears to be moving and is moving.

The secondary qualities, on the other hand, are nothing but powers in the objects to produce in us ideas which do not resemble their cause (physical object). The ideas so produced include those of colour, taste, sound and smell. They are not in the object of experience; rather they are incidental to the object. For examples according to Locke’s account, size and shape are primary qualities, while the colour that we see is not. The colour is the result of certain conditions, or as they called them ‘power in the objects’ which act

upon our minds so that we see colour, when the actual objects that we are experiencing do not, in fact, have any colour in them (Popkin and Stroll, 1981:194). Let's briefly examine Locke's teaching, was Locke a utilitarian in his views of the objects of education?

Features of his Teaching

There is ample evidence of this in his thoughts. The first aim of the teacher should be to help his pupil to form the habit of self-control. The great principle and foundation of all virtue and work is placed in this;

That a man is able to deny his own desires cross his own inclinations and purely follow what reason direct as best though the appetite lean the other way... He that has not mastery over his inclinations... is in danger of never being good for anything... The great work of the governor is to fashion the carriage and form the mind...

The tutor should remember that his business is not so much to teach him all that is knowable as to raise in him a love and esteem of knowledge, and to put him in the right way of knowing and improving himself when he has a mind to it.

Thus, Locke attaches only a subordinate value to learning itself. The great aim which the tutor should deep before him is not the communication of knowledge but the formation of habits. "The great thing to be minded in education is what habits you settle, and therefore do not begin to make anything customary the practice thereof you would not have continued and increased". Eventually the child will go beyond the reach of parental control, therefore there must be woven into the very principles of his nature that which will sway his life. Locke never allows the reader to lose sight of the permanent character of the results of every form of early influence. Much as he would command reason he regards habits as much the stronger.

Locke pays little attention to the different kinds of knowledge as instruments of mental discipline, his invariable test of the value of a subject being its use in later life. Thus he would be content with a small amount of Latin and has no regard for versifying. Locke seems to have been lacking in appreciation of the influences of art in all its forms. He never refers to the literature of the imagination, and he sees in music and painting only accomplishment not worth the pain spent on their acquisition.

Locke was in advance of his age in ascribing importance to English. He appreciates the tendency to learn a foreign language and neglecting the mother tongue.

He would include in his course arithmetic, book-keeping, astronomy geography, chronology, history, geometry, anatomy, civil law, and the laws of England. He thinks the first six books of Euclid enough to be taught by a tutor. Ethics should be taught more by practice than by rules. He had little faith in the value of logic and rhetoric for young people.

He has admirable remarks on style. 'To write and speak correctly gives a grace and gains a favourable attention to what one has to say; and since it is English then an English gentlemen will have in constant use of, that is the language he should chiefly cultivate and wherein most care should be taken to polish and perfect. To speak or write better Latin than English, may make a man be talked of, but he will find it more to his purpose to express himself well in his own tongue that he uses every moment than to have the vain commendation of others for a very insignificant quality.

When Locke wrote there was scarcely a department of physical science with the exception of astronomy. He did not envisage a natural science since he regarded nature as beyond investigation, but he does not oppose the study of nature and speaks in high terms of Newton.

Locke leaves very little room for the so called accomplishments. He thinks highly of dancing but objects to music because it takes so long to master it an 'leads one into odd company'. He objects also to painting but recommends fencing and riding as good exercise.

Locke would support the mastering of a manual trade both for the sake of the skill and for the sake of the exercise. He also mentions gardening, husbandry in general, carpentry, joinery, turning, delivering, painting, grafting, perfuming, yarnishing, graving, working in iron, brass, and silver; cutting, polishing, and setting precious stones, and grinding and polishing optical glasses.

Locke was fully alive to the advantages of travel but he would defer it as a means of enlarging experience until youth. To reap the full benefit from a visit to a foreign country the mind must be previously stored with knowledge of their history etc.

Such were some of the features of his teaching. Was he then a utilitarian?

Locke the utilitarian

R.H. Quick (1890), in his book *'Essays on Educational Reformers'* asserts that it is the fashion to treat Locke as the great champion of utilitarianism. He said "the tone of Locke's remarks is condemnatory of any teaching which tends to the general cultivation of the mind". But first what is utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is an impartial or personal moral view. Ordinary morality is "agent relative" and allows each person to favour these near or dear to him but for utilitarianism each person is fundamentally morally equal to every other, and any favouritism must be justified by overall good consequences for people generally. This make direct utilitarianism a rather demanding moral doctrine and opponents of such utilitarianism often criticize it for being too demanding (Honderich, 1995:890).

It must however be reiterated that the strength of utilitarianism as an ethical theory lies in its ability to replace the hodgepodge of our common sense moral intuitions with a unified system of thought that treats all moral questions in uniform fashion and in relation to an ideal, human happiness or desire – satisfaction, that is both less obscure and more attractive than most alternative (Honderich, 1995:892).

It is obvious that Locke had in his pursuit of knowledge emphasized the knowledge that will be satisfying in learning anything two points should be remembered, first the advantage we shall find from knowing that subject or having that skill, and second the effect which the study of that object or the practicing of that skill will have on the mind. The utilitarian view of instruction is that we should teach things useful in themselves and either neglect the result on the mind or body of the learner or assume Spencer's law of 'economy of nature'. Again an utilitarian will think how quickly the knowledge can be gained not how the method will affect the faculty or faculties.

Now if we take Locke's thoughts by itself he would undoubtedly be described as a utilitarian. He takes each subject of instruction and pronounces for or against it according to its usefulness or otherwise for the 'gentlemen'. And his methods deal with quickest route. But two points have been ignored – one, that learning for Locke is the last and least part of education; second intellectual education is not for childhood but for maturity.

The business of education is not as I think, to make the young perfect in any of the sciences but so to open and dispose their minds as may best make them capable of any when they shall apply themselves to it.

This is strange talk from a utilitarian and appears in the *Conduct of the Understanding* where he proposes to study intellectual education continuing he argued that “Studies... have for their object an increase of the powers and activities of the mind, not an enlargement of its possessions”.

Such were the departments of knowledge and the accomplishments necessary to include in the curriculum of the ideal gentlemen. But where and how was he to be taught? This we shall consider. Locke’s recollections of his own training at Westminster were not favourable to public school education. He sees very clearly the disadvantages of private tuition but nevertheless decides in favour of it. This view of the qualifications of a tutor is one that would be difficult to satisfy. He should be “a sober man and a scholar; he should himself be well-bred, understand the ways of carriage and measures of civility in all the variety of persons, times and places and keep his pupil as much as his age requires constantly to the observation of them. He should know the world well, the ways, the follies, the cheats, the faults of the age he has fallen into and particularly of the country he lives in. He should be able to teach Latin conversationally”. To secure this paragon of knowledge, virtue, and good breeding, Locke thinks that parents ought to be willing to incur considerable expenses.

Locke attaches great importance to the healthy development of the physical frame. “I imagine the minds of children turned this way or that, as water itself; and though this be the principal part and our main care should be about the inside, yet the clay cottage is not to be neglected. I shall therefore begin with the case”.

Without any methodical pursuit of the subject Locke makes some valuable remarks on warmth, swimming, air, habits, clothing, diet, meals, drinks, sleep, and medicine. He recommends plenty of open air, exercise and sleep; plain diet, no wine or strong drink and very little or no physic; not too warm or strait clothing; especially the head and feet kept cold, and the feet often used to cold water and exposed to the wet’. He would advise that the gentleman’s feet be washed in cold water everyday, and that he should ‘have

his shoes so thin that they might leak and let in water whenever he comes near it” Locke evidently believed in a hardening system.

Locke while he was disposed to trust nature seems afraid to trust natural taste and appetite in the matter of eating and drinking. He would withhold fresh meat from children for the first three or four years of their lives. He would have food sparingly seasoned with sugar and would prohibit all sweet – meats.

Locke attached great importance to moral education. The great aim of the teacher he tells us should be to train the mind so that on all occasions it may be disposed to nothing but what may be suitable to the dignity and excellency of a rational creature. To the end children should be accustomed to self-denial from the first ‘when their minds are most tender, most easy to be bowed;’ ‘for he that hath been used to have his will in everything as long as he was in coats why should we think it strange that he should desire it and contend for it still when he is in breeches?’ ‘I would advise that contrary to the ordinary way, children should be used to submit their desires and go without their longings even from their very cradles’.

Of the importance of the early cultivating habits of obedience there can be no question. ‘Would you have your son obedient to you when past a child, be sure then to establish the authority of a father as soon as he is capable of submission and can understand in whose power he is’.

Although Locke supports rigour in infancy he would not condone severity, rather obedience should arrive naturally and easily. He regards corporal punishment most unfit for education. ‘In as much it strengthens rather than weakens our propensity to pain.’ ‘It is impossible children should learn anything whilst their thoughts are possessed or disturbed with any passion, especially fear... keep the mind in an easy and calm temper... It is as impossible to draw fair and regular characters on a trembling mind as on a shaking paper.’

Locke recognizes the value of rewards and punishments but is opposed to rewards that take the form of material pleasures. He would have children treated as rational creatures and influenced not through their bodies but through their minds. He notices how sensitive children are to praise and how quickly they detect the withholding of it.

Locke is also opposed to multiplication of rules and again would rather trust the formation of habits 'which being once established, operate of themselves easily and naturally without the assistance of memory'. As might be expected he recognizes the educative influences for good or bad exerted on children by their associates, and warns parents against the bad examples which are often set by servants. A child is always learning, and not infrequently the lessons learned from servants are directly opposed to those taught by parents and teachers.

Although Locke encourages parents to inspire their children with a certain amount of awe and reverence, he is in favour as the children grow older to treat them with an ever increasing familiarity. Confidence begets confidence. Thus teachers should not keep children at too great a distance.

Locke's suggestions on the practical work of teaching are not always as sensible as his remarks on the principles of education, but he offers some useful suggestions. To start with he sees clearly the importance of securing the child's attention in teaching 'Children's minds are narrow and weak, and usually susceptible but of one thought at once. Whatever is in a child's head fills it for the time especially if set on with any passion. It should therefore be the skill and art of the teacher to clear their heads of all other thoughts while they are learning of anything, the better to make room for what he would instill into them, that it may be received with attention and application, without which it leaves no impression.' This being the case the teachers must fasten on the child's love of novelty and convert it from being a source of distraction into a means of securing attention. He must minister to the instinct of curiosity by bringing before it subjects of interest; he must multiply his illustrations and vary his methods; he must in short make his teaching more attractive.

One of its best chapters is the one on 'Curiosity'. 'Curiosity in children is but an appetite for knowledge, and therefore ought to be encouraged in them not only as a good sign but as the great instrument nature has provided to remove that ignorance they were born with. 'To encourage this he advises that a child should not be discouraged, nor laughed at, to take care that he never receives deceitful and evasive answers, and to bring strange and new things to enlarge his inquiry.

To render learning attractive Locke would make it simple but not easy. He approves of teaching letters with the aid of a dice on which letters of the

alphabet have been pasted. Languages he would teach conversationally. 'If grammar ought to be taught, at any time it must be the one that can speak the language already; how else can he be taught it? I know not why anyone should waste his time and beat his head about Latin grammar who does not intend to be a critic, or make speeches and write dispatches in it'.

At the same time Locke urges that teachers should not allow the pupils to have too easy a time. 'It robs it of half its charm and more than half its value'.

Two innovations in practical education associated with the name of Locke are the interlinear mode of teaching languages and the method of teaching writing by tracing over copies printed in light coloured ink.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the philosophy of John Locke. Although some aspects of his philosophy show inconsistencies, his theories are quite interesting and has influenced directly or indirectly the development of philosophy and teaching. In deed his teachings has impact on the later traditions of teachers and has influenced the education of generations of children.

Quick (1890) thus sums up Locke's views on education:

His aim was to give a boy a robust mind in a robust body. His body was to endure hardness, his reason was to teach himself denial. But this result was to be brought about by leading, not driving him. He was to be trained not for the university but for the world. Good principles, good manners and discretion were to be cared for first of all, intellectual activity next, and actual knowledge last of all. His spirits were to be kept up by kind treatment and learning was never to be a drudgery. With regard to the subjects of instruction those branches of knowledge which concern things were to take precedence of those which consist of abstract ideas. The prevalent drill in the grammar of the classical languages was to be abandoned. The mother tongue was to be carefully studied and other languages acquired either by conversation or by the use of translations. In everything the part the pupil was to play in

life was steadily to be kept in view; and the ideal which Locke proposed was not the finished scholar but the finished gentleman.

The deficiencies of Locke's scheme of education were the natural consequences of a reaction from the system current in his day. He underrates the importance of classical culture and almost wholly lose sight of the refining influences of art. 'Education in England' says Dr. Johnson 'has been in danger of being hurt by two of its greatest men Locke and Milton. Milton's plan is impracticable... Locke's infancy has been tried often enough but is very imperfect; it gives too much to one side and too little to another; it gives too little to literature one would concur with this. He had a livelier sense of the value of what he calls 'real knowledge' than of the beauty of literary form, and directly overlooks the cultivation of the aesthetic faculty. In his discussion of the value of dead languages he overlooks the great classics of Greece and Rome as models of literary excellence. Knowledge of the original should always be encouraged.

His great virtue however is that he took for his centre not the object, knowledge, but the subject man. Education should be geared to the child not to the curriculum.

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