



Locke's Atomic Theory of Ideas: Implications for Human Understanding

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Abstract. This paper examines Locke's atomic theory of ideas and its implications for human understanding. The question "how is objective knowledge possible?" marked the dividing line between rationalism and empiricism in the modern period of philosophy. Rationalism on the one hand upholds the doctrine of innate ideas which claims that man possesses certain natural intellectual properties that exist prior to experience and provides privileged access to reality. Empiricism on the other hand countered with the opposing thesis that all genuine knowledge is derived from sense experience. As the chief speaker of the empiricists, Locke presents an atomic theory of ideas which holds that there are no such things as ideas before experience. He maintains that all ideas are products of experience and serve as building blocks of human knowledge. By so doing, Locke reduces the entirety of human knowledge structure to a collection of ideas derived from sense experience. Locke's position has far reaching implications for human understanding as it addresses the foundation, structure and extent of human knowledge. In view of this, this paper through the use of philosophical methods of analysis and criticism examines Locke's theory of ideas and its implications for human understanding.

Keywords: Rationalism, Empiricism, Mind, Innate Ideas and Sense Experience

1. Introduction

In the history of philosophy, the "notion of ideas" has evolved from describing objective, transcendence realities to subjective, psychological representations. This intellectual journey maps the core of western epistemology and metaphysics, transitioning from the atomists' ideation, Platonic forms to modern consciousness. Hence, the term "idea" is historically traceable to the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus who stressed the origin of ideation in sense images. This usage of the term is continued by Epicurus. From these philosophers, the emphasis on ideas in connection to sense images continues throughout the

empirical tradition of western philosophy. In classical philosophy, Plato, used the word "idea" synonymously with *eidos* an ancient Greek term that translate literally to "form," "shape," or "appearance" depending on the context. For him, ideas are not "appearances" as comparable to the Atomists sense images but it refers to the structural elements of things. Sensation may provide an initial clue to ideation, but ideas are thought not sensed. In order to clarify this point, Plato introduced the Greek term *idein*, "to see" to refer not to mental thoughts, but to objective, eternal and immutable essences or archetypes. Thus, in Plato's thinking, true knowledge is achieved through the intellect (not the senses) grasping these perfect Forms (ideas), which exist in a transcendence realm. In Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, the Atomists and Platonists approaches are both utilized. Here, thought begins with sense datum or *fantasma* (from the Greek word *fantasma*-meaning image) and by abstraction, the former element is separated from it. For this reason, Aristotle rejected Plato's separation of Forms from physical objects. For Aristotle, ideas or "forms" are immanent, that is, they exist independently within matter, defining the essence of the actual things we experience in the world. In the medieval synthesis, ideas are situated in the mind of God. Here, medieval Christian philosophers merged Platonic and Aristotelian concepts with theology. They argued that "ideas" are eternal exemplars or blueprints residing within the mind of God. Human reason works by participating in or "illuminating" these divine ideas to understand truth. This explains why in St. Augustine's thought, the term idea, took a divine dimension as the eternal forms (ideas) are associated with the mind of God and are compared to the presence of designs in the mind of the artist. In the modern period of philosophy, that is, during the 17th and 18th centuries, the concept of an idea shifted radically from a cosmic reality to a strictly psychological, mental construct. In line with this thinking, Thomas Hobbes associated ideas closely with sense images. By idea, he seems to mean a *fantasma* or appearance in the brain resulting from the impression of an external body on a sense

organ. The continental rationalists of the 17th century following Plato make ideation the judge of sense data rather than the other way around. Consequently, the Platonic doctrine of innate ideas became the cornerstone of their view. The chief speaker of rationalism Rene Descartes separated ideas into three (3) types namely; innate, adventitious and factitious. It is based on this that Descartes's criterion of truth in terms of clear and distinct ideas are established. Thus, the history of ideas is, fundamentally, the history of how humanity understands its relationship to truth, reality and consciousness.

It is in response to the above tradition of the term idea that Locke seeks to establish his theory of ideas to correct what he sees as a dogmatic acceptance of innate ideas by suggesting that our ideas derived from objects of perception are the building blocks of knowledge, thereby grounding all our knowledge in sense-experience. This paper therefore seeks to examine Locke's atomic theory of knowledge and its implications for human understanding.

1.1 What is Idea?

Etymologically, the term "idea" is traceable to the ancient Greek word *idein* meaning "form", "pattern" or "the look of a thing" An idea is a foundational mental construct, thought, or image that exists in the mind. It is a concept, thought, opinion or belief. It is a mental representation of something or a plan of action in the mind. That is, it is a mental notion or image, a concept or archetype, it is a formulated thought expected to guide a course of action. Ideas are the starting point for all human creativity, innovation and problem-solving. Thus, ideas are the blue print for reality. Every physical product, artistic masterpiece, scientific breakthrough, and organizational structure began as a mere thought in someone's mind before being developed and brought to life

2. Locke's Rejection of Innate Ideas

In his attempt to answer that question "how is knowledge possible?" Locke begins on a negative note; a lengthy indictment of any theory of innate ideas. (Miller, 232). This to him is a necessary step to take in order to make a valid argument for his empirical analysis of knowledge. Locke felt that it is important to begin this task by clearing the ground in order to build a solid foundation for his epistemological theory. He therefore embarks on a mission to renew the epistemological project by clearing away the debris of unintelligible terms and useless systems of thought. These debris, according to Locke, are obstacles that stand in the way to

knowledge and for this reason must be swept away. The rubbish or debris he most wanted to sweep away was the doctrine of innate ideas. This refers to "ideas that are inborn and not the product of experience" (Blackburn, 186). The doctrine asserts that some kinds of ideas, principles, or knowledge are not acquired through experience, but are built into the mind itself. These ideas are clear, distinct, self-evident and innate in the sense that they are "born with us," as Descartes said, they are imprinted upon the soul. Example of such innate ideas are the ideas of substance, cause, God and the principles of logic. (Lavine, 141) This doctrine was a standard thesis of the rationalistic tradition from Plato to Leibniz, but Locke raises a number of fundamental objections to it. He describes the doctrine of innate ideas as follows:

It is an established opinion amongst some men, that there are in the understanding certain INNATE PRINCIPLES; some primary notions, KOINAI ENNOIAI (Greek: universal idea), 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. (1)

Being an apostle of sense experience as the source of our knowledge, Locke vehemently denied the truthfulness of the doctrine of innate ideas. He argues that the claim that we have certain naturally inbuilt innate principles is false, unreasonable and contrary to how we come to know things around us. He pointed out that the use of our natural faculties of the five senses to access information about the world around us shows the falseness of the doctrine of innate ideas. According to him:

For I imagine anyone will easily grant that it would be impertinent to suppose the idea of colors innate in a creature to whom God hath give sight, and a power to receive them by the eyes from external objects: and no less unreasonable would it be to attribute several truths to the impressions of nature, and innate characters, when we may observe in ourselves faculties fit to attain as easy and certain knowledge of them as if they were originally imprinted on the mind. (1)

The point Locke is trying to make in the above quotation is that in the absence of the faculty of the senses, how do we justify our knowledge of things externally located to us? Also, in view of the fact that we take for granted the role of the senses, we assume or it appears to us that the knowledge of external objects has always been with us from birth. This according to Locke, is an erroneous presupposition as all we know and are capable of knowing are basically based on experience.

Locke's line of attack on the doctrine of innate ideas is clear. It is by way of the questions; how do we know that these ideas are innate in all human beings? What data of experience, what sensory observations, and what empirical evidence can we offer in support of this claim? Can we show by pointing to the data that all humans from infancy on, possess these ideas? The idea of innate ideas falls short of these fundamental questions. By implication, Locke concludes that the doctrine is worthless rubbish. The mind is not a closet which is filled at birth with such innate ideas. The mind is an empty closet only filled with information from sense experience. Changing the metaphor, Locke argues that the mind is a blank tablet, blank white paper, on which experience writes, and this writing by experience is all the mind can know.

3. Locke's Atomic Theory of Ideas

In the book II of his work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke defines ideas as "the object of thinking" (44) Accordingly, he argues that when a man is conscious of his thinking, that which is the object of his thinking or what his mind is applied about when thinking is the "ideas" therein. It is an undeniable fact that men have in their minds several ideas which constitutes the object of thinking. These includes such ideas expressed as whiteness, hardness, sweetness, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness and many more. But since the mind is at birth a tabula rasa; a clean and empty slate, how then do we come by these several ideas that are the object of thinking? To this, Locke assumes that knowledge could be explained by discovering the raw materials out of which it was made. (Stumpf, 250) For this reason, Locke says:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas: How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence 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. (44)

From the above, it is clear that Locke holds experience as the source of all our knowledge as well as its foundation. Experience as explained by Locke is limited to sense experience, that is, whatever we come to be aware of through the use of our five senses; sight, touch, smell, taste and sound. In Locke's view, man is naturally endowed with the faculty of the senses to receive information from the objects in such a way that such information would seem to have been with us from birth. (Ibrahim, 157) Thus, all our ideas about the

world come to us through experience. Locke identified two sorts of experience which are: sensation and reflection. He explains these two as follows:

This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call sensation... the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got... I call this SENSATION. These two, I say, viz, external material things, and the operations of our own minds within, as the objects of REFLECTION, are to me the only originals from whence all our ideas take their beginnings. (45)

To follow Locke's argument logically, it implies that we have no direct knowledge of things themselves but only of our ideas about them. Since according to him, things impress (or impose) themselves on our minds, leaving in them their images or copies which are therefore representations of things (Omeregbe, 58). Locke went further to distinguish two kinds of ideas namely: Simple and Complex ideas. Simple ideas are the impressions that things make on our minds; they are copies or representations which things leave in our minds when they impress themselves on them. Simple ideas are therefore directly caused by things and those ideas resemble their causes and correspond to them. For this reason, Locke holds that there is correspondence or resemblance between simple ideas in our minds and the things they represent. Complex ideas, according to Locke, are combinations of simple ideas. When two or more simple ideas are combined into one, we have a complex idea. This shows that complex ideas are derived from simple ideas by combination and reflection and also by abstraction. (Scruton, 85). That is, the mind makes complex ideas out of simple ideas by repeating, comparing and uniting them however these complex ideas do not and cannot correspond to anything outside the mind because they are constructed out of the raw materials (simple ideas) received from sense experience. Thus, "the mind is passive in respect of the acquisition of simple ideas, but active in the making of complex ones" (Uzgalis, 25). In this sense, simple ideas are the building blocks of knowledge as Locke indicates that simple ideas are the atoms while complex ideas are the molecules in his attempt to distinguish between our situation in the material world and our mental world. Locke explains this distinction as follows: For simple ideas are all from things themselves, and of these, the mind can have no more, no other than what are suggested to it. It can have no other ideas of sensible qualities, than what come from without senses, nor any idea of other kind of operations of a thinking substance, than what it finds in itself; but when it has once got these simple ideas, it is confined

barely to observation, and what offer itself from without; it can by its own power, put together those ideas, it has, and make new complex ones, which it never received so united. (164)

From Locke's analysis above, it is clear that Locke sees simple ideas as atomic units or building blocks of knowledge as the mind actively compounds, compares and abstracts them to form all complex concepts. This shows that our understanding is actively constructed rather than divinely preloaded. In the final analysis, ideas are simply the representation of objects in our mind which also double as the object of thinking. In effect, we cannot know what things are in themselves, we can only know the impressions they leave in our minds, that is, our ideas about them. Thus, all human knowledge, according to Locke, is built from the indivisible atomic ideas derived from sense perception and reflection. This is because when two or more simple ideas are combined into one, we have a complex idea. For this reason, all ideas we have and all that we may ever have without any exception are all derived from and limited to sense experience.

4. Implications of Locke's Atomic Theory of Ideas for Human Understanding

A careful look into Locke's conception of ideas shows that it seeks to capture idea within the limit of what our senses could provide to us in experience. It avoids creating a transcendental notion of idea like that of Plato, Descartes or Leibniz, where idea is transformed into some sort of intangible essence of things. In this way, Locke tries to be careful of not going outside sense experience in order to remain within what the senses could provide. This is actually in line with the central teachings of the empirical school of thought he belongs to and projects his philosophical motto: "our business here is not to know all thing, but those which concern our conduct" (Lawhead, 292). This is why he claim that there are no such things as innate ideas or ideas before experience. All our ideas in the past, present and future are all products of sense experience. There is nothing in the mind that was not initially in the senses. (Ibrahim, Essentials, 72) It is therefore important to say that Locke's conception of ideas remains within the bound of empiricism and the teachings of common sense.

It is however necessary to show that Locke's notion of ideas have some challenges within it. For instance, the claim that simple ideas are nothing but impressions caused by external factors and resemble same brings some issues. In the first place, if this point is taken, it follows that simple ideas are nothing but copies or representation of external objects in our minds. This

means that we do not have any independent idea except what comes from the object. In this way, how do we differentiate between what an object is in itself and what we think it is in our mind. Another problem here is; do we really have knowledge of things at all, if knowledge indicates the state of awareness of things and what we know, according to Locke, are simply ideas or copies of things but not things in themselves. In this way, Locke draws a huge line of demarcation between the knower and the known. This is because Locke gives no room of direct connection between the subject and the object of knowledge.

Lastly, Locke's conception of idea as argued by Ibrahim (101) drops into the pit of egocentric predicament. This argument holds that if all we know is nothing but our own ideas, then how could we ever know the correspondence between our ideas and the things "out there"? Is there any way for us to get out of our experience to check this correspondence? This makes Locke's theory of ideas problematic as it is a self-centered notion of idea detached from the true state of things. In view of the forgoing, it is clear that Locke's atomic theory of ideas has far reaching implications for human understanding. These Implications are as follows:

Locke's theory of ideas reveals that human mind is a blank slate without any content but always in a state of potency. By arguing that we possess no innate, pre-installed ideas (such as inherent moral truths or concepts of God), Locke elevated the role of experience. Consequently, we are entirely shaped by our environment, sensations, and education. This implies that the mind is fundamentally malleable, differences in human understanding and capabilities are a result of our individual life experiences rather than predetermined cognitive traits.

Locke's suggestion that simple ideas are passively received from external objects shows that simple ideas such as colour red, the sensation of cold, or the taste of sweetness act as the fundamental "atoms." When experiencing this, the human mind is purely passive, that is, it acts as a receiver. This implies that at the most fundamental level, all human knowledge is tethered directly to our physical interactions with the world.

Locke's analysis of ideas presents the mind as an active engine that constructs complex ideas. While the mind is passive in simply receiving inputs, it becomes highly active when processing them. Through three mental operations which are compounding (grouping simple ideas together), comparing (evaluating relationships), and abstracting (separating specific traits to form general concepts) the mind creates

complex ideas. This implies that much of our so-called advanced reasoning is merely the cognitive “gluing together” of basic sensory building blocks.

Locke’s atomic theory of ideas separates the mind from reality. In this sense, we only directly observe our own ideas (mental representations) rather than the physical world itself. This necessitates a gap between internal understanding and external reality. This implies that our understanding of reality is largely subjective. The world we perceive is a mental construction shaped by our perceptual apparatus as by the physical objects themselves.

On the limits of human knowledge, Locke’s theory of ideas categorically emphasizes that our knowledge is limited to what is discernable within sense experience. This is because all knowledge is ultimately built out of atomic simple ideas, we cannot know anything that goes beyond our capacity to experience. If the mind thinks of what is beyond sense experience, human understanding of such an object of thought hits an absolute rock. This implies that our grasp of God or the universe is inherently limited, prompting a call for intellectual humility regarding things beyond our capacity to comprehend.

5. Conclusion

This work started by providing a short consideration of the views of major philosophers on the notion of ideas. Stressing the origin in the term "ideation" in sense images. Dominant in these views is the Atomists in ancient Greek philosophy to its rationalist usage in Plato, Descartes and Leibniz. It shows that Locke's analysis of idea is a response to the dogmatic postulation of innate ideas associated with Descartes' theory of knowledge. It is argued that Locke rejected innate ideas in order to clear the way for his atomic theory of ideas. This is to enable him situate the process of knowledge acquisition within the possibility of what the senses could provide. Locke's theory of ideas is said to be situated on the five senses of touch, sight, hearing, taste and feeling as a mark of an advocate and father of modern empiricism. Furthermore, the paper presents an in-depth analysis of Locke's notion of ideas as he sees it as “building blocks of knowledge” and "objects of thinking”. It captures his classification of experience into sensation and reflection as well as the distinction between simple and complex ideas. Also, it gives a critical assessment of Locke's atomic theory of ideas as well as draws out its implications for human understanding.

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