

JOHN LOCKE

Edited by
Peter Anstey

CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS OF
LEADING PHILOSOPHERS, SERIES II

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INTRODUCTION

Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* is first and foremost a work in epistemology, that is, in the theory of knowledge. Locke sets himself the task to search out

the *Bounds* between Opinion and Knowledge; and examine by what Measures, in things, whereof we have no certain Knowledge, we ought to regulate our Assent, and moderate our Perswasions . . .¹

So, while the *Essay* deals with many other philosophical issues, it is its treatment of knowledge, belief, perception and ideas that are the work's central concerns and have remained the focal points of discussion in the secondary literature on this work. The broad outline of Locke's theory of knowledge is clear enough, but many of the details have proven difficult to unravel fully and there is a cluster of problems that has been taken up again and again in the secondary literature. One such issue is the question as to whether Locke held a direct realist or a representative realist theory of perception. The terms of reference for the recent discussions of this issue have been set by the writings of Michael Ayers and John Yolton. The point at issue is whether Locke believed, and whether his theory of ideas and his account of knowledge of the external world requires, that the perceiver has direct epistemic access to external objects, or whether the immediate objects of perception are ideas and external objects are known mediately. This issue is not the primary focus of any of the chapters included in this volume. The reader is referred to the recent symposium on this specific issue in the *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (2004).²

Empiricism

The dominant historiographical frame of reference for interpreting Locke's great work on the understanding has been the distinction between Rationalism and Empiricism. By the early twentieth century, this distinction had become the standard interpretive grid by which all early modern accounts of knowledge and belief were understood. 'Empiricism' is hard to define, but in a rough and ready way it can be taken to refer to theories of knowledge which both deny the existence of innate ideas (ideas that are

in the mind at birth) and which stress the primacy of the senses in the acquisition of knowledge. In the interpretive tradition that uses this distinction, Locke has been regarded as the paradigm empiricist; indeed a common epithet for Locke is the 'father of British Empiricism'. The utility of this historiographical framework is increasingly being questioned by specialist historians of philosophy (see Chapter 34), but it has been and remains a dominant frame of reference amongst Locke's interpreters, especially those in the analytic tradition of philosophy. Its imprint is found in many of the chapters included in this volume on Locke's account of the nature and origins of knowledge (see, for example, Chapters 24 and 27).

In his chapter on 'Epistemology in the empiricists' George S. Pappas defines what he calls 'evidential empiricism' as the view that all our knowledge is either knowledge of ideas or is derived from knowledge of ideas. He goes on to ask whether Locke held to a variant of this view dubbed 'unrestricted evidential empiricism' that allows for the evidential base of knowledge to include things which are not ideas. This qualified form of evidential empiricism is required because Locke claims that we can have sensitive knowledge of external objects and sensitive knowledge is knowledge of the existence of external objects 'actually present to our senses'. Pappas suggests that Locke's (and Berkeley's) account of self-knowledge is an important exception to unrestricted evidential empiricism.

Ideas and knowledge

One issue in that recurring cluster of problems in the interpretation of Locke's epistemology is the precise nature of ideas. Martha B. Bolton in her article on the epistemological status of ideas examines some of the epistemic properties of Lockean ideas by a comparison with the views of Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole in the Port Royal *Logic*, a popular Cartesian work on the nature of thinking first published in 1662.³ (For further discussion of Locke and the Port Royal *Logic* see Chapters 30 and 31.) One point of contrast that Bolton brings out is the manner in which, according to Locke, our knowledge of our own ideas precludes error: we cannot be mistaken about the ideas we perceive and we cannot fail to differentiate ideas from each other. Another feature of the epistemology of Lockean ideas is their representational nature. Raffaella de Rosa picks up on one of the features of Lockean ideas discussed by Bolton and examines its role in Locke's arguments against innate ideas in Book I of the *Essay*. de Rosa claims that Locke's 'awareness principle' that 'one cannot have an idea without being aware or having been aware of that idea' ends up undermining Locke's arguments against innate ideas. According to de Rosa's analysis, the awareness principle renders Locke's arguments question-begging. In his chapter on 'Is Locke an imagist?' David Soles

argues against Michael Ayers' view that, for Locke, all ideas are mental images of what they represent.

J. C. Walmsley in his chapter on Locke on abstraction agrees with Ayers on the question of imagism in Locke's theory of ideas, but takes issue with Ayers over the nature of abstraction. According to Locke, we can perform various mental operations on the simple ideas that we gain through sensation and reflection. One of these is abstraction whereby we create general ideas. However, at one point in the *Essay* Locke also speaks of an operation of 'partial Consideration' (II. xiii. 13). Walmsley argues that while abstraction and partial consideration are different intellectual operations in the *Essay*, an examination of the drafts of the *Essay* reveals that they have a common root in Locke's early discussions of ideas of genera and species. Walmsley's careful, text-based account of Locke's views on abstraction is in stark contrast to David Owens' fine paper on 'A Lockean theory of memory experience'. Far from analysing Locke's writings, Owens uses Locke's account of memory in Book II chapter x as a springboard to defend an account of experiential recall against a series of objections by Thomas Reid and others and by the use of a series of plausible thought experiments. Owens' chapter is a nice example of the way in which Locke's *Essay* is used as a reservoir of theses and arguments that are deployed by contemporary philosophers in current debates.

The *Essay* itself contains many thought experiments,⁴ the most famous of which is Molyneux's Problem. William Molyneux asked Locke to consider a man born blind who can distinguish a sphere and cube of similar size by touch. Suppose now that the blind man receives his sight. Can he distinguish by sight alone the sphere and cube and tell which is which? This problem is discussed in chapters by Jean-Michel Vienne and Menno Lievers, both of whom claim that the traditional emphasis in explanations of the problem on the relation of ideas of touch and vision is misplaced. Vienne argues instead that Locke's concern is with the process of the formation of our ideas of the primary qualities of the sphere and cube. Lievers argues on the basis of contextual and textual arguments that the point at issue is one of depth perception.

Reasoning and logic

For Locke, reason is a faculty of the understanding. David Owen's exposition of Locke on reason is one of the best recent treatments of Locke on reason. It also provides a good survey of Locke's epistemology in general. It sets the broader context from which to approach Locke's views on logic. A key development over the last two decades in our understanding of the structure and content of Locke's *Essay* and *Conduct of the Understanding* has been a fresh analysis of these works in the light

of developments in logic in the second half of the seventeenth century. The pioneering study here was James G. Buickerood's chapter on Locke and what Buickerood aptly labels 'facultative logic'.

Buickerood shows that Locke's *Essay* is firmly located in a new revisionist approach to logic which, breaking from the traditional logics, sought to develop natural histories of the understanding by focusing on the role in reasoning played by different cognitive faculties or powers. The Port Royal *Logic* was a seminal work here and so, according to Buickerood and Schuurman, was Locke's *Essay*. Schuurman takes the analysis further in his chapter arguing that Locke's 'logic of ideas' is also evident in the *Conduct* which he began in 1697 and which was originally penned as an addition to the *Essay*.⁵ A central feature of the new facultative logic was a critique of syllogistic logic and Locke's own critique of the syllogism in *Essay* IV. xvii. 4 is subjected to careful analysis by Jonathan Barnes in his chapter on 'Locke and the syllogism'. Barnes' searching critique of Locke on logic is not flattering, but it should be read in the light of the papers by Buickerood and Schuurman. Rounding off the section on 'Reasoning and logic' is a paper by Predrag Cicovacki which focuses specifically on Locke's account of mathematical knowledge and which argues, that, for Locke, Euclidean-style reasoning produces what Kant would call synthetic *a priori* knowledge. (Locke's views on probable opinion are discussed in Nicholas Wolterstorff's 'The assurance of faith', IV, 63.)

Scepticism

Locke has repeatedly been accused of being a sceptic and yet the content of this charge has often remained vague. In his chapter in this volume Stephen Buckle argues that the sense in which Locke's *Essay* is a sceptical work is not that it deploys sceptical strategies in the manner of Descartes' *Meditations*, or that it promotes the suspension of belief with a view to *ataraxia*, or unperturbedness, but rather that it is written in the spirit of academic scepticism, or at least that brand of academic scepticism typified by Carneades' probabilism. Buckle argues that Hume follows Locke in this type of sceptical realism.

Locke's corpuscular scepticism and his pessimism about the prospects of natural philosophy are notorious, but divergent analyses have been given as to how extreme this corpuscular scepticism is. It is now clear that the London physician Thomas Sydenham was an important early influence on Locke in this regard (For Locke's relations with Sydenham see J. R. Milton's chapter in III, 50.). In her chapter on the observability of corpuscles, Lisa Downing presents a strong case against those who have claimed that, for Locke, the fundamental building blocks of matter are unobservable in principle.

Language

Language was one of the great preoccupations of twentieth-century philosophy and Locke has been portrayed as both hero and villain by modern philosophers of language. Locke's comment that

perhaps if [Ideas and Words] were distinctly weighed, and duly considered, they would afford us another sort of Logick and Critick, than what we have hitherto been acquainted with

(*Essay* IV. xxi. 4)

functioned as something of a motto for the Oxford linguistic philosophy mid-century,⁶ but the standard textbook account of Locke on language characterises him as holding an overly naive private language theory of meaning. In her revisionist chapter on 'Locke on private language', Hannah Dawson argues that to claim that Locke develops a theory of meaning in the *Essay* is to approach Locke anachronistically. Further, Dawson argues, even defenders of Locke's discussion of words and their reference are defending Locke on the wrong grounds. For, Locke's concern in Book III of the *Essay* is to give an account of communication and in particular to provide remedies for errors in communication. A different perspective on Locke's views on language is provided by Walter Ott's *Locke's Philosophy of Language* (2004).⁷ Sally Ferguson's chapter, which precedes Dawson's, attributes a form of teleosemantics to Locke on the basis of the role that divine design plays in Locke's account of the relation between ideas and their causes.

Notes

- 1 *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, I. i. 3, p. 44.
- 2 *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 85 (3), 2004. The symposium is edited by Vere Chappell.
- 3 Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic, or, the Art of Thinking*, ed. Jill Vance Buroker, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- 4 See David Soles and Katherine Bradfield, 'Some Remarks on Locke's Use of Thought Experiments', *Locke Studies*, 1, 2001, pp. 31–62.
- 5 See also Kenneth Winkler, 'Lockean logic' in *The Philosophy of John Locke: New Perspectives*, ed. Peter R. Anstey, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 154–178.
- 6 See this quote on p. v and the Introduction to A. G. N. Flew ed., *Logic and Language: First Series*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1951.
- 7 Walter Ott, *Locke's Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Part 11

EMPIRICISM

EPISTEMOLOGY IN THE EMPIRICISTS

George S. Pappas

Source: *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 15(3), 1998: 285–302.

Making up part of what is meant by “empiricism” is an epistemic thesis, expressed classically by Locke as the thesis that all knowledge rests on experience. My aim here is to look again at this thesis in Locke and Berkeley. The same, or very closely related thesis in Hume, I will leave aside as deserving of separate treatment. My argument will be that perhaps the most important epistemic notion of empiricism is one not to be found in either Locke or Berkeley, at least not in the form in which it has usually been stated.

I will not make this argument by concentrating on the allegedly rationalist elements in Locke’s philosophy, those parts where he deals with knowledge of moral principles or God’s existence. Instead, I will focus attention on what Locke says about knowledge of the self, and the epistemic relationship this knowledge may have to ideas of reflection.

I. Epistemic empiricism

Not surprisingly, the notion of empiricism is ambiguous, even in its epistemic forms. It is, firstly, a genetic, psychological thesis according to which all ideas or concepts originate in experience. It is also a semantic doctrine according to which all meaningful words, or at any rate all meaningful nonlogical words, are somehow connected to terms standing for experienced ideas. Indeed, in Locke’s hands it seems that the semantic thesis requires that all meaningful nomological terms refer to ideas, either directly or indirectly. Further, empiricism is certainly an epistemic thesis, one in which it is held that all knowledge is dependent on experience.

I am not proposing to discuss either the psychological or the semantic notions of empiricism except insofar as they relate to the epistemic notion, on which I will concentrate. We can begin the task of clarification by recalling

that both Locke and Berkeley take experience to be, roughly, the having of ideas. Then, epistemic empiricism is just the view that

All knowledge rests on, or is dependent on, ideas.

As Locke puts it in a well-known passage,

Whence has it [the Mind] 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 it self.¹

Locke then divides experience into perception and reflection, the former yielding ideas of sensation, and the latter yielding ideas of reflection. The having of ideas of these two sorts comprises all of what Locke considers experience. Hence, all knowledge rests on ideas, either of sensation or of reflection. This is his epistemic empiricist thesis, a thesis commonly attributed to Berkeley as well. But what is the manner, exactly, in which knowledge rests on ideas?

Speaking of Locke, Gibson says that ideas form or make up the *materials* of knowledge.² In this, of course, he is just echoing what Locke says. What I think Gibson means can be expressed this way:

All of the concepts we need to know a proposition are concepts derived from ideas.

Here “ideas” must mean ideas of sensation and reflection, for Locke, and the sort of derivation would be variable, including combining, compounding, and abstracting. I doubt if this thesis is correct for Berkeley, a point we return to below, but on Locke it seems to me Gibson is right. For, as Locke tells us,

All those sublime Thoughts, which towre above the Clouds, and reach as high as Heaven it self, take their Rise and Footing here: In all that great Extent wherein the mind wanders, in those remote Speculations, it may seem to be elevated with, it stirs not one jot beyond those *Ideas*, which *Sense* or *Reflection*, have offered for its Contemplation.

(*Essay*, II, I, 24; emphases Locke's)

Does Locke also hold the view that all knowledge derives from experience of ideas, not in the *materials* sense but rather in the sense of all knowledge resting on or deriving from *knowledge* of ideas. This is not a materials sense of empiricism, but instead an *evidential* sense. What it claims is that all knowledge is either knowledge about ideas, or it is derived from knowledge of ideas. So we need to ask, does knowledge had about ideas form the