

ABSTRACT

The present work entitled ‘JOHN LOCKE’S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT’ is done in partial fulfilment of the work of my Ph. D. programme. It primarily deals with the British philosopher John Locke’s theory of knowledge. The theory of knowledge advocated by a philosopher, or a group of philosophers, usually gets a lot of importance as other theories of him/them are based on his/their epistemological theories. Locke was not an exception in this regard. Rather his theory of knowledge has some extra importance, to my mind. It is so as it posed a challenge to the existing traditions, prevalent at that time, such as rationalistic and idealistic tendencies and set an alternative approach to philosophizing. To put it more precisely, the empiricist fashion that he initiated left a seminal impact in the philosophical arena. It is this thing that attracted me and hence I decide to work on this topic.

Initiating the first step to an alternative approach is a bit risky task. As it is quite difficult to free the thinker completely from the previously time-tested line of thinking. This is also true in the case of John Locke. He was a bit controversial figure due to a number of reasons. Hence, considerable time he had to spend abroad. This also brought an opportunity to him to engage with thinkers of different unfamiliar lines of thinking. Influences of these are palpable in his philosophy. In spite of his strong advocacy of empiricist theory of knowledge, we find

rationalistic elements in his philosophy. On account of this, his theory of knowledge has been subjected to severe criticism. In spite of these criticisms, his theory brought a revolution in philosophy. This I intended to show in my present endeavour.

In discussing his theory of knowledge, I divided my discussion into six chapters. In the first chapter, I have given a brief life history of him as I thought that a glimpse of his life and writings will be helpful to place him in the right context. His main book on the theory of knowledge was *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. I tried to have a cursory look of the different essays of this treatise. Then I gave a chapter plan as I thought that a blueprint will help me to do the work in a proper way.

Chapter II deals with the negative aspect of Locke's theory of knowledge. At the introduction of this chapter, two different forms of the theory have been elucidated. Alongside this, two different types of innate principles have been discussed. The central theme of this chapter is to demonstrate Locke's refutation of innate principles. The negative or destructive side of his theory of knowledge concentrates on the refutation of the theory of innate knowledge. But his primary goal was to attack not conceptual but propositional innatism. On the one hand, he put forward arguments in order to nullify the hypothesis of innate principles; on the other, he attempted to establish the view that our mind is similar to a white paper at the time of birth. However, this chapter mainly focuses on

Locke's refutation of innate principles. The intent behind his refutation of the theory of innate knowledge is to clear the path in order to establish his empiricism. Before and during Locke it was speculated that there are certain ideas that God has imprinted in the mind at the time of birth. Besides, the Scholastic philosophers supposed that all knowledge is based on certain innate maxims. Locke challenged this standpoint. In fact, He was seeking to adopt a new critical approach towards the acquisition of all kinds of knowledge. Moreover, he was inclined to found religion and morality on reason. During and before Locke, the doctrine of innate knowledge was considered to be necessary for religion and morality. He sought to replace the old foundation of innate ideas with suitable arguments so that religion and morality would stand stronger than earlier.

Next, we have investigated the reason for his refutation of innate principles. The fundamental interest of Locke was to challenge the foundation of the doctrine of innatism. He believed that if it could be shown empirically unfounded then it would no longer be possible to use it as an epistemological instrument to support obscurity as well as intellectual oppression. Most importantly, he wanted to eradicate this obstacle in order to establish his doctrine of empiricism.

In addition to that, an attempt has been made to enumerate the contestants of Locke. There is a divergence of opinion among scholars regarding the opponents of Locke. Usually, it is conceived that Descartes

and the Cartesians were his principal adversaries in this epistemological debate. But his polemic was not against any particular opinion rather it was directed against a widespread view.

The subsequent portion of this chapter attempted to illustrate at length Locke's arguments against innate principles and also the counter-arguments put forward by different scholars from different angles. Actually, this portion sought to capture as well as present the debate between Locke and the innatists in a holistic manner.

In Chapter III, my main aim is to outline Locke's theory of knowledge, i. e. the positive side of his theory. In the first section, I mainly dealt with the development of Locke's idea of knowledge. Here I have shown how Locke established his theory of knowledge and what are the main factors for the possibility of knowledge. In this chapter, I have illustrated some indispensable concepts that helped Locke to set his epistemological viewpoints, under the umbrella of empiricism, such as ideas, qualities, modes, substances, relations, etc. In the second section, I illustrated Locke's theory of representationalism. Here I have also shown how Locke tries to establish his representative theory of knowledge by applying his empiricist style. The final section is my concluding section, and here I have tried to explain different shortcomings of Locke's theory of knowledge that occur from lack of attention and insufficient explanations (of the concepts of primary and secondary qualities, and the concept of reflection), given by Locke. In the concluding remark, I have

suggested that if Locke paid attention to the nature of ideas, qualities, and also to the human understanding, then he could have solved most of the shortcomings of his theory of knowledge.

In chapter IV, my main aim is to outline Locke's classification of knowledge. And in this regard, I have shown that Locke classifies his theory of knowledge based on what we can know, and how we can know. In the first section of this chapter, I mainly deal with what we can know according to Locke. Here I have illustrated the Lockean definition of knowledge. And different kinds of agreement between ideas of objects, which help us to understand what we can know. Here I also have mentioned some objections raised against the classification of the agreement of ideas. Afterward, in the second section, I have spread light on the Lockean conception of how we can know. Here I have shown the Lockean classification of knowledge based on different degrees of clarity. In this section, I also have shown some shortcomings regarding Locke's conception of Demonstrative and Sensitive knowledge. And the final section is my concluding section, where I have discussed the deficiencies that arise in Locke's theory of knowledge. Here I have also shown that though Locke tries his best to set his theory of knowledge based on empiricist style but at the end of the inquiry, he was unable to hold this position properly.

In chapter V my main aim is to spread light on Locke's conception of truth. Here I have mainly shown the possibility of truth in

terms of Locke's theory of knowledge. In the first section of this chapter, I have stated how Locke established his theory of truth in terms of his theory of knowledge. Afterward, in the second section, I discussed Locke's conception of truth in detail, with classifications. After this, in the third section, I have spread light on the criteria through which Locke classifies his theory of truth. And finally, the fourth section is my concluding section where I have illustrated different shortcomings regarding the theory of truth, which mainly arises out of the weaknesses of the theory of knowledge.

I proceeded as per the blueprint stated above. The concluding chapter gives a critical summary of his (Locke's) theory of knowledge. To my mind, Locke with his espousal of empiricist epistemology did a wonderful task which we must appreciate. But it is also right that his empiricism was impure empiricism as he admitted some of the things which are not in consonance with empiricists' tenets. Later philosophers Bishop Berkeley and David Hume tried to purge these drawbacks. Locke perhaps could not foresee the radical implications of empiricism. These implications became evident in Hume's philosophy as we find that it leads to scepticism. There is no gainsaying the fact that Locke's theory of knowledge in particular and his philosophy in general left seminal contributions. As we find that later philosophers drew spirit from him in some way or other. It would not be an overstatement perhaps to state that even the critical philosophy that Immanuel Kant espoused, later on, had

its seed latent in Locke's philosophy. We find a number of similarities between these two great philosophers' viewpoints.
