

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Development of John Locke's philosophy

British empiricist John Locke (1632-1704) is known to the philosophical and intellectual world for many of his fundamental contributions. It is not that he was merely a philosopher. He, of course, was a philosopher but in addition to that, he had expertise in medicine and experimented with many political ideas. On account of his manifold contributions, he is remembered in the intellectual world. He was also a controversial person for his bizarre stand on certain philosophical issues such as his epistemological views and certain of his political activities. Out of his many contributions his espousal and initiation of empiricism, contribution to moral philosophy and thinking and writings in the field of political philosophy stand out clearly.

Locke was born in a small village in Wrington situated in North Somerset. Born and reared up in a liberal puritan family he imbibed the virtues such as temperance, simplicity etc. In order to have good education he was admitted to Westminster School. But he was not happy with the curriculum of the school and hence we find him criticizing it later on. In 1656 he graduated from Oxford's Christ Church College and then entered a

master's. He also learned medicine and established contact with many noted physicians of his time. We find him accepting diplomatic missions on some occasions and rejecting offers on certain other occasions. We can presume that his academic interest caused this rejection.

It is interesting to note that though he initiated empiricism as a school of thought in philosophy he held a high opinion of French philosopher Descartes' writings. It is in Oxford he chanced upon Lord Ashley in 1662. Lord Ashley was a known politician and social reformer. They enjoyed each other's company and Locke became Ashley's personal physician. During his stay with Ashley gradually Locke entered into the political domain and made significant contributions. It also made him a controversial personality and had to undergo many ordeals. Apprehending persecution on account of certain activities done in collaboration with Ashley he left England and arrived in Holland in 1683.

We come to know that in 1675 he went to France. During his stay there he got in touch with many contemporary important personalities. A group of thinkers known as Gassendists, followers of French philosopher and priest Pierre Gassendi, influenced him and under their influence, he studied Descartes' view and reflected on it. We find his appreciation as well as criticism of Cartesian philosophy.

We have seen that from 1683 Locke stayed in Holland. There he wrote many things on diverse issues. His celebrated letter „Letter Concerning Toleration“ was written and his magnum opus, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which he began writing in 1671 continued at this time. In 1689 he came back to England. During his stay in Holland and even after his return he remained engaged in politics. He also held certain positions on account of his expertise in practical politics. In spite of his engagements, he, by 1691, published two of his major works: *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises of Government*. In 1693 he wrote *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. In the next year, we find the publication of the second edition of the *Essay*. In 1695 he authored *Reasonableness of Christianity* and *A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, which was a rejoinder to criticisms of the former book. Till the year of his death, 1704, he remained engaged in writing and editing.

Some writers opined that Locke was a complex personality. On the one hand, he was modest, pious and careful on account of which he was respected by a wide section of people; on the other, he was very secretive. In spite of his complex personality, he was passionate to unearth the truth and tried relentlessly to state the truth that his reflective mind could discern.

Though Locke is a modern philosopher it is sometimes held that his philosophy has its root in medieval philosophy. It is also maintained by some

writers that Cambridge Platonists had immensely influenced Locke's ideas shaping and noteworthy among these were his espousal of empiricism and his ardent support for religious tolerance. Two persons who greatly modified his political thoughts were Richard Hooker and the founder of political philosophy, Thomas Hobbes. Previously we mentioned Pierre Gassendi's influence on him. Most importantly it is Descartes' philosophy that greatly regulated his thought. On account of the influence of this diverse line of thought, he espoused the view that it is sensations from where our knowledge begin and before this mind was a *tabula rasa*. However, in the attainment of knowledge reason also plays its part. For holding such a bizarre view his empiricism was subjected to criticism.

We have stated that Locke's philosophical contributions are primarily found in his *Essay* and *Two Treatises*. He spent considerable time for shaping his views in these treatises. He also took great care in making necessary changes in his views in later editions as he made required changes in the face of criticisms. In spite of these refinements, his basic stand remained unaltered. The firm foundation of empiricism that he gave kept thriving in later years. The rationalist element in his thought has been subjected to severe criticism and he has been called an inconsistent thinker. In spite of his awareness of this criticism, he has not moved from his stand. We need to remember that though we can trace rationalism in Locke's

thought, the orientation of his rationalism was not identical with continental rationalists. The foundation that he gave to empiricism was later further refined by Bishop Berkeley and David Hume.

In his *Essay*, his definition of knowledge, his interpretation of the notion of idea, and his refutation of the innate idea got the central place. During our discussion in the next chapters, we shall discuss these issues. In order to give a foundation for his empiricist thesis that all knowledge begins with sensations he refuted the view that there is innate knowledge. He gives elaborate arguments to show that no argument is enough to demonstrate the innateness of some knowledge. Having refuted innate knowledge/ideas he went on to assert that it is the senses which provide us with ideas. Human beings possess the faculties to think and reason. It is through ideas and human faculties that knowledge is generated. Two means—sensation and reflection— are the only ways for our knowledge.

Another important book, whose authorship he denied previously, was *Two Treatises of Government*. Perhaps his controversial stand on certain issues caused him to do so. In the second treatise, he talks about the state of nature where people enjoyed perfect freedom. The state of nature was not a political society but it was a society of men. On account of certain difficulties of the state of nature, people thought of a civil government through a social contract—he held there.

It is perhaps on account of his epistemological theory that he was a strong advocate of religious tolerance. In his „Letter Concerning Toleration,“ we find him passionately arguing for separating religion from state authority. His loyalty to individual rights and freedom, which he strongly advocated in the *Two Treatises*, might have prompted him for championing religious toleration.

Locke made many original contributions to the different branches of knowledge and these contributions greatly influenced many post-Lockean thinkers. His empiricist views modified rationalism which was moving forward at a great speed. We find many important intellectuals in England and other parts of Europe admiring his contributions.

Among all his contributions, his theory of knowledge is considered as the most important one. We come to know it took almost twenty years to script his *Essay* (published in 1690) where he advocated his theory of knowledge. It is the most important theory as it provided the foundation and backdrop of other theories he proposed in different branches of knowledge. As he said “it was necessary to examine our own abilities” as without knowing it any theory advanced will not be a sound one. In the *Essay*, he shows our capacity what can we know and also what is beyond our capacity to know. Hence, there he sets his aim to explore the “origin, certainty and extent of human knowledge.” Moreover, he wants to examine “the grounds

and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent.” From the aforesaid aims what becomes clear to us is that Lock was more preoccupied to enquire into how much leverage we can give to different types of knowledge.

The *Essay* consists of four books. A study of these four books gives us the impression that the first three books actually prepare the ground for the fourth one. Here he is laying the foundation for empiricism and hence he asserts that our mind at birth is a clean slate. It is through experience that we get all our ideas. These ideas we receive through sense experience are raw materials on which our minds work upon. He writes in the *Essay*: “Let us then suppose the mind to be...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...”¹ This and a study of the *Essay* makes it clear that Locke is talking regarding the information or data that our mind has. He did not intend to refer to mental power or capacity. He did not deny we having human faculties. Rather he holds that it is these faculties that act upon raw materials gained through sensations. In *Essay*’s Book III he deals with this in detail.

Another issue that got prominence in the *Essay* is his denial of having innate knowledge. It occupied considerable attention as the notion of innate knowledge act as a fulcrum for many other views and also is a great blow to the empiricists' way of knowledge. Book I of the *Essay* spends considerable time refuting the view that we are born with certain imprinted ideas. There is a long debate in refutation of innate ideas regarding who was/were Locke's *purbapakṣa*. Scholars differ in their views. Some say that it was Descartes. Some others hold different views. Whomever Lock wanted to refute, he was determined to disprove its existence. The proponents of innate ideas considered their actuality necessary as it is on these ideas that rendered support to religious belief and morality. A study of Locke's other writings makes us think that he was not a secular thinker that we may incline to think. He, on the one hand, believed in God on the other believed in humanity and was an ardent supporter of individual freedom. He tried to dovetail all these aspects in a very unique way. For him, a pious believer, we are endowed with faculties. These faculties place us in a position which is indeed distinctive. We possess the capacity for reasoning and hence we need to reap the benefits of it. By employing it we can change our society and can arrange it in a way that can serve the purpose of humanity. Reading of his philosophy renders the impression that his repudiation of the innate idea was linked to this goal. Espousal of innatism was a strong obstacle to the

achievement of this goal and as most of the proponents of innate knowledge used it as a weapon to maintain existing conditions.

In Book II the British philosopher explains the procedure of acquiring knowledge. For him, sense experience is the only means that provides our sense data. This is the window for our simple ideas. Once they come to our mind, the mind works on them and thereby complex ideas are formed. Complex ideas are again grouped under modes, substance and relations. Modes is a technical term in philosophy. Modes, he says, are “dependencies on, or affectations of substances”. They do not exist on their own and depend on us for their presence. On the other hand, a substance exists independently in the outer world. Complex idea relations consist of “the consideration and comparing one idea with another.” Then Locke goes on to recount how ideas are organized in various ways. In all, he talks of three ways. Interestingly in Book II he talks of power. The term „power“ has been used by different disciplines in different ways. For example, in science, say physics“ power denoted something which is not akin to the use of the term when used in politics. By recognizing mental capacities to organize ideas Locke is referring to its power. It has a wider implication as he is making room here for the political philosophy that he intends to champion. We find later on he is supporting liberty, will, desire, etc.

Crucial to Locke's epistemology is Book III of the *Essay*. In this book, he investigates the connection between names that we give to objects and ideas. It is like making a bridge between language and ideas. He says in „Of Words“ nearly all words are “names of ideas in the mind.” He further goes on to maintain that nearly all words can be arranged under the class of substances, modes and relations. He says many other things about ideas here which have implications for his theory of knowledge and that we intend to discuss in the next chapters.

In Book IV of his *magnum opus*, Locke attempts to discover the extent of human knowledge—what a human being can know and what he/she cannot know. This book is very crucial for his epistemology. Here he attempts to answer the questions

What actually knowledge is?

How do we attain it?

What are the diverse varieties of knowledge?

How much sure we can be of the knowledge we attain?

He tries to formulate answers to these questions. His definition of knowledge we shall state later on. For now, it will suffice to say that knowledge, for him, consists of agreement and disagreement between ideas. If we look back at the rationalist philosopher Descartes' interpretation of the same we find a striking difference between these two philosophers. For

Descartes, knowledge means ideas which possess the characteristics of clearness and distinctness. In order to prepare the ground for giving the definition of knowledge he explains „ideas“, „signs“, etc. For him, an idea “is, that it is, or is not the same with some other, that it does, or does not always co-exist with some other idea in the same subject; that it has this or that relation to some other idea; or that it has a real existence without the mind.” Then he goes on to talk about various types of agreement and disagreement between ideas which, according to him, are four: identity, relation, co-existence and real existence. Then he goes on to talk of different types of knowledge which according to Locke are three—intuitive knowledge, demonstrative knowledge, and sensitive knowledge. They possess a different level of certainty.

In the concluding chapters, Locke makes certain significant observations regarding reason, faith, judgement, etc. which have far-reaching implications in addressing knowledge. The British philosopher seems to exhort us to rely on our own judgement which seems to be an allusion to the fact that only this approach can break the monopoly of the so-called authority. In a nutshell, we can say that his plea was to accept authority blindly. We need to pose more trust in ourselves. He was critical of the reasoning advocated by Aristotle. He found a lot of problems in such artificially formalised logical thinking. Instead for Locke, a better way is

„argument from judgement“. Such arguments assist us in the knowledge-acquiring process. This is also a veiled attack on authority. It, of course, does not imply that reason and faith were antithetical. Except in certain cases, this-worldly matters which are open to observation and experience, reason must get precedence over faith. By advancing this view Locke is opening a bigger issue that which philosophical arena in the next couple of centuries likely to experience. In other words, it is going to give a big jolt to the many views which went on in the name of the authority.

Chapter plan

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 illustrated 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. His 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.

Reference

¹ Locke, John. (1690). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Roger Woolhouse (Edited), 1997, Penguin Books, p. 109.