



- Omachonu, G. S. (2011). Semantics. In G. S. Omachonu (Ed.). *Nsuk texts in general linguistics. Vol. I*. Enugu: Rossen Publications
- Onumajuru, (2016). A semantic and pragmatic analysis of Igbo names. In *African Research Review*. Vol 10(2). 307-324. Retrieved on 18/7/18.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/afrev.vl012.21>
- Philip, O. (2003). *Connotation and Collocation: A Corpus-Based Investigation Of colour Words In English and Italian*. PhD Thesis. Birmingham: The University of Birmingham.
- Ricanti, F. (2010). *Truth conditional pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Udemmadu, T.N. (2018). *Ọmụmụ Nghọtaokwu (Semantiks)*. Onitsha: Durability Press
- Wardhaugh, R. (2010). *An introduction to Sociolinguistics*. (6th ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Yule, G. (1996). *The study of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



EMPIRICISM AND JOHN LOCKE'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL INCONSISTENCY

Arinze Agbanusi (Ph.D)

08030842070

arinzeagbanusi1@gmail.com

ac.agbanusi@unizik.edu.ng

Department of Philosophy

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract: *Epistemology is a refutation of skepticism. Skepticism is the philosophical position that nothing can be known for sure; in other words, that the attainment of certain knowledge is impossible. An extreme version of skepticism denies the possibility of human knowledge, in other words, it claims that nothing can be known. However, epistemology assumes, not only the possibility of human knowledge but also, sometimes, the possibility of sure or certain human knowledge. Hence, it addresses the questions of the extent, the limit, the source and the nature of human knowledge. Empiricists are epistemologists who claim that all possible human knowledge derive from sense experience or perception. They are opposed to rationalist epistemologists who claim that all possible human knowledge derives from reason. Using the method of analysis, this work discusses Empiricism and takes a close look at John Locke's epistemology with a view to ascertaining the extent to which he has been consistent with the empiricist tradition. The conclusion of the work is that John Locke deviated from the typical position of empiricism, the champion of which he is generally seen as.*

Introduction

The ancient Greek Philosophers, who lived about 600 B.C., and who were the first recorded philosophers, were predominantly cosmologists. In other words, they were preoccupied with issues about the origin and the physical features of the cosmos or universe. These early Greek Philosophers were struck by two factors as they observed the universe. Firstly, they observed that, although there were changes everywhere, that there was continuity in the midst of the changes. In other words, there was always something which persisted through the changes and, as such, did not change but remained permanent. Secondly, they observed that in the midst of the plurality of things, there was a basic unity, in other words, they observed that there was a fundamental unity underlying the diversity of things. From the foregoing observations,



they concluded or deduced that there must be an original stuff or primary element of which all things were made. The primary or original stuff, for these early philosophers, would be the explanation for the continuity in the midst of observable changes and the underlying unity in the diversity of things.¹

Parmenides, who was born towards the end of the sixth century B.C., was the first recorded philosopher to delve into the area of philosophy that is today known as epistemology.² In his poem, entitled “On nature” which consists of two parts “Way of Truth” and “Way of Opinion”, Parmenides made a distinction between reason and the senses. According to him, way of truth is the way of reason while the way of opinion is the way of the senses. He argued that it is only through reason that man can attain truth; the senses can only give us opinion and not truth. Thus, Parmenides was not only the first epistemologist, being the first philosopher to make this distinction; but also, he was the first rationalist, being the first to declare this preference for reason as the source of truth.

Due to the conflicting cosmological theories and speculations of earlier ancient philosophers (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, etc), the sophists who existed in the fifth century B.C. began to doubt the possibility of knowing anything for certain. Can man know any truth with certainty? Being skeptical of human knowledge, the sophist philosophers settled for Relativism. Relativism is the position that there is no absolute or objective truth. Hence, the sophists were relativists who denied the possibility of man attaining absolute or objective truths. For them, there are no absolute, objective or universal truths. Truth is relative, thus it depends on the point of view of the individual. What is true for one man may be false for another. In other words, what is true for one man may be different from what is true for another.

The skepticism of the sophists can be seen in its extreme in the philosophy of Gorgias as expounded in his book, *On Nature* or *The non-existent*. In it, Gorgias tried to prove three things: first, that nothing exists, secondly, that even if anything exists, it cannot be known, and thirdly, that even if it is known, it cannot be communicated.³

The relativism of the sophists was later criticized severely by Socrates and Plato, both of who believed in the objectivity and universality of truth or knowledge. The skepticism of the sophists later faced a stiff opposition in the works of the medieval philosopher, Aristotle, who argued that anyone who doubts the possibility of knowing anything for certain, that the one knows for certain at least that he is doubting. Anyone



who, like Gorgias, doubts the existence of all things is at least sure of his own existence, and even his doubt is a confirmation of his own existence because one has to exist in order to doubt. He would not be able to doubt anything if he did not exist. St Augustine argues further that even if it is supposed that he is deceived in thinking that he exists, then that is a further proof of his existence because, as he argues: If I am deceived, I am.⁴

The Emergence of Rationalism and Empiricism

Etymologically, epistemology is the theory, science or study of knowledge. Generally, it is seen as the branch of philosophy that studies the possibility, the nature, the sources, the extent and the limits of human knowledge. Is it possible for man to attain certain knowledge? If it is, what is the possible source of such knowledge? In other words, how do we know what we claim to know? What is the scope or the range of the human capacity to know? How do we know that we know?

Beginning from Parmenides, different philosophers have over the years addressed some of these epistemological issues. From the different epistemological views of philosophers, it can be seen that while some deny the possibility of certain human knowledge, others agree that certain knowledge is possible. Also, based on epistemological positions or views of those philosophers (before the renaissance), each can be termed a rationalist or an empiricist. However, it can be said that it was during the renaissance that rationalism and empiricism actually developed as distinct philosophical methods.

The renaissance period refers to the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries when the renaissance movement took place in Europe.⁵ The predominantly religious worldview of the middle ages was replaced by the new scientific worldview. In philosophy, the renaissance marked the end of the medieval period and the beginning of the modern period. The development of science and mathematics was accompanied by the development of mathematics. It was around this period that certain eminent scientists, some of who were also famous mathematicians, lived. They include John Kepler, Nicholas Copernicus, Leonardo da Vinci and Galileo Galilei. Galilei, for instance, was a professor of mathematics.⁶ Philosophy could not have been unaffected by the renaissance 'winds' of science and mathematics. Hence, two traditions emerged in philosophy: one; empiricism (adopting the empirico-scientific method) and the other, rationalism (adopting the mathematical method). The rationalists of the post-



renaissance modern philosophy include Rene Descartes, Benedict Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz. The empiricists of the period, most of who were from Britain, include John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume. The issue which polarized philosophers into rationalists and empiricists is that of the source or foundation of human knowledge. In other words, how is knowledge acquired? The rationalists contend that reason alone can attain truth or knowledge without recourse to the senses. The empiricists, on the other hand, assert that all knowledge derive from sense perception, and that the senses are indispensable in the acquisition of knowledge. In other words, the empiricists are of the opinion that all knowledge begin from sense experience and derive from sense experience.

Another prominent point of departure between the rationalists and the empiricists is the issue of innate ideas. Most rationalists (including Descartes, St Augustine and the Cambridge Platonists of the 16th and 17th centuries) held that man is born with certain ideas in his mind (actually or virtually), and that as soon as he reaches the age of reason, he knows these ideas spontaneously without having to learn them explicitly. In fact, they insist that these innate ideas are the basic principles of human knowledge, that is, that they constitute the basis or the basic units in the process of learning or knowledge acquisition. But the empiricists reject the theory of innate ideas, insisting that man is not born with any ideas, but that all ideas come from experience. Although empiricism and rationalism were actually born in the modern period, Aristotle and his medieval followers, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, are classed as empiricists, owing to their epistemological views. Most empiricists of the modern period were British philosophers. They include John Locke, Bishop George Berkeley and David Hume. Our interest in this paper is John Locke.

John Locke's Biography

John Locke, who is regarded as the father of British empiricism, was born in Britain in 1632. He attended Oxford University and later lectured there for sometime. He also worked as a medical adviser to Lord Ashley. Locke's most famous work is his Essay Concerning Human Understanding. He is believed to be the brain behind the English revolution of 1688 which led to the occupation of the English throne by William of Orange who had come into England from Holland.⁷



John Locke's Epistemology

John Locke, in line with the empiricist tradition, rejects the theory of innate ideas. He vehemently opposes the view that there are innate ideas which constitute the primary principles of reasoning. The innate ideas are said to include the ideas that a whole is greater than any of its parts and that if a thing is, it cannot at the same time, not be. They are also said to include such basic moral principles as that justice is good but that injustice is wrong; and that kindness is good while cruelty is bad. Locke bases his rejection of the theory of innate ideas on the logic that if there were any such innate ideas, then they would be known by both children and idiots, since they too have minds. Locke also rejects the existence of innate moral principles because if they existed, according to him, savages would have them and, as such, not behave as they do. In addition, he argues that all men and peoples do not have exactly the same moral principles and practices which should be the case if innate moral principles were to exist.⁸

Locke's position instead is that the immediate 'objects of human knowledge are ideas gotten during sense perception'. According to him, as we behold the objects of experience, they impress themselves on our minds, leaving- in them their images or copies which represent them. Thus, ideas represent the things from which they come. This is why the epistemology of John Locke is sometimes referred to as that of representationism.

Locke makes a distinction between simple ideas and complex ideas. Simple ideas are those impressions or copies that things leave on our minds when they impress themselves on them. On the other hand, a complex idea is a combination of two or more simple ideas. He also talks about general or abstract ideas. An abstract idea is an idea from which all circumstances of time and space and all other particularizing factors (such as height, size and colour) have been removed. When an idea is stripped of all particularizing traits, it is reduced to an abstract or general idea.⁹

Locke contends that we cannot perceive substance but we know of its existence by the supposition that there must be a substratum which underlies the simple ideas we perceive. This is also how we are aware of 'spiritual substance', i.e. by the supposition that there must be a spiritual substratum or immaterial substratum which underlies and sustains the simple ideas of thinking, reflecting, doubting, and so on.



Degrees of Knowledge

In his epistemology, Locke identifies three degrees of knowledge:

mathematical or intuitive knowledge, demonstrative knowledge and sensitive knowledge. The first and highest level of knowledge is mathematical knowledge which he says is attained by intuition. This is the genuine knowledge which he describes as the perception of the agreement and disagreement of two ideas immediately by themselves without any intermediary idea. The second degree of knowledge is demonstrative or scientific knowledge which is acquired through natural science. This degree of knowledge enjoys some level of certainty, but it is not as certain as the knowledge of the first degree. The third degree of knowledge is sensitive knowledge and is acquired through sensation. This is the knowledge of particular things as they are. He exemplifies this classification by stating that our knowledge of own existence is mathematical knowledge; our knowledge of the existence of God is demonstrative, whereas our knowledge of the existence of other things is sensitive knowledge.¹⁰

Although Locke insists that all human knowledge derive from, and are circumscribed, within, sense experience; he grants that religious knowledge gotten through revelation, is true and certain. But he warns that it is not everything claimed by religious fanatics to have been revealed by God that should be accepted as authentic. To the question of how the distinction can be made between what is actually revealed by God and what is only so claimed, Locke responds that it should be decided by reason.¹¹

An Exposition of Locke's Empiricist Inconsistency

Locke's rejection of the theory of innate ideas is very much in line with the empiricist tradition. His epistemological position that all knowledge, not only derive from sense perception, but are also circumscribed within sense perception, is also in keeping with the empiricist tradition. However, there are some loopholes in his epistemology which betray his inconsistency with the 'empiricist tradition. First, his idea of 'imperceptible substance', as a fall-out of the position that we can only have ideas of things but cannot perceive things as they are, is problematic. If we cannot perceive things or substances, then how can we claim to have knowledge of things?

Locke's attempt to address this problem drove him further away from empiricism. His answer is that even though we cannot perceive substance, we assume that it must be present in order to impress on our minds the ideas we perceive. But the question is:



Does assumption constitute knowledge? Of course, no. If we assume that things exist, it does not mean that we know that they exist. The implication is that we do not, and cannot, have knowledge of things. This means skepticism. No wonder George Berkeley accused Locke of paving the way for universal skepticism. It was in an attempt to solve this problem, which Locke created, that Berkeley was compelled to postulate his startling doctrine that what we think are material things - trees, animals, bushes, houses, mountains, rocks and so on - are merely ideas in the mind. Berkeley's argument is that if we separate things from their ideas (as Locke did), then these things can no longer be said to have access to our minds, because it is only ideas that can exist in the mind. Only ideas can be perceived and only what is perceived can be known. In other words, whatever that is not perceived does not exist. According to Berkeley, *esse est percipi* (to exist is to be perceived). Both Locke and Berkeley agree that only ideas can be known; however, they differ on what these ideas are. For Locke, the ideas are separate from things and represent things; but for Berkeley, ideas are not distinct from things, that is to say that, things are ideas. Since all things are ideas, and since the only abode for ideas is the human mind, all things are ideas in the human mind.

Another term in Locke's epistemology which is inconsistent with the empiricist tradition is the issue of 'abstract or general ideas'. It does not seem plausible that an abstract idea can be gotten without involving reason. Berkeley also criticized it, describing it as an unwarranted abstraction derived from the equally unwarranted assumption that there is an unperceived substance underlying and sustaining the ideas we perceive.¹²

David Hume also disagreed with Locke's idea of 'abstract ideas' or 'general ideas', arguing that there cannot be general ideas since there are no general things, and that the human mind is incapable of forming ideas of non-existent realities. In addition, Locke postulates spiritual substance which is also at variance with his empiricist posture. Ironically, Berkeley criticizes Locke's idea of imperceptible 'material substance' but agrees with his idea of 'spiritual substances'. No wonder David Hume, a thorough-going empiricist, later accused both Locke and Berkeley of inconsistency with the empiricist tradition.

Finally, it can be said that Locke's greatest show of disappointment to the empiricist tradition is his admission that it is through reason that the distinction can be made between what is actually revealed by God and what is only claimed to be so. Locke's



acceptance that it is with the use of reason that we can discern between true revelation and false claim of revelation is an indirect acceptance that reason is ultimately the true source of reliable knowledge. This is directly opposed to the traditional position of empiricism which is that the senses constitute the true source of human knowledge. From the foregoing, it is intelligible that even though Locke claims to be an empiricist, he is an inconsistent empiricist.

References

Joseph Omoregbe, *A Simplified History, of Western Philosophy*, Vol. 1., (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd, 1991), pp. 3-4

Ibid, p. 13

Ibid, p. 27

Ibid, p. 100

Joseph Omoregbe, *A Simplified History, of Western Philosophy*, Vol. 2., (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd, 1991), p. 1

Ibid, p. 5

Ibid, p. 57

Ibid, P. 58

Ibid, P. 59

Ibid, p. 60

Ibid, p. 61

Ibid, p. 68

Bibliography

Copleston, F; *A History of Philosophy*, New York: Image Books, Vols 1-8., 1960-1968.

Goodin, R.E., Philip Petit, eds; *A companion to contemporary Political Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1993.

Could J.W; *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Compiled under the auspices of UNESCO), London: Tavistock Publication, 1964.



Hume, D.; *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1975.

Hume, D.; *Treatise of Human Nature*, Middlessex: Penguin Books, 1969

Locke, J.; *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London: Fontana Library, 1964.

Nietzsche, F.; *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, tans by Francis. Golffing, Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956.

Roberts, G.K.; *A Dictionary of Political Analysis*, London: Longman, 1979.

Rousseau, J.J.; *Social Contract*, Middlesex: Pengun Books, 1968.