



# The Extent of Human Knowledge: Ageement and Disagreement

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## ABSTRACT

John Locke was one of the most versatile philosophers of his time. His philosophical contribution not only covered a wide range of topics but also had a profound influence on the philosophers of subsequent generations. Indeed, it is impossible to understand properly the philosophy of his successors, especially Berkeley, Hume, and Kant without understanding Locke's philosophy. His *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, referred heretofore as the *Essay* in the present work, constitutes one of Locke's most important contributions, covering epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language, among others. In spite of many of its drawbacks pointed out by critics, Locke's work is a philosophical classic in the true sense of the term. It gives us the first characteristically modern statement of the questions about human knowledge. The main theme and concern of Locke's *Essay* is knowledge and the capacity of the human understanding to acquire it. Here, Locke's principal objective is to enquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge. My endeavor through this piece of writing is to present pen picture view on limit and extent of human knowledge as understood from Locke's Theory of Knowledge.

**Key Words:** Human Knowledge, Epistemology, Enquire, Extent of human knowledge.

## I

Any philosophical school or philosopher of eminence has numerous influences on the writers, thinkers and philosophers of the succeeding generations. John Locke (1632-1704), one of the giants of Western thought was not an exception in this regards. He has been highly influential in the field of modern philosophy. His contribution in the history of thought is spread in many fields out of which his empiricist theory of knowledge and his continuous commitment to the understanding of the rights of mankind are still admired today. However, only a few philosophers have been able to study minutely the writings of Locke. In this regard, C.B. Martin has aptly observed, "A serious study of Locke is not in fashion."<sup>1</sup> Locke, indeed, was a prolific philosopher who wrote on a wide range of subjects including religion, education, liberty, government and politics. His magnum opus *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is one of the most influential works in the field of philosophy. In that work Locke talks about a large number of topics such as epistemology, philosophy of mind and philosophy of language. As such, it has been quite difficult for general readers and critics to assess this great English philosopher of the Enlightenment period properly.

Admittedly, one can easily notice the seventeenth century background to Locke's writing. He is equally important along with Descartes in the arena of contemporary philosophy of the occident as well as the orient. Locke paves the way for empirical psychology and modern philosophy. He challenges and rejects the theory of innate ideas, rather he propounds that sense perception and experiences are the major aspects of knowledge. He focuses on the fundamental principle of reason and the role of it in deriving knowledge. Along with common sense, he gives many reflections on time and space, free will, meaning and personal identity in support of his tenets and claims. As such, his works may seem to people inconsistent in approach which reflects, in certain cases, obscurity of thought and repetitiveness of matter. However, his philosophical thoughts have not only exerted strong impacts on several philosophers of his subsequent generations but also many thinkers of other disciplines. He has been a centre of attention to interdisciplinary professionals and men of letters. Hans Aarsleff has aptly observed, "*John Locke is the most influential philosopher of modern times. His Essay initiated the vigorous and lasting philosophical tradition that is known as British Empiricism, but Locke's importance reaches far beyond the limits of what has since his time become recognized as the professional discipline of philosophy.*"<sup>2</sup> Without understanding the nuances of Locke's philosophy, it is quite difficult to understand properly the philosophy of his successors, especially Berkeley and Hume.

## II

The primary objective of the study is to clarify Locke's opinion regarding the extension of human knowledge. According to him, knowledge consists of the perception of agreement or disagreement of particular ideas. Therefore, it follows in the first place that we can have knowledge no further than the ideas that we possess. Secondly, it is impossible to extend our knowledge beyond our perception of the agreement or disagreement by intuition, demonstration, or sensation. Thirdly, Locke held that it is quite impossible for us to have intuitive knowledge regarding all of our ideas for we cannot examine or perceive all the relations they bear to one another immediately. We can distinguish intuitively an obtuse angle triangle from an acute angle triangle, both drawn on equal bases and between the same parallels. However, we cannot know if they are equal or not, by immediate comparison, without the intervention of other ideas. Therefore, it is evident from the above that our rational knowledge cannot reach to the whole extent of our ideas. This is the fourth observation of Locke regarding the extent of knowledge. The fifth observation is that our sensory knowledge extends no further than the existence of things actually found to our senses.

This study is on purely theoretical based. The concept for the study has been collected mainly from secondary sources, special study has gone through Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and from various sources such as reference books, journals, Wikipedia, reports, articles, internet and websites etc. The study has delimited only to the extent of human knowledge.

## III

The extent of human knowledge is very limited - much less, in fact than that of our ignorance. This is how Richard Falckenberg has summarized the view of John Locke regarding the extent of our knowledge.<sup>3</sup> According to Locke, knowledge consists of the perception of agreement or disagreement of any ideas. Therefore, it follows, in the first place, that we can have knowledge no further than the ideas we possess. Again, we derive ideas from experience i.e. from sensation or reflection or both. This statement means that we cannot know what lies completely beyond our sensory and reflective experience. Secondly, it is not possible to extend our knowledge beyond our perception of the agreement or disagreement by intuition, demonstration, or sensation. Thirdly, Locke held that we could not have intuitive knowledge regarding all of our ideas for we cannot examine or perceive all the relations they bear to one another immediately. We can distinguish intuitively an obtuse angle

triangle from an acute angle triangle, both drawn on equal bases and between the same parallels. However, we cannot know if they are equal or not, by immediate comparison, without the intervention of other ideas. Locke argued that the reason behind is that we often cannot find the other ideas act as media to connect the two ideas with an intuitive knowledge in all parts of the deduction. Therefore, we are short of knowledge and demonstration. Therefore, it is evident from the above that our rational knowledge cannot reach the whole extent of our ideas. This was the fourth observation of Locke regarding the extent of knowledge. Lastly, our sensitive knowledge extends no further than the existence of things actually present to our senses.

It follows from Locke's definition of knowledge that we can have knowledge no further than the ideas we possess. However, Locke observes that the extent of our Knowledge comes from the reality of Things and also from the extent of our own Ideas<sup>74</sup>. Therefore, it is necessary to examine Locke's opinion. In order to examine his view, it is necessary to observe how far our knowledge extends or can extend in each of the four forms of knowledge or ways of perceiving the agreement or disagreement of our ideas.

#### IV

Locke held that the perception of agreement and disagreement concerning our ideas are of four kinds. These are identity, co-existence, relation, and real existence. Regarding identity and diversity, Locke opined that our intuitive knowledge extends as far as our ideas themselves. We intuitively perceive in case of every idea in the mind – what it is about and is different from any other. All propositions which express identities of ideas are certain, but trifling. In addition, the only limit to knowledge in this case is the number of ideas we experience.

As to the second kind of agreement or disagreement, referred to as co-existence, our knowledge is very limited, although this kind of knowledge consists of most material part of our knowledge i.e. concerning substance and our idea of a particular substance is the collections of simple ideas combined under one name. Here we perceive only the factual co-existence or togetherness of simple ideas. Our idea of gold is a yellow, malleable, and fusible and body heavy to a certain degree. To know a substance is to know the simple ideas, which constitute the complex idea of the very substance. However, the knowledge regarding the co-existence of the simple ideas is very narrow. The cause behind this, according to Locke, is that the simple ideas, which make up the complex ideas of substances, are such that they, in their nature, carrying no visible necessary connection or inconsistency with other simple ideas that co-existence with these simple ideas are yet to be discovered.

Regarding the third kind of agreement or disagreement of any of our ideas in any other relation, Locke contended that it is difficult to determine how far it may extend. He said that it consists of the largest field of our knowledge and it is difficult to determine the extent of such knowledge because it is not easy to find what further improvements and helps, advantageous to other parts of knowledge, are possible yet, considering the immense capability of the sagacious mind of man. Locke argued that those who are ignorant of algebra cannot imagine its potentialities and cannot discover in advance the further resources and utility of this branch of knowledge. He pointed out that ethics can be a demonstrative science besides mathematics. Locke remarked that morality, like mathematics, is capable of demonstration.

However, Locke contended that there are certain disadvantages in case of moral ideas, which force us to think that they are not capable of demonstration. Firstly, sensible marks or diagrams can represent mathematical propositions. Locke held that these sensible marks have a greater correspondence with mathematical ideas than any words or sounds. There is no sensible mark that resembles moral ideas and thus cannot be noted down. Only words can express them properly.

However, there is no guarantee that words always represent the same ideas to different people or even to the same person over a long period.

Secondly, moral ideas are more complex than the ideas of mathematics. Two inconveniences arise due to this. One of these is that there is no general agreement about the precise collection of simple ideas for which the moral ideas stand. Therefore, error, confusion, and disorder arise in the sphere of morality. On the other hand, in the sphere of mathematics, mathematical figures remain unaltered. It helps us retain them easily in the mind and carry out demonstrations properly.

As to the fourth kind of our knowledge viz. the real or actual existence of things, Locke said that we have an intuitive knowledge of our own existence and a demonstrative knowledge of the existence of the God. He further pointed out that regarding the existence of anything else, we have no knowledge other than sensitive knowledge, a knowledge that does not extend beyond the objects present in our senses.

According to Locke, our ignorance is infinitely larger than our knowledge. If we know how far we have clear and distinct ideas, we can confine our thoughts within the contemplation of those things that are within the sphere of our understanding. Locke held that there are primarily three causes of our ignorance. Since knowledge is the perception of the relations between ideas, it is clear that knowledge cannot extend farther than the ideas that we have. Furthermore, since we have ideas either from sensation or reflection, or from both of these sources, it follows that we cannot know what lies beyond our sensory and reflective experience. Locke said that we are ignorant about many things for want of ideas, since sensory and reflective experience is, in fact, most decidedly limited. However, it would be improper to over-emphasize Locke's pessimistic attitude regarding scientific knowledge. As remarked by Copleston that while it would be in order to note the rationalistic attitude discussed above and projected in Book IV of the *Essay*, it must be realized that Locke's pessimistic remarks about natural science are due in large part to the contemporary ignorance and the lack of technical equipments necessary for startling advances and discoveries.<sup>5</sup>

## V

Let us review Locke's contention about the extent of our knowledge. Jenkins remarked that unlike geometry, it is hard to find an agreement about the use of moral terms. Even if this agreement is found, it is difficult for us to say how long it could be sustained. Jenkins pointed out that if someone looked at the subject matter of geometry naively, he can think of it as a completely arbitrary and artificial system, which deals with the concept of circles, triangles, squares etc. It seems that there is no obstacle to find out an agreement regarding these concepts. However, in case of morality, we find no such agreement regarding its different concepts. David Hume pointed out that although a system of justice is artificial in the sense that human being construes it, yet it is dependent upon existing empirical conditions. Hume argued that justice is there because it fulfills a purpose and is useful. Therefore, if the circumstances that make it useful were changed, there would be a corresponding change in the rules of justice. In a society where private property stands abolished, the rules of justice are bound to change since a majority of the rules of justice are concerned with providing security for private property. Similarly, in a society where the concept of private property does not exist, concept of justice would be very different. Therefore, it would be difficult to arrive at a unique definition of justice. Jenkins noted Locke's panorama by saying that there could be clear, undisputed, and unchanging concepts in moral sphere that would enable us to make entailments and deductions like geometry is not tenable.

The second comment that Jenkins has made is already implicit in the first. Jenkins contended that regarding any specific moral state of affairs we have the right to ask 'is this how we want it to be?' or 'do we wish things to go on in this way?'<sup>6</sup> This is, Jenkins, pointed out, an essential feature of moral sphere. This kind of question regarding any specific moral state suggests that moral concepts are changeable and corresponding to any social change there would be a change in moral ideas. As moral concepts are changeable, there cannot be similar kind of deduction as those of geometry. The figures related to geometry always retain the same properties. Therefore, when we are examining the features of a particular triangle, we know definitely that we can rule out the question 'do we really think that triangles should have three sides?' However, in the moral sphere we cannot rule out the question 'do we really think of this man should be hanged for the murder he committed?'

Jenkins contended that if these two comments upon Locke's analogy between morality and geometry are sound they provide some ground for challenging his optimism about this area of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> He further commented that once we have clear and precise definitions in morality we can expect to have a system of entailments comparable to those we find in geometry. Regarding sensitive knowledge, Locke argued, "Sensitive Knowledge, reaching no further than the Existence of Things actually present to our Senses, is yet much narrower than either of the former".<sup>8</sup>

Locke, while holding that the extent of sensitive knowledge is narrower than intuitive and demonstrative knowledge, has undermined sensitive knowledge. However, Locke's standpoint here contradicts his empiricist viewpoint.

From the discussion made so far on Locke's view on extent of human knowledge, we can say that Locke was not an empiricist in the strictest sense of the term. He was an empiricist in the sense that he thought of all the materials of knowledge derive from experience i.e. from sensation and reflection. However, he was not an empiricist in the sense, he thought, that we could know only by sense perception. There is, indeed, a rationalistic flavor in his writing. Jenkins commented, "Locke, then, was an empiricist. This is not to say that he was entirely consistent under this label. There are times in the *Essay*, and elsewhere, when certain rationalist elements in his thought suddenly betray themselves".<sup>9</sup>

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