Chapter 15

John Locke: Theory of knowledge

Key Words:
Ideas, self-evident knowledge, quality, primary qualities, secondary qualities, modes, representationalism.

In the previous chapter we have outlined some fundamental doctrines of Locke’s empiricism. We have examined his concepts of simple and complex ideas which are the archetypes of knowledge according to empiricist epistemology. The ideas of substances, modes and relations are the three types of complex ideas our mind forms by combining the simple ideas received from multiple sources. Before we proceed further, we need to understand how knowledge is gained from ideas. We learn that the notion of idea plays a crucial role in the empiricist epistemology, as Locke proposes an ideation theory in order to explain the concept of knowledge.

Locke says that knowledge is the perception of the connection or agreement, and repugnancy or disagreement, of any of our ideas. Since the mind has access only to the ideas and not to the world of objects, we have certainty about the ideas alone. Locke affirms that, we have no self-evident knowledge of real existence except of oneself and God, as while the existence of oneself is intuitive the existence of God is known by reason.

Knowledge according to Locke, agrees with the realities of things, as the simple ideas we get represent things outside. In this sense the simple ideas are the product of things operating on our minds. In other words, things outside us arose in us sensations that generate simple ideas. We are passive in their reception. This is a very fundamental assumption of Locke’s empiricism. He thus takes for granted the existence of things in the world, which had later attracted criticism from his own successors in the empiricist school. Locke thus assumes that there are things out there in the world and our simple ideas are copies of what is there in the world. Unlike these simple ideas, the complex ideas are not copies and they do not refer to anything original out there. The human mind makes them. Out of all the complex ideas formed by the mind the idea of substance is the most interesting and controversial one.
Before we discuss this notion we may have to examine how ideas are formed. The notion of quality is important here. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, Locke defines an idea as “whatsoever the mind perceives in itself or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding”. Now, these ideas themselves are produced by sources outside the mind. They are produced by objects in the world. In other words, objects have certain powers to produce ideas in the mind. These powers an object to produce an idea in the mind is called qualities.

Locke argues that, every object will have two types of qualities; primary qualities and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are inseparable from a body and they remain in it even when it undergoes changes. For example, qualities of solidity, extension, figure and mobility, motion or rest, and number. Locke considers them as the original or primary qualities of the body, which produce simple ideas in us. They resemble what is in the object and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves. For example, The idea of figure resembles the object itself which causes the idea in us. In this sense, they are real qualities, as they really exist in the bodies, whether anyone perceives them or not.

On the other hand, secondary qualities are not in the objects themselves. They are powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities. For example, colours, sounds, tastes and odours. They have no resemblance of them in the body in which they are perceived. For example, in the case of a red rose, our idea of it does not resemble the rose considered in itself. What corresponds in the rose to our idea of red is its power of producing in us the idea of red through the action of imperceptible particles on our eyes.

But Locke is not prepared to consider these secondary qualities as purely subjective. He argues that they are powers really in the objects that can produce simple ideas in us. But, at the same time, these ideas like colours, sounds etc., are not copies of colours and sounds in the objects themselves.

This division of primary and secondary qualities has created a lot of difficulties to Locke’s doctrine. As we have seen above, Locke's representative theory of perception does not ascertain the existence of anything else other than our ideas. He then holds that, while the ideas of primary qualities really resemble things the ideas of secondary qualities do not. But since what we know immediately are ideas alone, we have no way to know
whether these ideas do or do not resemble things. Yet Locke asserts that they are more original and resemble things. Again, as Locke himself contends, we are not certain whether things other than our ideas even exist. We cannot compare ideas with things to see whether they resemble them or not. Hence the representationalism of Locke fails to establish the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

Again, with regard to the ideas and substance, Locke’s views attracted criticisms. Locke says that we are sure of ideas or collections or clusters of qualities. Since ideas cannot subsist by themselves, there must be some substratum where they subsist, which is the substance. Here the idea of substance is conceived as the support of such qualities, which are capable of producing simple ideas in us. It is the support in which the primary qualities inhere. For example, we put together some qualities like white, sweet, solid etc., in our idea of substance of sugar. In this sense several simple ideas coexist in a substance, which is their unknown bearer or substratum. It remains unknown, because we do not experience the dependence of these qualities on one another.

As mentioned above, the origin of our idea of substance is in the notion of the unknown support of those qualities we find existing. We assume that these qualities cannot subsist without something to support them and this support is the substance. We infer its existence as the support of accidents, qualities or modes. Hence the complex idea of substance is the collection of simple ideas, with a supposition of something to which they belong, and in which they subsist. Of course, we have no clear distinct idea about what exactly it is.

We form the complex idea of substance by initially making a distinction between complex ideas of particular substances and the general idea of substance. The complex ideas of particular substances are obtained by combining simple ideas and the general idea of substance is obtained by abstraction. In his notion of the general idea of substance the influence of Scholasticism is visible, though Locke’s own view is substantially different from the Scholastic view. The idea is about an unchanging substratum hidden beneath the changing phenomena. In this sense it refers to the power of the reflective mind. With regard to the spiritual substance Locke says that it is a substance that thinks and hence it is an immaterial substance. This idea is arrived at by combining the simple ideas of thinking, knowing, willing, understanding, doubting etc., which are obtained by reflection, with the vague and obscure notion of a substratum in which these psychical
operations inhere. Unlike Descartes and other rationalists he maintains that thinking is not the essence of spiritual substance, but its action. On the other hand, the idea of physical or material substance is obtained by putting together corporeal qualities and supposing a support for them.

The idea of God is another such complex idea. Though we are certain about its existence, it is not an innate idea, but we know about him with the employment of reason, which is our natural ability. God or Pure Spirit is an ever-active substance according to Locke. We form this idea by taking the ideas of existence, duration, knowledge and power, pleasure and happiness and enlarging them to an infinite degree. We then combine these infinite ideas in order to arrive at the idea of God. Locke states that God alone is ever active. Matter is essentially passive and mind is both active and passive, as it becomes active when it moves the bodies and becomes passive when it receives ideas produced by bodies outside us. According to Locke, the mind is more easily conceived than the body.

Lock also conceives a mind-body interaction and states that ideas are formed through such interactions. The action of the body on the mind in producing sensations is a fundamental act in the process of knowledge acquisition. The doctrine of qualities and the distinction between primary and secondary qualities become relevant in this context. Primary qualities of the body are capable of producing the ideas of solidity, extension and motion in the mind and these ideas are understood as the copies of real qualities in the body. On the other hand, secondary qualities of colour, sound, taste etc., do not really belong to the body, but are merely the effects produced on the mind by solid extended objects.

Locke’s empiricism, as we could see, is historically very important, as it provides an important perspective in modern philosophy and epistemology. It is very close to the contentions of common sense and position adopted by modern science. Modern age demanded a coming together of two approaches to knowledge; the mathematical conception of knowledge which relied on a priori structures of human understanding and the kind of knowledge that emphasizes experience and observation. Locke’s contributions to the latter are phenomenal.

Quiz
1. The origin of our idea of substance is in the notion of……………
   (a) Unknown support of qualities  (b) Secondary qualities  (c) Spiritual subatance
   (d) God.

2. Which of the following descriptions does not match the nature of the spiritual
   substance according to Locke?
   (a) A substance that thinks  (b) An immaterial substance  (c) substratum in which
   these psychical operations inhere  (d) A substance whose essence if thinking.

3. The idea of God is?
   (a) A simple idea  (b) A complex idea  (c) AN innate idea  (d) An idea of reflection.

4. Which among the following is not true for Locke?
   (i) God alone is ever active
   (ii) Matter is essentially passive
   (iii) Mind is only active.
   (iv) Mind is more easily conceived than the body.
   (a) [iii] alone  (b) [iii] and [iv]  (c) [ii] and [iv]  (d) [ii] alone.

Answer Keys
   1. [a]
   2. [d]
   3. [b]
   4. [a]

Assignments
   1. Discuss the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.
   2. What is an idea and how many types of ideas are there?

References

Books
   1. Copleston, Frederick, A History of Philosophy, vol.5: British Philosophy Hobbes to
      2012.
      Company, 1935.

**Web Resources**