An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Study Guide

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding by John Locke

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

John Locke's An Essay Concerning Human Understanding is a major work in the history of philosophy and a founding text in the empiricist approach to philosophical investigation. Although ostensibly an investigation into the nature of knowledge and understanding (epistemology) this work ranges farther afield than one might expect. Instead of just being merely a work in epistemology, this is really a reappraisal of many traditional philosophical questions, metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and religious.

Locke begins his work in Book I by explaining the origin of the content of understanding, ideas. Ideas originate only from experience, claims Locke. His main argument in this Book is to argue against the idea that there is some knowledge that arises prior to experience, that is, the idea that some of our ideas or knowledge are innate. Locke uses several arguments against the innateness hypothesis but his main argument is that for an idea to be innate it would have to be universally shared and present in children and idiots. We can find no such knowledge and, hence, there is no reason to believe in innate ideas.

Having dealt with innate ideas and the origins of ideas, Locke turns in Book II to a detailed analysis of the content of knowledge, ideas. He categorizes ideas into simple and complex ideas. Simple ideas are generated directly by experience and refer to simple objects of sensation. Through a variety of simple procedures, simple ideas are transformed into complex ideas. These ideas can be abstracted further and further into general ideas. Locke then goes on to describe the multitude of ways our minds can operate on simple and complex ideas to generate what we think of as many other faculties and content of the mind. There is a short digression on the active and passive powers and an argument for a kind of compatabalism regarding free will. There is also an analysis of good and evil into pleasure and pain. Finally, Locke tries to account for false and fantastical ideas.

Book III deals with the signs that we use to communicate ideas to ourselves and to others, words. Book III follows roughly the same form as Book II, explaining how the different kinds of ideas can be communicated as different kinds of words. Towards the end of the Book, Locke discusses the importance of words to philosophy and to truth in general.

Book IV concerns knowledge generally and Locke spends the section explaining how our ideas, derived from experience and our words can account for our knowledge of various things. Locke also gives a unique empiricist proof of the existence for God and a strong attack on the possibility of faith and revelation. Finally Locke concludes by laying out a program for the future development of science along Lockean, empiricist lines. Many attempt to follow his trail, including David Hume and many modern philosophers. Though this work is idiosyncratic, it is hard to overemphasize its influence on philosophy and the development of thought over the last several hundred years.

Book I

Book I Summary and Analysis

Locke begins his Essay by claiming that it is understanding that separates mankind form all other creatures on earth. It is the understanding, the ability to reason, that allows humans to create technology and to organize our environment. Our understanding, though, like our eyes, is an instrument of perception and apprehension and is, therefore, closed to direct perception itself. In the same way that we can not see the very eyes that allow us to see other things, we also are not able to direct our understanding back in on itself to directly comprehend our own powers of reasoning. Here, Locke is, no doubt, partially leveling an attack at his predecessor Rene Descartes who claimed to have a method that allowed him to introspect directly into the workings of his understanding. Since, as Locke claims, we do not have direct access to our understanding, we must find a way to look at understanding in a vacuum and see what we can gather from this method.

Locke claims that the purpose of his investigation is to break the understanding into its constituent parts. First, the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, that is, how we come to know things, how well we know them, and the types of things we can know. Second he wants to analyze the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent. That is, where our beliefs come from, why some beliefs are better than others and why we should or should not believe certain things. What the mind is, whether it is material or spiritual, is not part of his investigation. Rather, his investigation is into what we would call in contemporary philosophy Epistemology,—the sources, criteria, and meaning of knowledge and belief.

Locke continues and concludes chapter 1 by attacking another idea, also from Descartes, that we need to begin an investigation of understanding by doubting everything that we know. This, Locke, claims is absurd; our understanding given to us by God, according to Locke, will necessarily be up to the job of investigating our most important questions. Furthermore, the fact that our understanding may be limited does not in any way invalidate the knowledge that we may still have access to. Some knowledge is better than none, even if we are never truly able to true understand. Locke finishes his introductory chapter by defining his use of idea as the object of understanding in the mind.

In Chapter 2 of Book I, Locke is arguing against the claim that there are ideas in the mind that are innate, that is, present before experience. It is Locke's central argument in this work that there are no innate ideas but rather that the mind needs sensation from experience to generate ideas. In this chapter Locke deploys his main argument against innate ideas. For an idea to be innate, even an idea that seems as natural as it is impossible for the same thing to be and not be, the idea must be understood by anyone who understands the words used in the sentence including children and idiots. Locke then goes on to show that not everyone does, in fact, understand or know many of the

ideas that defenders of the innateness hypothesis claim they should. As Locke argues, it is not enough for most people to know some idea for it to be innate, it must be known by everyone and this is too high a hurdle for most ideas to pass. Locke claims that ideas come from experience and it is through language that we are able to name these experiences and to organize and arrange them into more abstract ideas. Without language and the content that come from experience, knowledge and, hence, innate knowledge would be impossible. Before we can know whether the idea that it is impossible for the same thing to be and not be is an innate truth, we must have a clear idea what "impossible" means. However, as Locke shows, very intelligent adults have different ideas of what "impossible" means and hence their understanding of the statement that it is impossible for the same thing to be and not be will vary. Far from showing that the previous claim is innate, we have learned that there are many ways of understanding the statement, hence it cannot be innate.

In the previous chapter, Locke argues that there are no innate principles in the mind because even for obvious seeming principles, there is never the universal assent that is necessary for a principle to be innate. In this chapter, Locke seeks to make the same argument for practical rather than just theoretical principles and ideas. In this context, practical principles are principles that are meant to be action guiding including moral principles. While Locke admits that many moral principles and principles of justice seem obvious and are often even followed by bandits and the immoral, he claims that this does not show that they are innate. Moral rules and principles need to be justified by reasons. Any moral principle, even one so fundamental as the golden rule, can have asked of it, "why should I follow that?" without any confusion. This shows that the moral rules, though natural, are not innate. Locke is arguing here, at least tangentially, for the authority of natural principles of reason over innate principles. Natural principles are, like they sound, natural for humans, but not necessarily innate. For instance, property is a natural convention for humans to establish, but knowledge of how and which property rules to establish must be learned.

In the final chapter of Book I, Locke returns to the idea that even if primary sensations are felt in the womb or very early on, this still does not meant that the ideas that refer to those sensations, say pain or pleasure, are also innate. Those ideas and the words that refer to them must be learned. He again returns to the idea that even if two people have a notion of some idea, say impossibility, it does not mean that the idea itself will mean the same thing to both people; this shows that the idea is not innate. To conclude, he repeats his main argument from the section that there is no universal assent to the ideas that those like Descartes claim to be innate, hence there is no way that those ideas are, in fact, innate.

Book II, Chapters 1-15

Book II, Chapters 1-15 Summary and Analysis

In Book I, Locke considers whether or not the material of our understanding, that is, ideas are innate or supplied to us by experience. Locke gives several proofs that suggest ideas come solely from experience and in Book II he sets out to give a full account of how ideas are developed from experience and the different aspects of our ideas and how they fit together in understanding. In Book II we find the famous metaphor from Locke of the mind as a "blank slate," though he actually writes that, before experience, the mind is a white piece of paper. Continuing the metaphor, ideas are written on the paper by experience. In this Book, Locke will explain exactly how experience writes those ideas into understanding and exactly how understanding then uses those ideas.

The first several chapters of the Book describe ideas in general and their origin in experience and sensation. First, Locke states again that experience is the only possible foundation of our knowledge. Once we have dispelled the idea that innate knowledge is possible, we must accept that all knowledge ultimately comes form experience. Locke argues that we come to have ideas from experience in two ways, through sensation and reflection. Sensation is the process that produces ideas from sensory sensation. Most of our basic ideas are from sensation such as our knowledge of color, sound, and taste. Reflection is the process of generating ideas from operations of our own minds. In some sense, reflection is just internal sensation of the operating of the mind and is not totally different from sensation. Both of these processes generate ideas from experience, only the object of experience changes; for sensation the objects are external, for reflection internal. The types of ideas that these two faculties generate are one of two kinds, either simple or complex. Simple ideas are uniform and unable to be broken up into constituent parts. Complex ideas are just the combination of several simple ideas into a new idea.

Locke goes over several examples of different simple and complex ideas and eventually comes to a notion of primary and secondary qualities of things. Some qualities of a thing, their color, taste, or texture for example, can change if facts about the thing are changed. For instance, an object may change color in different lights or if one is colorblind. Also, as Locke notes, a walnut that is crushed into a pulp will look very different in terms of color and texture than an uncrushed walnut. Food that has been cooked often tastes very different from the same food uncooked. Garlic can taste very pungent if it is uncooked but if it is even cooked slightly, its pungent flavor will change to a sweet and pleasing flavor. There are other qualities of a thing, however, that are primary and cannot change without changing the thing itself. Some of these include what Locke calls number and bulk. Number is the clearer of these two qualities and basically just says that if a thing is split it will become something different than what it previously was. Locke argues that primary qualities are, in some sense, in the thing

itself, whereas secondary qualities arise out of the interaction of the thing and faculties of perception.

After this discussion of primary and secondary qualities, Locke goes on to explain the faculties of perception, retention, and other important faculties of understanding. First, Locke discusses perception, which, as he claims, is the passive faculty by which most of our ideas are generated. In some ways perception is the original route by which all of our ideas are generated. Besides this basic, passive faculty, we also need a faculty of retention. Retention allows us to store our ideas so that they may be recalled and used again in the future. This faculty is typically called memory. What Locke says here is not of great interest, though he does think that our ideas degrade over time and must be continually renewed through experience lest they vanish forever. Locke then discusses discerning, comparing, and composition. Discerning is the faculty that allows us to distinguish one idea from another. Comparing allows us to determine the difference in relations between ideas, while composition allows us to combine several simple ideas into complex ones. The final faculty that he discusses here is that of abstraction, whereby the mind subtracts qualities from particular ideas and turns an individual idea into a general representative of a type. So that to abstract form a particular chair to the notion of a representative type "chair," we subtract all that is specific and unique about a specific chair to give us a generalized idea of what any chair would have to have as qualities.

Locke then considers complex ideas in more detail. He has already suggested how complex ideas are generated but here he specifies that complex ideas can be made by combing several simple ideas into a new, complex idea, by bringing two simple ideas together without uniting them but seeing then as in some sense a new idea, or by abstracting from a simple idea into a general idea. Although there are many different complex ideas, Locke thinks that all complex ideas can be organized into three categories: modes, substances, and relations. Modes are different combinations or variations on a substance. Of these there are two kinds: simple and complex modes. The second category is substance, which represents the distinct separation between two things. That is, when a thing, or rather the idea of a thing, cannot meaningfully be divided, that constitutes a substance. The third category is that of relation or the idea of comparing two or more things on some dimension.

After briefly describing these three categories of complex ideas, Locke goes into some more depth on each category. The first is simple modes and to explain the notion, he uses the example of space. By taking the simple idea of space, derived from our sensation of solidity, we can modify it or vary it to generate all kinds of ideas such as distance or place. Finally we also generate two other key ideas which we will discuss later, body and extension. Duration, and ultimately our ideas of time, are also derived from a simple idea made into a complex idea in the same way by changing its modes, extending or reducing.

Book II, Chapters 16-33

Book II, Chapters 16-33 Summary and Analysis

Book II continues with a discussion of number. Basically Locke's idea is that all of our conceptions of number come from our underlying idea of unity that we find in our own body and mind. We multiply this original unity over and over to get all of our other complex ideas of number up to and including different notions of the infinite. Basically the discussion of number leads directly into Locke's discussion of other ways that we can construct simple modes including the basic modification of sound, taste and other basic simple ideas.

In Chapter 20, Locke begins a long discussion of pleasure, pain and the active and passive powers, which will take up much of Book II. Although this discussion is within the context of Locke's larger discussion of complex ideas, this should be seen as an extended commentary on morality and freedom. Locke begins with a discussion of pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain are both simple ideas that are given to us by sensation. There are important and very clear and powerful sensations that make a great impression on us. Locke goes on to argue that good and evil only really refer to pleasure and pain. That is, when we think of something as good we really are conjuring up an idea of some past pleasure. We think of things as good or bad insofar as those things tend to cause either pleasure or pain. This is all that we really mean by the terms good and evil. This is a strong claim by Locke and it is important to realize how radical this claim is as well as how it fits into his overall system. If Locke does not equate pleasure and pain with good and evil where would people learn about good and evil? That is, since all knowledge comes from experience and ultimately from sensation, Locke has to posit some sensory base for all our ideas, even those concerning morality. He cannot claim that we have inborn knowledge of morality because that would constitute an innate idea. Rather, he must claim, as he does, that our moral ideas can be reduced to sensory ideas of pleasure and pain. Locke here then is giving the basic argument that will inform all future utilitarianism.

Locke then goes on, in the same way to explain love and desire. Love is just the attitude of reflecting on something, which has a tendency to cause delight. Love, like our ideas in general, can and does fade over time if that original idea of delight is not renewed with the object. Desire is related and it is the uneasiness that a person feels in the absence of an object that has caused delight in the past. Locke explains this uneasiness as extremely troubling and claims that no man can be happy in its presence. As a result of the pain of unrequited desire, desire is able to motivate into action.

The next section begins an extended discussion of freedom of the will and the agent. Locke begins this discussion with an analysis of what he calls powers. A power is something that is capable of making a change in the world. Heat has the power to melt gold or cold the power to freeze ice. There are two kinds of power, active and passive.

Passive powers are the powers of heat and cold aforementioned, that is, relational power that require no internal direction. Matter has passive powers by virtue of internal and external relations it has. Only agents, that is, things capable of moving themselves, have active powers. It is easy enough to see how we form the ideas of passive powers. Any kind of motion or transformation of matter that we see in the world gives us a basic idea of passive power. It is harder to see how we get an idea of active powers, since we are unable to observe active powers in nature. Locke thinks that we see in ourselves a will or volition that gives us the idea of active powers.

It is this idea of liberty that we find in ourselves that allows us to think of ourselves as free agents. Throughout the history of philosophy, philosophers have disputed whether or not the will is free or determined. Some have argued that since nature seems to work on the necessary, casual laws, we too must be bound by those laws and however much we think of ourselves as free, we are really determined though causal necessity by the events of the past. Other philosophers have held that despite the causal necessity that seems to rule the world of objects and matter, human beings, for whatever reason, have a free will; they are not bound by the casual necessity of the world. Philosophers who hold that people do not have free will are called determinist and those that claim humans do have free will are called libertarians. Locke is notable because he is one of the first proponents of a third position in this debate known as compatabalism. Although Locke does not use the word himself, compatabalists argue that freedom is compatible with determinism. Locke is able to hold this position because of an interesting distinction he makes between a free will and a free agent. Will, or the idea of liberty, is just the idea to act in accordance with one's preferences. Will itself is an idea, a power, and it is silly and mistaken to talk about the freedom of the will itself. Rather we should talk about the freedom of the individual agent who has a will.

Locke uses several ingenious examples to explain this basic idea. Locke asks us to imagine a man who, while he is sleeping, is carried into another room where a friend of his is sitting. Upon awaking he finds himself in the company of the friend and is delighted to stay in the room and converse with his friend. Unbeknownst to him, another person has locked him in the room with his friend. Despite being locked into the room, the man has no preference to leave the room and so stays happily discussing with his friend. Locke claims that the man's stay in the room is voluntary, that is, it is in accordance with his will and preferences to stay in the room. Still, the man, being locked into the room, is not at liberty to leave. This shows that the voluntariness of the action and the freedom of the action are not the same thing. Being free as an agent involves having the freedom to do what one may want to do whereas being free in terms of will means something else. The two things then, cannot be the same. Will or volition is a type of power; freedom or liberty is the ability to act in a way of his choosing. Locke then, believes that the entire debate about free will and determinism has been confused because those involved have not separated freedom of the will from freedom of the agent.

Locke then returns to an idea from above, namely that of desire as the felt uneasiness for some good or to relive some evil. He discusses how strong this urge can be in different cases and how desires to remove pain can be different from desires to seek

pleasure. What all desires have in common however, is the motivating force to an agent to change his situation so as to alleviate the felt uneasiness. Happiness is the utmost pleasure that we can feel when we have no more desires. It is to the pursuit of happiness that all true liberty is aimed. Therefore we should direct our active powers to the pursuit of that state and make sure that all obstacles that would obstruct our liberty be removed so that we are able to move towards a greater state of happiness. Locke then deals with the question of moral and legal responsibility. Since we can never actually discern the colors and contents of a person's will or preferences, Locke argues that people should be held responsible solely for their actions, noting that God will ultimately punish the wicked and raise up the just.

After this extended discussion of morality and freedom, Locke returns to the main narrative of mixed modes where he discusses ideas of substance and relation. While discussing relations, he explains how cause and effect really derive from our basic ideas of relation. Then, he goes on to discuss identity over time, specifically the identity of persons over time. This is a complicated subject in general and a complicated discussion in Locke that we will only skim the surface of here. Personal identity is important for one reason because if we cannot pick out the same person over time, we cannot rightly praise or blame. Locke uses the example of a person who is drunk and does something wrong though does not remember it the next day. Children grow up and look nothing like they originally did, a man at night may think differently than a man during the day; how then are we to tell when a person is the same and when they are different? Locke chooses to distinguish between identity in consciousness and identity in body. Bodies can and do change over time but so long as consciousness remains similar, we still consider it to be the same person. This is a problem for Locke partly because he wants to allow for the possibility of the resurrection of the body at judgment day. Locke says that though those bodies will be new our consciousness will have remained similar and hence we will be the same person on the Day of Judgment.

Locke finishes this book by discussing several other, more minor relations and then discussing true and falsity. Locke holds what would be called today a "correspondence theory of truth" that is, something is true insofar as the ideas correspond with the world. He discusses the possibility of fantasy, falsity and several other important distinctions of truth before finishing up the book and preparing for the next book on words.

Book III

Book III Summary and Analysis

Locke's discussion in Book III is very important to his overall theory, but it is also very complex. Having explained the different forms and origins of ideas in Book II, Locke goes on here to look at the different forms and origins of the words that refer to ideas. Locke begins by claiming that God has formed mankind so as to be sociable. In so doing, God and nature have also given man the necessity and the ability to use words and language to communicate with one another. Without this communication, social life would be impossible. Words, according to Locke, are signs or sounds that refer to internal ideas. The actual form of the signs and words are arbitrary and are not essentially related to the ideas that they reference.

Although words have an arbitrary relationship to the underlying ideas that they refer to, since the purpose of language is ultimately communication, it is important to understand and use words in a way that one's fellows can understand. As Locke says, everyman has the liberty to make words refer to any internal ideas that he chooses, though he will necessarily have to pay a price in intelligibility if he does so.

It is, according to Locke, the use and invention of general terms that has led to the pervasiveness and usefulness of language. All words refer to and are generated by ideas and all ideas are originally simple ideas. Why then, do we not find most of our words referring to simple ideas? As Locke argues, in fact, most of our words are general rather than particular or simple. He argues that the reason that most words are general is of necessity. First, if most words referred to particular things then every particular thing would require a separate word, but this would be impossible. Second, even if it were possible to name everything individually, this would not serve the propose of communication because it would be impossible to hold enough words in common or to remember them to actively communicate with others. Finally, using only particular names would impede knowledge. To a large extent the increase of intellectual powers and intelligence in general follows the abstraction of our ideas. Similarly abstraction from particulars in language has a similar effect. Once we abstract, we are able to talk about chairs and furniture and objects rather than just one particular chair in my living room right now. The process of abstraction involves subtracting every aspect of a idea into its most basic form. Remove the color and the specific shape of a particular chair and we are left with the notion of "chair" in general. Combine that abstract idea with other things that are used for the same purposes as a chair and we are left with "furniture," thinking about what the kinds of furniture have in common. Once we do this, we are left with bodies or things in general. This process can be repeated for any given idea.

When we define a word, we make use of the next general word to help define the original word. So, when defining a horse, we use the idea of an animal. Some words cannot be defined any further and those words are simple ideas. Once a word can no

longer be defined we have found the essence of an idea. An essence of something is the properties of the thing that make it distinctly part of one species of things rather than another. Ultimately, every abstract idea that cannot be broken down, that is, every distinct idea is also an essence.

Scholars, especially the Scholastics, divided essences into real and nominal. Locke makes a great deal out of this distinction and spends some time discussing essences. He is responding in part to the post-scholastic philosophers of his time who were very concerned about essences, though the entire idea of essences is drawn from Thomistic, scholastic philosophy and is of little interest today. He also goes on to connect the idea of essence with substance. This debate harkens back to medieval, Catholic philosophy and need not concern us here. The interesting point, however, is that Locke is basically claiming that to understand the properties of things we can only look and analyze our ideas of those things. Locke himself does not focus too much on the radical implications of this view, implications that will be taken up later by Berkeley, Hume, and Kant among others.

Locke also has an interesting discussion of particles in grammar, focusing specifically on the particle "But," though he spends only about a page or two on what might have been an interesting subject. Locke then goes on to discuss the imperfections of words and the abuse of language. He distinguishes between two different type of words or usages of words, civil and philosophical. Civil words are used in communication between people in normal, everyday language. Philosophical usages are specialized and, Locke claims, prone to obfuscation and misuse. It is, in some sense, according to Locke, one of the most important jobs of the philosopher to get clear on the meanings and usages of words. Words are the currency, the medium of communication, and since words refer back to ideas, which come to us through the senses, philosophers using reflection should be able to fix, to some extent, the proper meaning of words. In so doing, we would clarify not only our communication, but also our thinking in general.

Locke then goes on to discuss what he calls the "abuse of words." One way of abusing words is to use words without any clear meaning, that is without any actual referent to ideas. Others will use words that have a meaning but, not knowing the meaning themselves, they will use the words loosely. Others will use words in an intentionally obscure manner. He charges the scholastic, catholic philosopher with this crime. Another abuse is what we now call reification, that is, taking words to be things rather than words. He claims metaphysical philosopher of all kinds, especially Platonists, are especially guilty of this sin. After laying out in some detail these abuses of language, Locke goes on to explain how philosophers can do a service by trying to scale back these crimes against language and reform the usage and meaning of words. This project largely foreshadows the movement in ordinary language philosophy that becomes popular in the English-speaking world in the early twentieth century. This project of conceptual and linguistic analysis is still an important aspect of English-speaking analytic philosophy to this day.

Book IV

Book IV Summary and Analysis

After having gone through an analysis of experience, ideas, and words, in Book IV Locke takes up the subject that he originally set out to investigate: knowledge. The setup is necessary as here Locke plans to give an account of knowledge based only on the concepts he has explained in the previous part of the book. An account of knowledge with no innate ideas and based only on the ideas generated from experience, or, as we would say today, an empiricist theory of knowledge. As Locke believes he has shown, the mind and its faculties of understanding have no other object than ideas, hence knowledge only consists of connections between ideas. We can only have knowledge of things that we perceive or could perceive. Given that knowledge only consists in certain relations between ideas, Locke believes those relations can be reduced to four kinds: identity and diversity, relation, necessary connection, and real existence. We will look at each of these forms of knowledge but before we do, we should give attention to Locke's notion of different degrees of knowledge.

Locke claims that intuitive knowledge is the clearest and the most certain of all kinds of knowledge. Intuitive knowledge is knowledge that we directly perceive to be true or false. That two is less than three or that nothing can be both all green and all red are known intuitively to be true. There is no need for a proof of intuitive claims; indeed, proofs cannot always be given because the truth is so certain. The next kind of knowledge is demonstrative knowledge, that is, knowledge that requires explicit proof. This kind of knowledge is only as certain as each step of the proof that is given. Still, it is typically not as certain as intuitive knowledge.

Locke takes a moment after the explanation of the different kinds and degrees of knowledge to address a skeptical worry. Since all knowledge is just the relations between ideas, how are we to know that the ideas we typically have are ideas deriving from experience and not ideas derived from memory or dreams. How is it that we can know we are not dreaming? In response to this concern, Locke describes his third degree of knowledge, sensitive. Sensitive knowledge is knowledge that, like our knowledge of pleasure and pain, comes from direct sensation.

Given these four forms of knowledge and three degrees of certainty, Locke can use all of the previous distinctions from his explanation to distinguish between different forms of knowledge. Since all knowledge is and can only be about and derived from ideas, all the different forms of ideas will also have their analogues in forms and modes of knowledge. Locke explains different variations of forms of knowledge and different degrees of knowledge. Knowledge derives from experience and ideas that are generated from experience are taken to be representational, that is, they represent the things that generate them. This helps us have certainty that at least some of our ideas represent what is going on in the external world. Locke, as we see above, is sensitive to the skeptical worry that there is no external world or that we are really just dreaming.

However, his theory, given its empiricist and representational character, is more open to this skeptical attack than he may be aware.

After going through the different forms of knowledge, Locke then moves his analysis to truth. Here, Locke claims that truth cannot mean anything other than the agreement or disagreement of signs with one and other. Truth is, as he says, a property of propositions. Propositions are strings of signs or ideas. Typically they have the form of sentences, at least in their verbal form. These verbal or word propositions reflect mental propositions of ideas. There are, however, two other types of truth that Locke thinks are somewhat different from the formal notion of truth deployed here. The first is moral truth, which he cryptically describes as truth which is persuasive to our minds but that may or may not accord to the reality of things. There is also another kind of truth, metaphysical truth, which refers to the real essence of things.

Locke then goes on to discuss how we have knowledge of our own existence. He claims that we have intuitive knowledge of our own existence based on the individuation of our sensations. To feel pain, I must feel pain, hence there must be an I. Ultimately, Locke believes that the existence of the self is incapable of and does not really need proof. Still, he thinks that our knowledge of our own existence is certain and intuitive. Almost as certain for Locke is our knowledge of God. This is a tricky argument, as Locke cannot rely on any innate or other ideas not derived from experience to prove the existence of God. The proof is that there must be a real being that was the source of all other beings and that being must be a thinking being because no unthinking thing can create a thinking thing. Therefore we have certain, intuitive knowledge of God that is ultimately derived from experience.

Locke then goes on to argue that we have knowledge of other things through experience in the same way that we have knowledge of differences, that is, through our senses. He then goes on to discuss approximate types of knowledge including judgment and probability. Judgment is the ability to assent to ideas or propositions without certain knowledge, a kind of intuitive leap. Probability is the appearance of agreement without intuitive proof. After discussing reason and its basis, Locke goes on to discuss the difference between reason and faith. Locke argues that faith requires revelation and revelation also necessarily requires reasons. Reason must judge whether revelation deserves assent and hence there is no real distinction between faith and reason; faith must ultimately collapse into reason since even faith requires reason. Locke spends the final chapter discussing the proper division of the sciences. This division is based on his system of knowledge. He divides the sciences into natural philosophy, ethics, and the science signs. Natural philosophy, what would be metaphysics and natural science, is the study of bodies and their properties but since we only have secondary knowledge of these things, this branch of knowledge is, paradoxically, speculative. Ethics is the study of those things that tend to increase happiness and reduce pain. Finally, the science of signs analyzes our ideas directly and our words. Since, according to Locke, ideas and signs are really the base of all of our knowledge, this should be seen as the primary science.

Characters

John Locke

Although not actually a character in this book, Locke himself is one of the most important philosophers in history. His work, especially this book and his Two Treatises of Government, was wildly influential. Although this particular work is not studied anymore as much as later work by David Hume, it was extremely influential in its day and one reason that it is not studied as much as one might think is that the work is both incredibly radical and so widely responded to by both critics and supporters that the substance of Locke's ideas were integrated into later thinkers.

Locke was the son of an English country lawyer who had served under Cromwell in the English civil war. John Locke studied philosophy and medicine at Oxford where he read the works of Descartes and the Scholastic philosophers. While at Oxford, he met Ashley Cooper, the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury and he joined Shaftesbury at his home. There he wrote the Essay as well as his later political work. He also wrote the constitution of the Carolinas and an influential letter and essay on religious toleration.

Locke's political work on limited government and private property were foundational doctrines in the development of liberalism and is still used today in classrooms. Locke's belief that the pursuit of happiness was central to both ethics and politics was eventually enshrined into the American declaration of independence, a document that owes much to Locke's influence. It is in this essay though, that we see the idea of the pursuit of happiness fully developed and we see how it fits into his overall philosophical system.

Descartes

Descartes is generally considered to be the first modern, as opposed to medieval, philosopher. He self-consciously began his philosophical project in opposition to the scholastic orthodoxy that was still dominant at the time. Descartes held that we should proceed by a method of doubt, that is, we should throw out all of our ideas and proceed reacquiring what knowledge we could by slowly assessing which ideas were able to withstand radical doubt. He famously starts his investigation by imagining that he does not exist and then seeks to prove his own existence from the fact of his thinking. This is the famous, "Cogito ergo Sum" or "I think, therefore I am." After establishing that he exists, Descartes goes on to prove many other things, including the existence of God.

Unlike Locke, Descartes believed that we have innate ideas and that we could know many things before experience. He further argued that the mind and the body consisted of two entirely separate, though related, substances. Descartes was also known for his invention of the Cartesian coordinates and analytic geometry. His philosophy inspired a school of philosophers on the continent of Europe known as Rationalists. Rationalists, like Spinoza, Leibniz, and Malebranche believed with Descartes that knowledge did not

rely on experience for its content. Locke is, in large part, replying to Descartes and providing a kind of analogue to Descartes' work. In some ways, Locke's Essay is a kind of project in radical doubt but instead of starting from doubt, Locke starts from basic experience and sees what he can construct out of that basis with different results from Descartes.

Schoolmen

The name Schoolmen refers to a type of philosophy or method of philosophy dominant from about the 11th century until the 16th century. The key figure in Scholasticism was Thomas Aquinas who tried to combine Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine. In modern consciousness, Scholasticism is known for its debates about topics like how many angels can stand on the head of a pin and for its methodological reliance on the notion of substance and final ends.

Cartesians

Followers of Descartes who believed that knowledge did not necessarily require experience and that there were innate ideas.

Epicureans

Epicureanism was a school of philosophy that follows the teaching of Epicurus and is known for its materialism and atheism. Epicurus claimed that pleasure was the only good thing in the world and living properly was to avoid pain and maximize pleasure.

Stoics

The Stoics are, in some ways, the Hellenistic competitors to the Epicureans. They believed in the existence of fate and the non-reality of free will, as well as the necessity of acting morally no matter what the circumstances.

Platonists

Platonists are philosophical followers of the Greek Philosopher Plato. Plato argued that we have all of our knowledge innately and that when we learn something, we are actually remembering it from a previous life.

Aristotle

Aristotle was another Greek philosopher and student of Plato. He argued for the existence of real substances and final ends in nature. Though Locke ultimately

disagrees with almost all of his doctrines, Locke agrees Aristotle was one of the greatest men who ever lived.

Socrates

Socrates was the first real moral philosopher and was the teacher of Plato. As a result of his doctrines, he was forced to drink poisonous hemlock and die.

Bucephalus

The beloved horse of Alexander the Great.

Objects/Places

Understanding

The understanding is the basic faculty of knowledge that, as Locke says, like the eye, is needed for seeing but does not see itself.

Simple Ideas

Simple ideas are derived directly from experience and cannot be broken down into constituent parts.

Complex Ideas

Complex ideas are, through a variety of different methods, made up of simple ideas.

Secondary Qualities

Secondary qualities are qualities like color or taste that are not things in themselves but, rather, arise from our reaction to those things.

Primary Qualities

Primary qualities are in the objects themselves and are invariant across different experiential modes.

Reflection

Reflection is the faculty that takes ideas directly as an object rather than experience.

Substance

Substance is the presumed basis of all things. It is what all things are ultimately composed of though we do not perceive it directly.

Modes

A Mode is a kind of variation. Modes of knowledge are different kinds of knowledge.

Relations

Relations are properties that hold between things but that are not, strictly speaking, in things. That is, the distance between two objects is a relational property, but absent one of the objects, the relational property would not exist.

Knowledge

Knowledge for Locke can only be about and derived from ideas. In some sense then, we only know about our experiences and ideas, not necessarily the objects that cause them.

Themes

Empiricism

One of the key themes of this work is the defense and articulation of an empiricist theory of knowledge. Although Hobbes had previously developed something like an empiricist theory of knowledge, his theory, though brilliant, is idiosyncratic. Locke is properly seen as the father of modern empiricism, the approach to philosophy followed by Hume, Berkeley, Mill, Ayer, Quine and many other philosophers up until the present day. Indeed, some form of empiricism is the dominant approach to philosophy in the English-speaking world. Locke's approach is developed in this Essay.

Empiricism is first and foremost a doctrine about where knowledge comes from. Knowledge, the empiricist claims, derives ultimately from experience. Many, like Locke and Hume argue that all knowledge basically comes from experience, though some empiricists may allow for the existence of a priori knowledge or knowledge that is not derived from experience.

Locke is extremely radical in this regard, even going so far as to argue that knowledge of God comes from experience. Although empiricism is an extremely powerful approach that need not make many methodological assumptions that other approaches must make, such as belief in the existence of innate ideas, there is one main drawback to the approach that Locke notices but does not really respond to here. If all of our knowledge is derived from experience, how do we know that our knowledge is related to the way things actually are rather than just the way things seem? Philosophers including Berkeley and Kant wrestled with this problem over the following decades but the debate is still raging to this day among philosophers.

Hedonism

According to Locke in the Essay, good and evil only refer to different tendencies of things to cause pain or pleasure. That is, we call things good that tend to cause pleasure and bad things that tend to cause pain. This general philosophical view about morality is called hedonism because pleasure is the ultimate moral good for which we should seek. Epicurus and his followers held a form or hedonism and later philosophers called utilitarians, most notably Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, would also argue that pleasure was the ultimate moral good. This view is more complicated than it may initially appear.

Simple pleasure seeking, as Locke understands, will not lead to happiness. Many things that cause pleasure in the short run also cause pain in the long run. One may enjoy drinking alcohol, but there is always a hangover to contend with. The intelligent pursuit of pleasure recognizes this and seeks to understand the things that tend to produce

pleasure and alleviate pain. Locke argues that a science of ethics should investigate those things and behaviors that tend to increase pleasure and produce happiness.

This science would not strictly be a philosophical science but would probably look something more like economics. We need to actually investigate the things that lead to happiness in humans so the science of ethics will have a considerable empirical component. The recent psychological sub-discipline of happiness research and different aspects of economics seem similar to what Locke had in mind.

Free Will

Throughout the history of philosophy, philosophers have debated the problem of free will. The natural world of things all around us seems to operate on regular, necessary causal laws. In the natural world, effects follow naturally from causes. From our point of view, though, we seem to somehow have escaped this natural world of causes and effects and we seem to have a will that we determine rather than previous causes. Determinists argue that this appearance of a free will is just an illusion while libertarians argue that freedom necessitates some lack of causal determinism. Locke, however, rejects both of these lines of argument and claims that freedom is possible even in a deterministic world.

The mistake, according to Locke is that previous philosophers were concerned about the freedom of the will rather than the freedom of the person. The will, Locke claims, is merely a power, a mental faculty. We are concerned with the freedom to act, not with the freedom of volition. Locke gives several examples where a person is restrained physically though they have no inclination to act in the way that they are restrained from.

Still, even though they have no desire, say, to leave a room that they are locked in, they are nevertheless not free to leave. The relevant sense of freedom we are concerned with politically, psychologically, and personally is the freedom to do one thing rather than another. We need not concern ourselves with freedom of the will.

Style

Perspective

It is somewhat odd to talk about the perspective in a book like this; still, Locke clearly takes the perspective of someone who is investigating these issues for the first time. Locke references other thinkers and refers to their work but he does not rely on their answers to guide his own. His empiricism is unique and radical and since he is striking out into new territory, other, previous thinkers will not necessarily be able to help direct his inquiry. This leads to some problems with the narrative of the Essay.

Some questions that Locke deals with are so interesting that he seems to want to deal with them exclusively for long periods without returning to the general narrative. This can be disconcerting to the reader even when, especially when, the digressions are important and interesting.

Locke's perspective on these issues is unique, at least at the time he wrote this essay and even today, though some have followed in his footsteps, his ideas are still not completely in line with modern thinking. This makes his perspective somewhat alien, though an open-minded reader should be able to follow him down the various avenues that his thought takes. Sometimes it is clear that he knows there is a potential problem with his thought but instead of dealing with it he moves on to another topic. Since Locke's thinking is highly original, some of the weaknesses of his view or the problems with his view would be just as fruitful or interesting to investigate as its strengths. It is not hard to see why an author would want to avoid the weakest parts of his work, but it would have been a richer work if he had spent more time on them.

Tone

Locke's tone is one of the best aspects of this work and of Locke's writing in general. Locke writes in a style that, though it might seem rarefied today, is actually very conversational. One gets the sense that if Locke were just explaining his ideas to you in person they would have much the same feel. Although some of the digression on archaic scholastic concepts is tedious, the rest of the book is strikingly engaging and conversational. His language, though resting on some jargon is also notably clear. This should not be surprising given the focus he puts on the clear and rigorous use of language in Book III and IV, but still it is a surprise and a delight to see the way he uses the English language.

The language is dated, but not as severely as that of many other writers of the same period. It is, of course, a serious work of philosophy and hence filled with abstract language and complicated arguments, but the technical terms actually aid understanding rather than hampering it.

Many of the terms that Locke uses here, such as "secondary qualities," are now in general use by philosophers; so philosophers may have an easier time relating to the usage than non-philosophers. All in all this work, like many other works of the time, was written for an audience of well-educated non-specialists. The fact that Locke's audience was broad no doubt contributes to the clarity of the language.

Structure

The Essay is structured in a seemingly straightforward, though not obvious way. Book I deals with the origin of all knowledge and is a sustained attack on the doctrine of innate ideas, that is, the doctrine that we have ideas implanted in us before birth by God or nature that can generate knowledge later. In Book II, Locke systematically develops his theory of the content of knowledge, ideas. In Book III Locke takes his analysis of ideas and applies it to words and language. In Book IV, Locke develops a final theory of knowledge and truth.

Each book has numerous chapters made up of numbered sections. Book II is the longest, accounting for a large portion of the Essay as a whole. The work suffers from this as the discussion takes several side routes and digressions, which could, no doubt, have benefited form their own books. Although the careful reader will be able to discern the structure underlying the Essay, Locke's work seems more unorganized that it needs to.

Ultimately Locke is concerned here with the origin, content, and ends of our knowledge as a whole. By dividing the work up into sections that do not necessarily relate to these aims, Locke may lose some of his readers. The sections on morality and free will seem added in and like digressions, though they are absolutely essential to his argument. With a different structure that highlighted the argumentative narrative rather than obscuring it, Locke would have clarified his general project and specific arguments.

Quotes

"The Understanding, like the eye, whilst it makes us see and perceive all other things takes no notice of itself..." (Book I, Chapter 1, 1)

"The candle that is set up in us shines bright enough for all our purposes." (Book I, Chapter 1, 3)

"I think there cannot be any one moral rule produced whereof a man may not justly demand a reason; which would be perfectly ridiculous and absurd if they were innate..." (Book I, Chapter 3, 19)

"Pound and Almond, and the clear white colour will be altered into a dirty one, and the sweet taste into an oily one." (Book II, Chapter 8, 61)

"This is memory, which is as it were the storehouse of our ideas." (Book II, Chapter 10, 69)

"The pictures drawn in our minds are laid in fading colors, and if not sometimes refreshed, vanish and disappear." (Book II, Chapter 10, 71)

"Things then are good or evil only in reference to pleasure or pain." (Book II, Chapter 20, 101)

"Voluntary then is not opposed to necessary, but to involuntary." (Book II, Chapter 21, 110)

"For Powers are relations, not agents; and that which has the power, or not the power to operate, is that alone which is or is not free, and not the power itself." (Book II, Chapter 21, 113)

"...every man has so inviolable a liberty to make words stand for what ideas he pleases that no one hath the power to make others have the same ideas in their minds." (Book III, Chapter 3, 210)

"Where this perception is, there is knowledge; and where it is not, there, though we may fancy, guess, or believe, yet we always come short of knowledge." (Book IV, Chapter 1, 267)

"I find every sect, as far as reason will help them, make use of it gladly; and where it fails them, they cry out, it is a matter of faith, and above reason." (Book IV, Chapter 18, 378)

Topics for Discussion

Explain John Locke's critique of Scholastic Metaphysics.

What is the distinction between simple and complex ideas? Is it plausible?

What is Locke's distinction between primary and second qualities? Is it plausible? Why or why not?

Explain Locke's distinction between Understanding and Reflection.

What is Locke's conception of substance? Can you make sense of it?

What does Locke mean by "modes" and "relations"? Are they properties of things in the world or of perceptions? Does the answer to the last question make sense to you?

What is Locke's critique of rationalists like Descartes?

Explain Locke's theory of what knowledge is and where it comes from. Does this sound like knowledge, as you understand it? Why or why not? If not, what is peculiar about it?