

A Studying of Limitation of Epistemology as Basis of Toleration with Special Reference to John Locke

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Abstract: Locke, in order to find a solution for main problems of England- the serious religious conflicts and inefficacy of government- began inquiry. At that time, he found before any inquiry, it was necessary to examine our own cognitive faculties and to see their fit objects and how far it can be extend. Locke begins his inquiry by examining the object of understanding namely the world of ideas. Knowledge consists in the perception of the agreement or disagreement of any of our ideas. That is, our knowledge extends not beyond the objects present to our senses. Therefore, our knowledge is so narrow and limited. Now, it is evident how our knowledge is narrow to spirits and intellectual world that are more remote from our knowledge. We have no certain information of the existence of other spirits and angels but by revelation. Hence, religious zealots and fanatics cannot achieve certainty about their belief and they do not have any right to insist on being certainty of their beliefs and to impose on others. Then, we must tolerate opposed opinion. Thus, Locke recognized limitation of epistemology as a strong basis for doctrine toleration.

Keywords: Faith, Limitation of Epistemology, John Locke, Reason, Toleration

1. Introduction

The idea of toleration is an important and current concept in western thought. Toleration “is a policy of patient forbiddance in the presence of something which is disliked or disapproved of.”¹ That is to say, accepting what we do not agree with, we approve other people’s behaviors and thoughts against our beliefs and opinions especially in religious matters and we tolerate them instead of condemning them. The idea emerged in the sixteenth century through the works of thinkers like Castalion, Lanoué, and Bodin. In the seventeenth century Spinoza, Milton, and Bayle were significant defenders of toleration. But in scholars’ opinion, toleration receives its most complete defiance in John Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Locke systematized existing debates about toleration into a coherent, powerful and principled plea of toleration.

2. Necessity of Inquiring Concerning Human understanding

In present article I have discussed Locke’s epistemology and how it is related with the principle of toleration. According to Locke before we discuss about the principles of morality and revealed religion,² it is necessary “to examine our own abilities, and see what objects our understandings were, or were not, fitted to deal with.”³ Hence, his purpose in *An Essay* consists inquiring into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent.

In addition, for Locke, if we can to describe the grounds of people’s contradictory opinions, at this time, we have the right to infer that “either there is no such thing as truth at all, or that mankind hath no sufficient means to attain certain knowledge of it.”⁴

Locke begins his inquiry into human understanding by examining the object of understanding namely the world of ideas. Idea, for Descartes is a rational thing in general while for Locke entirely sentient. Locke, at first, attacks to innate ideas and rejects them and works on of his empiricism that it seems the both were two

¹Cranston, Maurice, “Toleration,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edited by Paul Edwards, Macmillan Company & The Free Press, Vol. 8, 1967, p.143.

²Cranston, Maurice William, *John Locke: A Biography*, Longmans, London, 1957, pp.140-1.

³Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Epistle to the Reader, John W. Yolton, Dent, London; Dutton, New York, 1976, p.x1.

⁴Ibid., p.2.

sides of one coin and revolutionary.⁵ Locke clearly felt that the doctrine of innate principles was used by its advocates “as a pseudo-epistemological device to buttress obscurantism and as an instrument of intellectual oppression.”⁶

After criticizing and rejecting innate ideas, he tries to find a proper epistemological foundation for morality and religion in order to allow and promote religious toleration. Locke finds these bases in experience.

3. Epistemology Limitation

According to Locke, the mind is a white paper which at first is “void of all characters and without ideas” and the mind obtains all the materials of reason and knowledge by means of experience; sensation and reflection. “Our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them.”⁷ Therefore experience is instrument of gaining knowledge and ideas are its objects.

Also, in Locke’s view, knowledge consists in the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our ideas. There are three degrees of knowledge; intuitive knowledge, demonstrative knowledge, and sensitive knowledge. The first consists in perceiving agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately by themselves without any interference. This kind of knowledge is the clearest and most certain knowledge.⁸ The second degree of knowledge is where the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of ideas by the intervention of other idea (one or more), this is that which we call reasoning. The third degree of knowledge is sensitive knowledge, that is, perception of the mind about the particular existence of finite beings without us which going beyond bare probability and yet not reaching perfectly to either of the forgoing degrees of certainty, passes under the name of knowledge. In each of which, there are different degrees and ways of evidence and certainty. Whatever comes short of them is not knowledge “but faith or opinion, at least in all general truths.”⁹

According to Locke, our knowledge restricts our ideas and perception of agreement or disagreement our own ideas which is either by intuition or demonstration or sensation.

Consequently, first, our intuitive knowledge is limited and does not include all of our ideas because we can not “examine and perceive all the relations they have one to another, by juxtaposition or an immediate comparison one with another.”¹⁰

Second, our demonstrative knowledge does not contain all of our ideas.

Because when we examine between two different ideas, we can not always find mediums ideas which can connect one to another with an intuitive knowledge in all the parts of the deduction; and wherever that fails, therefore “we come short of knowledge and demonstration.”¹¹

Third, our sensitive knowledge is not reaching further than the existence of things actually present to our senses.¹² After all “our knowledge would never reach to all we might desire to know concerning those ideas we have; nor be able to surmount all the difficulties, and resolve all the questions that might arise concerning any of them.”¹³

Concerning God’s existence, Locke believes in our existence is a clear and infallible proof for being of God.¹⁴ But about other things, according to Locke, we have a sensitive knowledge; which extends not beyond

⁵Tipton, Ian, “Locke: Knowledge and its limits,” *British Philosophy and Age of Enlightenment*, Edited by Stuart Brown, Routledge, London, 1996, p.74.

⁶Wall, Grenville, “Locke’s Attack on Innate Knowledge,” *Philosophy*, Vol. 49, No. 190, Cambridge University Press on behalf of Royal Institute of Philosophy, Oct., 1974, p.414.

⁷Locke, John, 1976, p.33.

⁸Locke, John, 1976, p.271-272.

⁹Locke, John, 1976, p.277.

¹⁰Ibid.p. 278.

¹¹Ibid., p.279.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 331.

the objects present to our senses.¹⁵ Then, for Locke, Our knowledge is so narrow and limited because of First, want of ideas. Our ideas do not include whole extent of all beings, “secondly, want of a discoverable connexion between the ideas we have, thirdly want of tracing and examining our ideas.”¹⁶ Therefore, Locke declares although human may advance in experimental philosophy but “Certainty and demonstration are things we must not, in these matters, pretend to.”¹⁷

Now that it is evident how our knowledge is narrow to the whole extent even of material beings, obviously whole spirits and intellectual world are yet more remote from our knowledge.¹⁸ “Our knowledge therefore is real only so far as there is conformity between our ideas and the reality of things.”¹⁹ And Locke accepts all simple ideas are really conformed to things and this conformity is sufficient for real knowledge.

Hence, for Locke, there are the few important things that we can know for certain and the most of our knowledge which leads our life is not certain but probable. The mind, in probable Knowledge that is called belief, assent, or opinion- takes its ideas to agree or disagree or any proposition to be true or false, without perceiving demonstrative evidence in the proofs and it presumes to be so before it certainly appears.²⁰ That is to say, we have an opinion when we admit or receive any proposition for true, upon arguments or proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain knowledge that it is so.²¹ Opinion has degrees from “full assurance and confidence, quite down to conjecture, doubt, and distrust.”²² Certain Knowledge and probable Knowledge are named Knowledge and opinion respectively.

Moreover, Locke distinguishes between the probable propositions we receive of sensible matter of fact, capable of human testimony such as the propositions of the natural sciences or of what is beyond the evidence of our senses such as there are angels.²³

4. Human Being’s Knowledge Limitation on Religious Matters

In order to show our knowledge limitation in religious matters and to prevent from abusing of reason and faith, Locke at first defines reason and faith and then distinguishes their realms. Locke considers reason as a faculty in man, for distinguishing man from beasts and surpassing them²⁴ that deals with both of knowledge and opinion which discovers certainty in the one, and probability in the other.²⁵

Faith “is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men, we call revelation.”²⁶ In addition, Locke distinguishes between traditional revelation and original revelation. He declares “By the one, I mean that first impression which is made immediately by God on the mind of any man, to which we cannot set any bounds; and by the other, those impressions delivered over to others in words, and the ordinary ways of conveying our conceptions one to another.”²⁷

In Locke’s view, objects of reason are according to, above, and contrary to reason. According to reason are propositions whose truth we can discover by examining and tracing those ideas we have from sensation and reflection; and by natural deduction find to be true or probable. For example “the existence of one God is according to reason.”²⁸ Above reason are such propositions whose truth or probability we cannot by reason derive from those principles since they are beyond the discovery of our natural faculties, and above reason.

¹⁵Ibid., p.290.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p.293.

¹⁸Ibid., p.294.

¹⁹Ibid., p.298.

²⁰Locke, John, 1952, Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins, Published by William Benton, Great Books of the Western Worlds, 1952, p364.

²¹Ibid.p365.

²²Locke, John, 1976, p.356.

²³Locke, John, 1952, p.368.

²⁴Locke, John, 1976, p.366.

²⁵Ibid., p.367.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p.379.

²⁸Locke, John, 1952, p.380.

They are revealed and the proper matter of faith for example “the resurrection of the dead, above reason.”²⁹ Contrary to reason are such propositions as are inconsistent with or irreconcilable to our clear and distinct ideas for example the existence of more than one God is contrary to reason.³⁰

The important point, in here, is that Locke asserts nothing can, under the title of revelation “shake or overrule plain knowledge; or rationally prevail with any man to admit it for true, in a direct contradiction to the clear evidence of his own understanding.”³¹ Therefore, Locke rejects such propositions in faith realm because they are contrary to reason and if we accept doubtful propositions instead of self-evident and certain propositions it would destroy “the principles and foundations of all knowledge, evidence, and assent whatsoever; and there would be left no difference between truth and falsehood, no measures of credible and incredible in the world.”³² For him faith can never convince us of anything that contradicts our knowledge³³ because faith is not opposed to reason.³⁴ Also, man has to use reason even in immediate and original revelation besides traditional revelation.³⁵ Because, according to Locke “matter of faith being only divine revelation, and nothing else” therefore “without such a revelation, the believing, or not believing, that proposition, or book, to be of divine authority, can never be matter of faith, but matter of reason.”³⁶

In Locke’s view, every proposition is revealed and our mind cannot judge about its truth by its natural faculties and notions, it is explicitly matter of faith, and above reason. Also, all propositions which the mind can come to determine and judge, by using of its natural faculties through its naturally obtained ideas, are matter of reason. That is to say, we must not urge or assent whatever is contrary to reason as revelational matters.

Therefore, according to Locke, to be protected the extravagances of delusion and error, “reason must be our last judge and guide in everything,” that is to say, we must consult reason “and by it examine whether it be a revelation from God or no: and if reason finds it to be revealed from God, reason then declares for it as much as for any other truth, and makes it one of her dictates.”³⁷

As a result, Locke asserts since: first our certain knowledge is achieved only of our natural faculties I.e. senses, second someone can not be have perfect assurance or certain of faith and matters of faith and cannot achieve certainty about their belief and even cannot appeal to Scriptures as a source for their beliefs, religious zealots and fanatics have no reason for their claims to special knowledge that contradict ordinary experience and they do not have any right to insist on being security their beliefs and to impose on others. Then, it should be better that men do not show prejudice and do not insist others to assent their opinions. Therefore, here it seems, Locke uses want and absence of security in matters of faith, in other words, limitation of our knowledge in religious matters as an important premise in his argument for religious toleration. Locke’s argument is that, since we can not be sure that our religious beliefs and practices are more correct and pleasing to God than others, we must tolerate opposed opinion.

Thus, Locke prepares speculative grounds of toleration, by examining human understanding and showing that the reach of certainty is very limited whereas the field of probability is very large in its various degrees and he finds epistemology as a strong and secure foundation and basis for his view of religious toleration and thereby for his other political thoughts. In fact, Locke’s the doctrine of toleration connects his epistemology to his political thought.

5. Bibliography

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²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Locke, John, 1976, p.380.

³²Ibid, p. 381.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Locke, John, 1952, p. 380.

³⁵Locke, John, 1976, pp.381-382.

³⁶Ibid, p.382.

³⁷Locke, John, 1952, pp.387-388.

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