
THE CONNECTION BETWEEN JOHN LOCKE'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE CONDUCT OF UNDERSTANDING

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses three fundamental features of John Locke's educational philosophy, crucial to understanding the philosophical underpinnings of Locke's theory of education and the conduct of the understanding. These three features are 1) intimate connection between education and epistemology, 2) role of sensory faculties in the attainment of knowledge, and 3) the nature of ideas. In the first section, I will examine Locke's conception of epistemology and its relation to his theory of education. Being more akin to the corpuscularian view of reality, Locke believes that one should not bother about the knowledge of those things for which one is not capable due to the limits of one's sensory capacities. The second section is devoted to explaining those factors mentioned by Locke in his educational writings, which are crucial to understanding the conduct of understanding and play an important role in a child's mental development. Such as thinking habits, ideas as an object of understanding, the flexibility of mind, history, culture, language, and morality. The third section aims to clarify the meaning and nature of ideas as they are the cornerstone of Locke's epistemology which is intimately connected to his educational philosophy. Being an empiricist philosopher, he reduces man to an experiential plane of life and believes that education aims not to know all things except those that affect our conduct.

KEYWORDS

Mind, Knowledge, Sensory Faculties, John Locke, Understanding, Educational Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

There is a general consensus implicit or explicit among the habitants of every society that education is essential for progress, though the meaning and aims of education differ according to the needs and aspirations of the people living in that society. In every society, individuals must have some conception of reality that leads them to live a meaningful life. And that conception of reality has some epistemological leaning that eventually sets the meaning of progress in any particular society. For instance, if one has a firm belief in God, then for such a person, the ultimate nature of reality is spiritual, and his epistemic claim must be rooted in the word of God (revealed text). Suppose one thinks that one should not put oneself in pain to acquire knowledge of those things that do not fall within the purview of sensory faculties, such as the soul (Ed., 1997). In that case, it means such an individual like Locke is interested in developing an epistemology primarily devoted to experience as the ultimate source of knowledge. It means that the genuineness of an idea can be gauged on the basis of their ability to incite man while having an experience of an object. It may lead one to rely upon the empirical method of acquiring knowledge which rests upon the authority of observation and prefers scientific orientation of mind over speculative one. Such a view is sometimes called a corpuscularian view of reality, which coincides with Locke's view of reality and plays an important role in developing Locke's theory of education (Ed., 1997).

While emphasizing the need to identify the possibilities of acquiring knowledge, Locke developed an educational philosophy whose chief aim is to clarify the purpose of education. He is of the view that such a task can be achieved by exploring the meaning as well as the conduct of the understanding. For this reason, drawing upon his epistemological inclinations, Locke tends to establish that the aim of education is to know only those things which affect our life. Thus, to understand Locke's ideas concerning education, one needs to address some questions. Such questions include 1. How do we develop thinking habits? 2. What do we mean by a flexible mind? 3. What is the nature of the idea? 4. Why is the idea the only object of understanding? 5. What is the significance of history and culture in an educative process? And 6. What do we mean by studying and reading in the proper sense of the terms?

Epistemological foundations of Locke's theory of Education

As I have mentioned earlier that in order to develop better understanding of Locke's theory of education one needs to situate it in a proper context. It is essential to know the aims and meaning of education as conceived by Locke. According to Peter Gay, the connection between Locke's philosophy and educational theory is 'intimate and obvious' (Locke, 1968). Locke's educational theory is rooted in his epistemological inquiries and has two basic dimensions. First, he questions the extent of knowledge with respect to the constitution or capacity of the mind which is given. It means that

as soon as the learning process begins, one should recognize one's ability to grasp knowledge in a form of ideas and determine the possibilities and ways of acquiring knowledge, which eventually helps one to pursue knowledge in the right direction instead of wasting one's energies. Locke claims that knowing the power and limits of understanding one possesses through all the evolutionary stages from infancy through childhood to maturity is necessary to observe the nexus between the growth of one's mental abilities and experience of the world as the mind never stops changing. This process depends upon one's mental operations such as discerning, willing, memorizing & comparing, particularly attentive to the psychological foundations of the understanding in children (Locke, 1968). It is quite crucial in the making of knowledge. Another dimension of Locke's educational theory, which is the logical corollary of the first one, is concerned with the possibility of acquiring knowledge through sense experience, according to which the ultimate source of knowledge is experience because when the process of learning begins, the mind is simply a blank slate. This point is very well explained by Robert Rusk in this way:

"Locke's philosophy has been designated empiricism. It is opposed to rationalism which assumes the existence in the mind of certain first principles, known intuitively, from which other truths are derived by logical deduction. Locke in the Essay seeks to explain how experience is built up in the individual mind by impressions from without. He referred to the process as 'this historical, plain method'; we should now refer to it as the psychological method, The sense-data out of which experience is constituted are assumed to be given in a detached, isolated fashion and the mind which registers these impressions is conceived by Locke as a blank sheet or plain surface, a tabula rasa" (Rusk, 1962)

Locke being an empiricist, believes that the aim of education is 'not to know all Things, but those which concern our Conduct' (Locke, 1968). It entails that Locke is interested in developing a theory of education that encompasses all those factors that impact one's life and are likely to shape the future course of action on a broader scale. According to Axtell, the educational theory expounded by Locke is universal in nature, as it is applicable to all men in all places as Locke seems to make an attempt to explore the psychological foundations of understanding. In other words, he is trying to develop an educational theory based on philosophical psychology. Locke believes that every curriculum must include a distinct system of values embedded in morality, Christianity, humanistic or utilitarian concerns. And due to the enduring nature of such concerns, fundamental principles of education are universally applicable in various circumstances. For this reason, in Locke's view, "Education is the explicit application of the philosophy of knowledge latent within the Essay, we would expect the Education to be universally applicable in its main principles also" (Locke, 1968, p.51).

Locke's principles of Education

Following principles of education introduced by Locke are intimately related to each other and reflect that in what sense his empirically oriented theory of education can be transformed into a viable system of education in a concrete manner.

1. Instilling thinking habits:

In Locke's view, the formative years of any child are very crucial. He believes that the essential feature of education is that those responsible for the children's education should make every effort to instill thinking habits in the minds of their pupils. In other words, they should prepare them for thinking, which is one of the foremost pre-requisites for genuine understanding. Locke asserted that 'custom settles Habits of Thinking in the Understanding, as well as determining the will, and of Motions in the Body' (Locke, 1968, p.54). It entails that in every educational activity, the process of habit formation is ever-present, usually determined by the prevailing socio-cultural forces of the society. Here Locke is pointing out two critical dimensions of education. The first one tends to establish that the process of any educational activity begins with experience as one's mind is like a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) and is capable of being trained in a peculiar way as there are no *a priori* mental preoccupations. The second one is a concern with the impact of culture on education which presumes that nurturing of the pupil is also one of the most significant features of education. This dichotomy between one's natural capacities and cultural phenomenon is the key to understanding Locke's theory of education as well as its connection with his epistemology. It entails that if one receives adequate training on such a pattern, one is likely to develop an insight that may help one to recognize the role of sense-experience in the making of knowledge. It means that the process of education is supposed to be conducive as it should not warrant those ideas to enter into the minds of the learners, which may create hurdles in grasping the true aim and purpose of education.

2. Association of Ideas:

The second principle given by Locke is a logical corollary of the first one and is based upon the idea of the 'association of Ideas' (Locke, 1968). It means that education plays an important role in the process of formation or selection of ideas. That is, education aims to attain distinct and clear ideas in order to avoid confusion. Locke being an empiricist, believes that ideas pertaining to the material world are more distinct as one can experience them through senses. Locke is of the view that some of our ideas have a 'natural correspondence' and 'connexion' with each other. Besides this, our ideas are related completely owing to 'chance' or 'custom'. And the nature of the relationship would be explored by the reason. He says:

"This strong combination of ideas is not innate but the mind makes in itself either voluntary, or by chance; hence it comes in different Men to be very different, according to their different Inclinations, Educations, Interests" (Locke, 1968, p.55)

Here Locke emphasizes the need for spontaneity and the importance of freedom in the acquirement of ideas in an educative process that needs to be watched over by those responsible for the mental growth and upbringing of the students. It means that the true spirit of education consists in accommodating the interest and inclination of the learners as everyone is a different and unique being. Consequently, the chief aim of education is to help children acquire and associate those ideas which enable them to form correct habits of mind in accordance with their interest by utilizing rational abilities. Hence, it is the duty of those who have the charge of children's education to prevent association of those ideas that may create difficulty in the growth of appropriate habits of mind and reasoning. In Locke's view, the right way to avoid the wrong association of ideas is to create such a situation in which the students would be able to have distinct and 'settled notions' of things. This can be done by parents and teachers by providing various avenues and possibilities paving the way for natural and spontaneous correspondence and connection of ideas, as all knowledge consists of ideas (Locke, 1968) that are the objects of all knowledge.

3. Developing flexible attitude of mind:

In order to ensure the right association of ideas according to the inclination and preferences of the learner, Locke claims that the general aim of education should not be confined to make children perfect in any one discipline but to open and dispose of their minds to make them capable of excelling in any field of their choice and interest. This can be done by developing a flexible attitude of mind helping one to adjust in an ever-changing world. Here Locke is once again asserting the possibility to enhance the variety and freedom of thinking in order to increase the power and activity of the mind. And for this very reason, he is critical of those learning methods which merely focus upon the enlargement of mental possession by way of acquiring the bulk of information (Ed. E. P., 2006) rather than emphasizing upon the qualitative understanding of ideas which is one of the most important features of Locke's educational theory (Locke, 1968). It entails that a sound educational system ought to concentrate on the intellectual aspect of one's self by grooming critical insight of the learner leading one to develop a deeper and clear understanding of different notions. Owing to this negligence and ignorance about the true meaning of education as conceived by Locke, one is unable to recognize the intrinsic value of education instrumental in apprehending the task of conducting various educational activities as a cultural phenomenon. Besides, one considers education merely as a tool to achieve material happiness which is the least important aspect of education as far as the growth of an individual is concerned. Keeping these essentials of an education in mind, students have to focus upon the understanding of concepts rather than believing in the memorization of information in order to get high grades to secure better carrier prospects. Pursuance of better livelihood and material well-being is one of the many aims of education, and one should not treat them as the only aim. Another problem in the present-day education

system is the attitude of parents/guardians who are not willing to give ample space to their children to freely decide about their subject of study according to their inclination and interest. Contrary to this, they force them against their will to adopt a particular field of study in order to compete with others who are also striving with the same mind frame. In Locke's view, instead of relying upon rote learning, the educative process should provide children an opportunity to develop them mentally and physically to cope with the ever-changing environment. In other words, the aim of education is to prepare students for education. Locke says that one should not expect too much from children. As quoted by Axtell:

"[Locke] realized that children were human beings, with their own particular needs, abilities, and patterns of development. He did not expect them to have the 'Reason and Conduct of Counselors:' rather he considered them as children, who must be tenderly used, who must play, and have playthings. But he did expect them to be susceptible to reasonable admonitions and explanations. 'When I talk of Reasoning', he said, I do not intend any other, but such as suited to the child's Capacity and Apprehensions. Nobody can think a boy of three or seven years old, should be argued with as a grown man. Long discourses and philosophical reasoning, at best, amaze and confound but do not instruct children" (Locke, 1968, p.64).

The above-mentioned aspect of Locke's educational philosophy is quite relevant to those educational systems which support the idea that the more we teach our pupils more they are likely to be intelligent and successful. For this reason, they try to teach them all those things for which they are not capable and prepared, which causes distraction in the process of learning. Expecting too much from children by instilling many ideas in their minds in a short period of time simply results in utter confusion. It implies that the aspirations and inclinations of children should be respected, and they must be exposed to those things which they can comprehend in a meaningful manner.

4. Reading and Study:

Discussing the importance of reading and study, Locke says that the aim of reading and study is twofold. One purpose of reading is to acquire knowledge for oneself to develop a better understanding. The other purpose is to convey knowledge to others (Locke, 1968). Here Locke identifies the social function of study and reading [education] which plays a vital role in the development of society. Locke believes that education should be utilized to its full extent and it is only possible when one shares his ideas with others to make them more meaningful and applicatory. Locke further states that reading without comprehension is of no use. Men of much reading are learned but little knowing (Locke, 1968). Locke's distinction between knowledge and reading entails a distinction between information and knowledge. In some societies particularly in the context of Pakistan, there is a prevalent belief that knowledge consists of the bulk of information. In Locke's opinion, mere possession of information

has nothing to do with understanding. Knowledge consists of ideas and in order to improve one's understanding, one should observe the connection of 'intermediate ideas'. This may help one identify the way different ideas are joined and the foundations on which such ideas are based. In other words, Locke wants to convey that a sound education system focuses upon developing empirical and rational skills of the students leading one to acquire knowledge in the truest sense of the term. Locke says: *"When a man by use hath got this faculty of observing and judging of the reasoning and coherence of what he reads, and how it proves that he pretends to teach, he is then, not till then, in the right way of improving his understanding and enlarging his knowledge by reading. But that's [as I have said] being not all that a gentleman should aim at in reading, he should further take care to improve himself in the art also of speaking, that so he may be able to make the best use of what he knows"* (Locke, 1968, p.398) .

The art of speaking mainly depends on two things, the precision of thought [clarity] and 'right reasoning'. As Locke said earlier, one reason to enhance understanding is to share it with others to fulfill the social function of knowledge. It entails that if one is keen enough to evoke the cognitive faculty of one's listeners, then one must use plain and simple language. In an effort to pass on understanding to others, one has to be careful about the selection of proper terms as they stand for ideas and concepts. The use of loaded or colorful language has some drawbacks. It may create confusion in the mind of listeners or could make them prejudiced, which is a big hurdle in the way of clear thinking, which may distract them from the right direction. The right use of reasoning accompanied by clarity is essential for effective communication (Locke, 1968). Locke expresses this fact in these words "the end of study is knowledge and the end of knowledge practice or communication" (Locke, 1968, p.406). He was well aware of the extent of knowledge which is very vast, and the limits of human understanding. Keeping this in mind, Locke insists that one has to be very careful about the subject of his study. He believes that learning should be beneficial for us. It means that one should be clear-headed about the purpose and object of study. Experience tells us that even a laborious process of learning left behind some doubts and difficulties in the life of those who are not clear about the purpose and object of their study (Locke, 1968). A balanced man is one who avoids too much reliance upon the words of others. He tries to judge others' thoughts from his own reasoning instead of relying upon the opinion of others, for it is a useless pursuit. Locke believes that there is no harm in borrowing ideas from others and he doesn't want to undervalue the light one receives from others, but mere reliance on others, for him, is highly detrimental as it is destructive in actualizing one's potentialities. Furthermore, the purpose of education is to develop insights that protect us from flowing with others' sentiments. Again Locke is emphasizing that aspect of the study, which makes us different from others and paves the way for progress (Locke, 1968).

Significance of History and Education

Locke's conception of history is very important to understand his educational theory. He says that people usually think that the aim of studying history is to establish themselves as reputable historians or to equip themselves with the particularities of historical events. This approach towards history constitutes an ignorant man with a good memory. Locke seems to argue that the significance of history as a discipline in the curriculum lies in its attempt to understand the mind of the author, which exists in any historical situation. Such an understanding of history is meaningful as it enhances one's thinking power by enriching one's perspectives. Locke insists upon two important aspects of approaching historical study. First, one should study any historical event in its contextual background, which may help one to situate things appropriately. Second, one should work out an argumentative interpretation of an event as it links the past with the present in a meaningful manner to determine the future course of action (Locke, 1968). More importantly, in Locke's view the purpose of studying history should aim at achieving 'mental settlements' based upon 'moral principles' in order to strengthen one's moral aptitude. He thinks of men as they are and not as they appear to be. In this regard, men would be in a position to see a picture of the world and human nature. Locke opines:

"Truth is the proper object, the proper riches and furniture of mind and according as his stock of this is, so is the difference and value of one man above another. He that fills his head with vain notions and false opinions may have his mind puffed up and seemingly much enlarged, but in truth it is narrow and empty; for all that it comprehends, all that it contains, amounts to nothing, or less than nothing; for falsehood is below ignorance, and a lie worse than nothing" (Locke, 1968, p.415)

It entails that the most fundamental duty of an individual who is in the pursuit of historical knowledge should direct all his abilities towards the attainment of truth. Locke is of the opinion that truth is not something taken for granted; truth is one which is discovered by man through sincere efforts. He further states that, at times, truth is accepted on the basis of its prevalence through history without critical evaluation. Truth has nothing to do with the confirmation of already established opinions. Rather one comes by through other men's writing and discourses (Locke, 1968). Locke says: "These ancient preoccupations of our minds, these revered and almost sacred opinions, are to be examined if we will make way for truth, and put our minds in that freedom which belongs and necessary to them" (Locke, 1968, p.417). In Locke's view, history should not read as a tale that is told; he believes that the essentials on which the improvement of historical knowledge depends includes 'reading', 'meditation' and 'discourse'. Reading is an attempt to collect material with the help of studying books, human nature and traveling according to one's interest. The next step is meditation which enables one to analyze the material one has already obtained by various studies. This is pivotal for mental growth as it sets the limits of understanding. So men should

not strive for the knowledge of those things for which one is not capable and their efforts should not go in vain. Another important thing is discourse. Discourse with a friend, student, or a teacher will help one notice the defects of one's work or thought which ultimately enables one to improve one's knowledge (Locke, 1968).

DISCUSSION

In this paper, I have highlighted some of the significant features of Locke's educational philosophy in relation to his epistemology as it may help one to situate his educational ideas in a proper perspective. Locke being an empiricist philosopher, intends to establish that in order to understand anything, one needs to understand the conduct of understanding first. In other words, one should explore the possibilities of acquiring knowledge about various concepts or objects. Locke is certain about it as he claims that one should not bother about attaining the knowledge of those things for which one is not capable enough due to one's limited capacities. Hence for Locke anything that falls beyond one's sensory faculties is unknowable such as, primary qualities of things, mind, or soul. It means that in an educative process, one should consider empirical ideas as the object of understanding. Such clarity always plays an important role in deciding the meaning and purpose of education in any society. Locke's principles of education I have mentioned in this paper reflect his implicit theory of education. These principles presume that man is naturally capable of developing oneself by learning how to think and explore the association of ideas by developing a flexible attitude of mind. Locke is also interested in highlighting the true meaning of study and reading in an educative process as it plays an important role in the development of progressive society. While emphasizing the role of history as a discipline in an educational curriculum, Locke seems to argue that the purpose of studying history is very crucial as it provides an opportunity to explore the nature of mankind from a broader perspective. In Locke's view:

"Education is such a natural and universal function of society that many generations accepts and transmits its methods and forms without question or discussion. For long periods of time society only vaguely remembers that education means deliberately moulding human character in accordance with an ideal of human nature that changes as the values current within society change" (Locke, 1968, p.59).

It entails that Locke's theory of education tends to establish that Locke's understanding of the conduct of understanding can be applied to all men in all places, and hence his philosophy of education is universal in nature.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Locke's theory of education needs to be understood in the context of his philosophical framework. Specifically, his epistemological paradigm lies at the heart of his theory of

education. Education theorists should carefully analyze the role of empirical and rational knowledge in the development of the modern philosophy of education.

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