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## **John Locke's Theory of Knowledge**

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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**Abstract**

John Locke was one of the leading influential philosophers in the field of theory of knowledge. This paper provides a contextual and historical background to John Locke's theories. In addition, it examines Locke's beliefs on human knowledge, learning, his beliefs on women, and his contributions to the school charity movement.

*Keywords:* Knowledge, education, understanding, Locke

### **John Locke's Theory of Knowledge**

According to Uzgalis (2018), John Locke was a philosopher from Oxford who was born in 1632. One of the most influential texts John Locke wrote was *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* which he published in 1689. In this text, Locke exposed “the limits of human understanding in respect to a wide spectrum of topics”. Locke did not only examine human knowledge, he also delved into the political realm in his essay *The Second Treatise of Government*. Locke further examined human knowledge and education in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* which was published in 1684. Locke's work was controversial at the time. He held the development and education of children at a high stance. Locke believed this education was to be monitored and fostered by the child's parents. Locke stressed the importance of time spent by parents with their children (Uzgalis, 2018). Locke's work was influenced by several physicians and philosophers that existed during his time. Willi's methods of observation and experimentation greatly impacted how Locke perceived the world, proved his theories and ideas, and implemented them in real life mathematical applications. Locke provided guidelines for several aspects of knowledge such as methods of proving the existence of an object. John Locke's method of proving the existence of an object relied on the function that the object serves rather than its characteristics. This paper examines Locke's basic assertions about general knowledge, methods of proving existence of an object, and Locke's thoughts on mathematical knowledge.

### **Background and Cultural Context**

To acquire a better understanding of Locke's theory of knowledge, a historical educational context needs to be established to understand the influence of other theories on his own. According to Lega (2006), prior to becoming a philosopher, John Locke was a physician.

Locke worked closely with Thomas Sydenham. Sydenham focused on observing and comparing phenomena in groups of his patients to develop cures that appealed to his common sense. These treatments usually did not align with the principles of Galenical therapy. Researchers attribute Locke's method, where he utilized observations of properties to his work with Sydenham. This is evident in Locke's use of quotidian observations in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He utilized methods of quotidian observations to overcome uncertainty (Lega, 2006).

Lega (2006) stated that Locke attended Oxford University between 1650 and 1660. And studied under Dr. Willis who was young at the time. Commonalities in the works of Locke and Willis proved that they had intellectual interactions during Locke's time at Oxford University. At the time, several different theories of the mind existed. Galen believed that the human brain's main function was to cleanse animal spirits. These animal spirits were absorbed by humans through air and transported to all the body through the four humors. Harvey, on the other hand, proved that blood was the main mode of transportation throughout the human body. Human blood acted as a transporter for the animal spirits which directed them to the brain where they were cleansed. Harvey believed these spirits were conscious and had wills of their own. These spirits led to changes in the mood of the human absorbing them. Prior to Willis, Descartes believed the soul was the main culprit for changes in mood and cognition. Descartes believed the pineal gland housed the soul in the body. Descartes believed animal spirits are absorbed by the body through pores in the ventricles which are then transported through the body through tubes, later on known as nerves. On the other hand, Willis utilized necropsy and experimentation to establish his conclusions. Willis described different parts of the human brain in detail such as the thalamus, corpus callosum, and basal ganglia. Willis attributed the transportation of animal

spirits in the human body to the brain's white matter. According to Lega (2006), in his [Essay Concerning Human Understanding](#), Locke states

Imagination is caused by an impression from some external object that moves the spirits inwards and excites other spirits in the medulla oblongata into an expansive movement. These latter spirits are then variously circulated through the cerebral orbits forming different ideas.  
(pp. 573)

### **Philosophy of Education**

According to Mattern (1983), Locke had two main assertions regarding the nature of clear knowledge. First, Locke stated that for a person to acquire clear knowledge, clear and distinct ideas should be present as building blocks. However, in other instances, Locke stated that clear knowledge can be obtained with "obscure and confused ideas" (pp. 259). Researchers view these two statements as contradictory. This contradiction drove Stillingfleet to question Locke regarding his opposing ideas. In his correspondence with Stillingfleet, Locke stated that this difference and contradiction is due to the distinction that Locke created between knowledge of existence and general propositions. Locke stated that general propositions require clear and distinct ideas; whereas, knowledge of existence doesn't require them. Locke believed that knowledge regarding identity mandates the existence of clear ideas in the human brain. Moral knowledge is another type of knowledge that Locke believed requires clear ideas.

Mattern (1983) stated that Locke believed that "mathematical and moral knowledge presuppose ideas that are adequate in the sense of representing mathematical and moral real essences" (pp. 265-266). [Locke believed that adequate clear ideas stem from experience.](#) These experiences were then analyzed to form a belief. He used this method to prove the existence of

God. In this aspect, Locke demonstrated that the existence of an object can be confirmed solely from the function it serves, without any visual and materialistic proof of its' existence. Locke stressed that to prove the existence of an object, it is not necessary to acquire clear ideas regarding the object; however, adequate ideas were still mandatory (Mattern, 1983).

According to Gibson (1896), Locke's thoughts regarding the topic of human knowledge were centered on mathematical knowledge. Locke described mathematical demonstrations as "like diamonds are hard as well as clear" (pp. 38). Similarities exist between Locke's theory and that of Descartes due to the fact that they both based their theory on mathematics. Locke used intuition and thought interchangeably and offered little to no distinction between the two terms. Locke believed that mathematics solely developed in a scientific manner Locke was intrigued by the science of numbers and believed that they were discrete in nature.

According to Gibson (1896), Locke believed that the field of geometry created new methods to establish connections between ideas. He believed that other sciences were not capable of producing similar demonstrations that were concrete in nature. Locke utilized geometry's visible marks to recognize and demonstrate "the character of the science" (pp. 40). Gibson (1896) asserted that Locke believed general knowledge is combined with mathematical knowledge for humans to be capable of establishing links and relations between their ideas. He believed that "mathematical certainty" (pp. 41) can be generalized to other regions, not only mathematics. Locke established a differentiation between physical and mathematical knowledge. Locke defined ideas as "objects of thought" (pp. 42). Locke was convinced that humans derive their knowledge from sensory experiences. He believed that new ideas can be formed by combining several ideas into one more complex idea. One example that Locke utilized to demonstrate combining ideas is that regarding abstract ideas of numbers (Gibson, 1896).

### **Theory to Practice**

According to Sheasgreen (1986), Locke's books "shaped the social philosophy of the age" (p. 64). He believed John Locke's work led to the flow of money into the charity schools. Three main claims were made to establish a clear relationship between John Locke's work and the charity school movement. First, Sheasgreen (1986) believed that the discussion of the tabula rasa concept led investors and philanthropists to increase their investments in schools. Second, the concepts and guidelines outlined in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* greatly changed instruction and curriculums in schools. Finally, Sheasgreen (1986) asserted that his theory of knowledge and education which he discussed in depth in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* created a psychology of education that was used in schools to better understand how human knowledge is conceived (Sheasgreen, 1986).

### **Perspectives on Diversity**

Nyland (1990) when Locke discussed men and women, he believed women were weaker than men; however, when Locke discussed weakness, he was addressing their physical power and not the intellectual one. Moreover, Locke attributed men's physical prowess as the reason men were charge of the family. He attributed the decision making in the household to me due to their physical strength. However, Locke stressed that men are not to use physical stress to compel others to "do their bidding" (Nyland, 1990, pp.12).

### **Critical Analysis**

A clear historical, cultural, family, and educational background overview can provide a better understanding of a philosopher's belief system and theories. According to Smith (2020), the background of Jonathan Edwards had to be considered "in order for his life experiences and ideas to be contextualized properly" (pp. 63). John Locke had interactions with various scientists,

philosophers, and even physicians. His time at Oxford University exposed him to the works of Willis, who stressed the importance of observation and experimentation. Locke also worked closely with Thomas Sydenham who's work focused on large scale observations before deriving a conclusion. Moreover, According to Rogers (1978), Locke was also influenced by one of his students, Isaac Newton who influenced Locke's theories more than Locke influenced Newton's ideas. Moreover, John Locke's theories were also influenced by Descartes. Both John Locke and Rene Descartes based their theories on mathematics.

Locke's fascination with absolute truth of numbers in my opinion limited his exploration of other fields of study. He believed that mathematics was the only field that was developing in a scientific way. What Locke failed to take into consideration is that some of the principles used in mathematics cannot be applied to all other fields. As a physician before becoming a philosopher, Locke still believed that animal spirits acted on the human body after the body absorbs them. He proved the existence of these animal spirits in a similar manner to his attempt to prove the existence of God by relying on the function of the spirits and how they affect human mood and behavior. However, as we know now, animal spirits are no longer believed to have an effect on the human emotion spectrum and how it is exhibited. We also no longer believe that animal spirits are absorbed by the human body. Thus, Locke's obsession with absolute numbers, mathematics, and his categorizations of what objects demand clear knowledge and obscure ideas did not aid his quest to achieve truth.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Although now many of the beliefs that John Locke had are no longer valid, John Locke had huge implications on the field of education and on the evolution of the theory of knowledge. Locke was one of the few philosophers who explored different aspects of the human mind and



the way humans acquire and use knowledge. His idea of the tabula rasa helped develop the modern-day education system. Moreover, Locke's fascination with numbers and his theories on ways to prove the existence of objects should be further explored and built on.

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