

# **IDEAS AS CONSTITUENTS OF KNOWLEDGE AMONG LOCKE AND BERKELEY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the contrasting conceptions of ideas as constituents of knowledge in the Philosophies of John Locke and George Berkeley. While both philosophers anchor their epistemologies in empiricism, their understanding of ideas and its relationship to reality diverges significantly. Locke posits that there is an external world out there—a world of independently existing material objects and that our ideas are representations or copies of this external world. Berkeley's idealism, on the other hand, rejects this postulation, for him ideas exist solely in the minds of those perceive them or in the minds of the observer. Through a comparative analysis, this paper explores the strength and weaknesses of each approach highlighting their implications for our understanding of knowledge, perception, and the nature of reality.

**KEY WORDS:** Ideas, knowledge, empiricism, material objects, and idealism

## **INTRODUCTION**

The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries ushered in a period in time known as the age of enlightenment. This was marked intellectually by a shift from the dogmatic speculations and abstract musings of theology, the primacy of faith and the authority of the church to the authority of reason and the gradual consolidation of science as a veritable method of enquiry. In the area of philosophy, it was marked by a seeds of a fundamentally new understanding of knowledge—one that for the first time sought to ground epistemological inquiry within the bounds of empirical observation and concrete experience. These seeds were being sown by the philosophers of the new movement spearheaded by John Locke (1632-1704) and George Berkeley (1685-1753) these two philosophers laid the grounds for what would eventually become a long standing tradition, what would eventually be known today as empiricism.

Both philosophers in crafting their epistemological formulations emphasized the role of ideas as the fundamental building blocks of knowledge. However, their conceptions of what constitutes an idea, and how it relates to knowledge and reality, diverged significantly. For John Locke, there is an external world out there—a reality of independently existing material objects or matter and our ideas are representations or copies of this external world. For Berkeley, ideas

exist solely in the minds of those perceive them or in the minds of the observer—there are no *standby* material substances which our ideas mirror, only our ideas and our perception of these ideas, a position that has come to be known as Idealism. Both belonged to the empiricist tradition but their tenets diverged significantly. This paper will examine the central role of ideas in both Locke’s empiricism and Berkeley’s idealism, elucidating their distinct approaches while analyzing the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each perspective.

In light of the fore going, this paper will be divided into five sections: the first section is an abstract, the second section is the introduction, the third section covers an overview of Locke’s theory of ideas: here I shall focus on expounding the *core* tenets of his theory, the fourth section considers Berkeley’s theory of ideas particularly as they diverge from that of Locke, in the fifth section I shall render a critical assessment and a general appraisal of both philosophies, the sixth section shall be a conclusion on all that has been achieved thus far. As the requirements of my work do not dictate so, I shall not include a biography of the respective philosophers.

## **LOCKE’S THEORY OF IDEAS: ARGUMENT FROM EXPERIENCE**

What are ideas? Locke says that ideas are “the objects of thinking...such as those expressed by the words whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness, and others”<sup>1</sup> This concept of ideas differs sharply from the modern understanding of the concept today. When the word idea is used in John Locke, it is not referring to concepts or linguistic descriptions of a thing for instance “the concept of fire or the linguistic description of fire”<sup>2</sup> but the objects or data of sensory experience, the objects of concrete experience. Since ideas are the objects of thinking, it means that they are present to us in the mind. How then do they get there in the first place? Locke says “experience”. In his *Essay concerning Human Understanding II*, He writes “All ideas come from sensation or reflection. Let us then suppose the mind to be as we say, a white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:—how comes it to be furnished?...to this I answer in one word “experience”<sup>3</sup> Experience furnishes us with the objects of our thinking, with the ideas upon which our minds act on. He continues further “...in

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<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, (provided by the Pennsylvania State University; 1690), 86 [section 1].

<sup>2</sup> William. F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Cengage Learning; USA: 2015), 297.

<sup>3</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, (provided by the Pennsylvania State University; 1690), 87 [section 2].

that all our knowledge is founded and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, spring.”<sup>4</sup> According to Locke, all our knowledge is grounded in experience. He compares the mind to a blank slate, a white sheet (*Tabula rasa*) upon which experience impresses itself or *writes on*. There is nothing in the mind which does not spring forth from experience, according to Locke. Experience furnishes our minds with the data upon which it acts on—with the ideas upon which it acts on, with the ideas that constitute our knowledge. Contrary to the rationalist school of innate principles or what has come to be known as *innatism*, Locke rejects the idea that there are innate principles, principles which have been inbuilt into the soul at birth, principles which the soul comes to know of at birth. Locke contends that the mind is a blank slate upon which *only* experience writes or *impresses its* ideas on. “We come naked into the world both physically and mentally”<sup>5</sup> His idea of the mind could be compared to that of a camera in which images are deposited in the interior of the camera through the opening of the lens. The lens in this case represents the various senses, the interior of the camera represents the mind and the images represents the ideas that are deposited by experience. How then does experience enrich the mind with the ideas that constitute its knowledge? Locke says this come about in two ways: through “sensation and reflection.” In order for us to understand the significance of these processes for Locke, we must distinguish between two types of ideas for Locke, between “simple ideas and complex ideas”.

Simple ideas refer to the most fundamental ideas, they are those ideas which cannot be broken further into simpler ideas. “They are the most fundamental and original mental particles”<sup>6</sup> Lawhead calls them “the atoms of thought”. In the way atoms constitute the fundamental building blocks of matter, simple ideas are the fundamental building blocks of our knowledge. Our mind acts on simple ideas in a process of repetition, combination or compounding, comparison and abstraction to produce bigger or much more complex ideas. Simple ideas are of

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<sup>4</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 87, [Section 2].

<sup>5</sup> William. F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Cengage Learning; USA: 2015), 303.

<sup>6</sup> William. F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Cengage Learning; USA: 2015), 304.

two varieties: those received from sensation and those received from reflection. In his *Essay II*, he writes, "...first, our senses conversant with particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways those various objects do affect them. And thus we come by those ideas we have of yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet and all those which we call sensible qualities; which when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean they from external objects convey into the mind what produces there those perceptions. This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses...I call *sensation*"<sup>7</sup> By sensation, Locke is basically referring to the minute data of sensory experience. To our first hand apprehension of external objects and to the *immediate* ideas they produce in us. To the way the various external objects we perceive affect us firsthand. The second variety of simple ideas are those gained from is reflection. These are gained from experience of our mental states or from experience of the activities or operations of the mind. In his *Essay II*, Locke writes, "secondly the other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas,—the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got;—which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas which could not be had from things without. And such are perception, thinking, willing...so I call this *reflection*, the ideas it affords being such only as the mind gets by reflecting on its own operations within itself."<sup>8</sup> By *sensation*, Locke is basically referring to "the observation of the external objects of the mind"<sup>9</sup> and by *reflection*, Locke is basically referring to the "observation of the internal operations of the mind"<sup>10</sup>. Complex ideas, on the other hand refer to the constitution or buildup of simple ideas into *larger* and *bigger* forms much like the buildup of smaller atomic particles to form complex and complicated structures of matter. Like a camera film which receives the light that passes through a camera film, the human mind receives ideas passively through the senses. These ideas impress themselves on the human mind leaving traces of themselves in the mind. "However, these ideas are single and distinct sounds, colours and other pings of sensation".<sup>11</sup> The mind

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<sup>7</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 87, [Section 2].

<sup>8</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, (provided by the Pennsylvania State University; 1690), 88 [section 4].

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Ezebuilo Chibuike Hyginus, *Epistemology at a Glance*, (Iprogressive Press; Awka: 2022), 106.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Ezebuilo Chibuike Hyginus, *Epistemology at a Glance*, 106.

<sup>11</sup> William. F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Cengage Learning; USA: 2015), 305.

according to Locke, cannot produce its own ideas since it is passive however it can act on the ideas which it has received from experience and process them into more complex ideas. These are combinations of simple ideas that can be treated as unities and given their own names such as “beauty, gratitude, a man, an army, the universe...”<sup>12</sup> Thus complex ideas are made out of the mind by simple ones, they serve as the foundation or materials upon which our knowledge is built. There are three processes in which these are achieved or according to Locke in which the mind acts on simple ideas: “a) combining several simple ideas into one compound one; and thus all complex ideas are made. b) The second is bringing two ideas, whether simple or complex together and setting them by one another, so as to take a view of them at once, without uniting them into one; by which way it gets all its ideas of relations. c) The third is separating them from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence: this is called abstraction: and thus all its general ideas are made”<sup>13</sup> From our discussions so far, it can therefore be seen that for Locke, all our knowledge is grounded in experience. Experience furnishes us with the objects of our knowledge—it furnishes us with the ideas upon which our entire framework of knowledge is built. External objects thus furnish the mind with ideas with which it acts on, with which it works with. A more *secular* interpretation of Locke’s view would be that when we come into contact with objects existing in our natural environment—by natural environment, I mean our external physical world, they produce ideas of themselves in our mind such that our ideas of those objects are representations or *copies* of these objects. When we perceive say for instance, a blender or a book, the various qualities of the book or blender are impressed upon the mind, these qualities are left in the mind as distinct perceptions or simple ideas: the rectangularity of the book, the redness of the blender cover and so on. The mind, in its operations acts on these qualities to generate much more complex ideas: to generate that particular book or that particular blender.

In an attempt to account for the existence of the external world, Locke distinguishes between “primary” and “secondary” qualities. Primary qualities are those qualities which inhere in the objects themselves or can be found in the objects themselves while secondary qualities are those qualities relative to the observer. In other words, primary qualities are those mind-independent qualities which are inherent in the objects themselves while secondary qualities are mind dependent qualities which are relative to the minds or to the observers of an object. For example, even if no one was observing a table as it sits in particular corner of the room, it takes up a definite amount of space, it maintains exactly the same shape, it is at rest, singular and not plural

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<sup>12</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, (provided by the Pennsylvania State University; 1690), 146, [Chapter XII].

<sup>13</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 146, [Chapter XII].

however the colour of the table may change due to the intensity of light present in the table, the texture of the table may change slightly depending on the observer, the table may also feel warm or cold depending on the temperature of the room and the person. Locke calls the former qualities “primary qualities” and the latter “Secondary qualities”. Primary qualities are the genuine and objective properties of that object, they remain the same irrespective of whoever assesses the object while secondary qualities are dependent on the observer or viewer. Examples of primary qualities are solidity, figure, motion, rest, shape. Examples of secondary qualities include colour, taste, odors, warmth or coldness. Why does Locke make this distinction? Because he believes a proper assessment on “common-sense experience demands it.”<sup>14</sup>

### **IDEAS IN BERKELEY: A RADICAL DEPARTURE**

Since Berkeley’s arguments are usually considered as a corollary to that of Locke and my work incorporates a comparative analysis of both philosophers, I shall consider Berkeley’s theory of ideas particularly as they pertain or relate to Locke.

In line with Locke, Berkeley also postulates that our knowledge consists of ideas which are grounded in experience and that all our knowledge is gotten from experience. In other words, Berkeley also postulated that the contents of our knowledge—the ideas—which constitute our knowledge are derived or grounded in sense experience. The way in which Berkeley employs the concept of ideas is similar to the way in which Locke employs his concept early on in his work. Ideas refer to such things as the “colors of a rainbow, the wetness of water, the fragrance of a rose, the taste of a lemons or the sound of a bell.”<sup>15</sup> In line with Locke, Berkeley also posits that ideas could refer to the operations, processes and states of the mind that we experience such as loving, willing, and doubting. Thus ideas are “images or sensory data that are directly present to the mind either in vivid presentations of either memory or imagination”<sup>16</sup> Thus when Berkeley says that one has an idea of fire, he is not referring just like Locke to the conceptual or linguistic descriptions of fire but to the experience of searing heat, yellow flames, cackling sounds and the dazzling brightness of fire or the memory of such. When Berkeley uses the concept ideas, he is basically referring to sensory qualities that are associated with our sensory experiences and our perception—our awareness—of these qualities. However Berkeley deviates from Locke significantly in the nature of our ideas and how they constitute knowledge. This divergence begins with his rejection of material substance. Berkeley believed Locke’s empiricism was not consistent with the tenets of a pure empiricist position. In order to account for the consistency of our ideas, Locke posited the existence of substance, particularly material substance. Why is it that our ideas appear to us a collective whole? If sensations are distinct qualities or if our ideas occur singly and distinct, why are they are not separate and free floating? Why do we perceive an apple, lump of sugar, a stone, and not distinct qualities of redness, crunchiness, roundness, sweetness, whiteness, hardness standing alone on its own? Ordinarily one would answer that the mind combines these qualities together to produce collective sensations however if all knowledge is derived from experience, how would the mind know to consistently combine particular ideas in particular ways? Locke answers “substance”. The word substance derived

<sup>14</sup> William. F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Cengage Learning; USA: 2015), 306.

<sup>15</sup> William. F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 322.

<sup>16</sup> William. F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 322.

from the word *substans* literally means “that which stands under”. It is substance which stands under all the qualities we perceive as a whole. It is the power of an object to produce certain qualities in us. The substance of an apple or a sugar or a stone is that in which these qualities inhere. This is consistent with Locke’s position that some qualities inhere in the objects themselves. However, Berkeley rejects this proposition. The problem with substance is that it inhered in the objects themselves and could not be observed, it could not be known. Another problem Locke raises is since our ideas are merely copies or representations of an independently existing external reality out there, there is no way for us to have direct experience of the things out there (since we only have ideas of the objects as supported by their substance)—a position known as representative realism. Locke’s epistemology thus raises the problems of skepticism and certainty. Berkeley rejects the notion of material substance or matter, since we have no knowledge of these substances themselves but only their activities, he advocates that they should be discarded.

He rejects the notion of matter or of an independently existing world (a world that was *standby* irrespective of whether it was being perceived or not) that can be studied by science—science believed that an objective material world existed irrespective of our perception and it was this world that constituted the object of its study. This according to him was an unnecessary and pointless assumption that would only lead us further into the world of metaphysical and abstract speculations especially one that would eventually drive out the place of God in reality. Berkeley proposes that reality consists only of minds and the ideas they perceive. Berkeley’s position is commonly referred to as a Form of idealism. However, he himself called it immaterialism.<sup>17</sup> One of Berkeley’s key arguments for immaterialism is as espoused earlier his rejection of the notion of material substance. He argues that the concept of material substance, as something existing independently of perception, is incoherent. Instead, he proposes that what we perceive as material objects are *simply collections of ideas or perceptions*. To illustrate his point, Berkeley famously asks us to consider whether a tree falling in a deserted forest makes a sound if there is no one there to hear it. He argues that the sound only exists as a perception in the mind of an observer, which without a perceiving mind, there is no sound. He asserts that the physical world, including objects and events, only exist as ideas in the minds that perceive them. This is clearly amplified by his famous dictum “to be is to be perceived” or “*Esse est Percipi*.” He posits that the existence of objects is contingent upon their being perceived by a mind, whether that of humans, God, or some other spiritual entity.

It is pertinent to note that Berkeley does not deny the existence of the world. For him, a being or an object is said to exist if someone perceives it. He uses a table as an analogy to prove his point by saying that if he writes on a table, he would say that the table exists because he can feel and see it and when he was out of his study he should still say it exists because even if he is not the one perceiving it, some other spirit perceives it. He asserts this position in the words “...all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word, all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind—that their being is to be perceived or known.”<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, this position becomes problematic when trying to explain how there is regularity and consistency in the world. If I close my eyes, does the world stutter in and out of existence? Berkeley would answer “God”. According to him, “God perceives everything, and the

<sup>17</sup> William. F Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 321.

<sup>18</sup> William. F Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 321.

consistency and regularity we observe in the world are a result of God's continuous perception.”<sup>19</sup> This implies that God's existence is necessary since he must perceive other beings for them to have their own existence. This position he outlined in what is known as his “Theory of Vision”. According to him, the world has regularity and order because even after we cease perceiving a particular reality. God continues to perceive everything. That is why sugar is sweet, acid is corrosive, cyanide is poisonous and everything obeys a regular persistent pattern and order in the world. Here we see a gradual progression from the rejection of material substance to the establishment of God as the cause and sustainer of the world. God creates this world of ideas (our world) and sustains this world. God could be likened to substance in Locke—or to quantum forces of nature for God holds all things together. This ontological shift dissolved Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, as all qualities became ideas existing solely in the mind.

## **IDEAS AS CONSTITUENTS OF KNOWLEDGE IN LOCKE AND BERKELEY: AN APPRAISAL**

To render a critical assessment of the concept of Ideas as seen in the philosophies of Locke and Berkeley. I shall do this by raising two pertinent questions and proceeding to answer them: first, what are the strength and weaknesses of each philosopher and second, what are the implication of their philosophies.

Locke and Berkeley were empiricists who believed that the source of all knowledge and—the source of all valid knowledge is grounded in experience—by experience, they were referring to our concrete experience, our common-sense experience or first-hand experience of things. It is often believed that Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* helped to usher in the period of enlightenment creating a paradigm shift from the dogmatic theological, metaphysical and rationalistic philosophies at the time. While both philosophers employed the use of ideas in their philosophies, their approach towards this differed significantly as can be seen in their theory of ideas. Locke's empiricism while grounded in sensory experience, maintains the existence of a mind independent material world. The postulation of material substances and of a material world independent of our perceptive faculties raises some problems: if our ideas are representations or copies of a material world independent of our perceptive faculties and if we can only have ideas as they are presented to us in the mind, how then could we compare if our ideas match this external material reality? This raises the problems of skepticism and certainty. If we cannot have direct experience of the objects themselves (primary qualities) but only that as it is present to us (secondary qualities) how can we match the ideas we have of these objects to the objects themselves? The postulation creates a dualistic framework that is difficult to bridge. In addressing these challenges, Locke would tell us that our finite minds are too limited in order to grasp the reality of these things and that knowledge we have as this is enough for practical living. He would also assert that one day our instruments of knowledge would be able to pierce the veil of reality to probe into the nature of these things. Locke argues that *all* our knowledge is derived from sense experience and that the mind is a clean slate at birth, we do not have ideas of anything at all except that which we receive from experience however this is a very narrow conception of how the mind works: it fails to take into account the role of instincts, DNA and

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<sup>19</sup> William. F Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 321.

evolutionary traits. Several contemporary philosophers such as Noam Chomsky have refuted this position. If the mind were a blank slate then how would it be able to process the depositions of ideas it receives if there were no pre-existing rules or structures to guide such processes. Also, Locke fails to take into account the role of language, culture, society and environment—and other external factors in shaping our conceptions and understanding of reality. Another problem Locke's position raises would be in a situation where the condition of the senses would need to be ascertained? What if the condition of the senses affected the ideas we perceived at a particular time? Would those ideas still be valid, in that would we still have *first-hand* experience of our ideas or would they affect the senses? Locke never addressed this issue. Essentially Locke's theory, while intuitively appealing and more in line with common sense and more modern descriptions of learning struggles to bridge the gap between our perceptions and the external world. It leaves open the question of how we can be certain that our ideas accurately represent external objects.

Berkeley's idealism, conversely posits that only minds and ideas exist, thus challenging the conventional understanding of reality. Berkeley posited that an idealism with a coherent and internal metaphysical system that avoided the problems of Locke—Berkeley did provide strong and consistent arguments for his position—however his position is extremely problematic. It would be difficult to reconcile Berkeley's theory with our everyday experiences and our conventional understanding of the world. It raises extreme problems about the nature of reality and our ability to know it. Berkeley's position also leads to 'solipsism' or what could be termed as 'subjective idealism' if all that exists are minds and their ideas, how can we be sure other minds exist? Berkeley does not properly address that thus opening the door to solipsism and undermining our knowledge of reality. Also, Berkeley's use of the term spiritual substances as the causal or active agents is highly problematic and very complicated. Berkeley's theory relies heavily on the existence of God to maintain the continuity and order of the world. If we remove God from the equation, it becomes difficult to explain how objects persist when not being perceived by a human mind. This makes Berkeley's theory less appealing to those who don't accept the existence of God or who prefer explanations devoid of divine intervention. Berkeley's theory doesn't fully address the issues of perceptual errors or illusions, if all we have are ideas how can we explain the fact that we sometimes perceive things incorrectly? The reliability of our senses is also in question here? How can we distinguish between true and false perceptions?

## CONCLUSION

The philosophies of Locke and Berkeley, while sharing a common emphasis on ideas, present starkly contrasting views on the nature of reality and knowledge. Locke's empiricism provides a more intuitive framework for understanding our interactions with the world, but it grapples with the problem of bridging the gap between perception and reality. Berkeley's idealism, while more radical and counterintuitive, offers a coherent and consistent alternative. Both theories have left an enduring mark on philosophical discourse, prompting ongoing debates about the nature of perception, knowledge, and the relationship between mind and world. Further exploration of these philosophical perspectives can enrich our understanding of these

fundamental questions and pave the way for new insights into the complex relationship between ideas and reality.

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