



STUDY MATERIAL

**VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE
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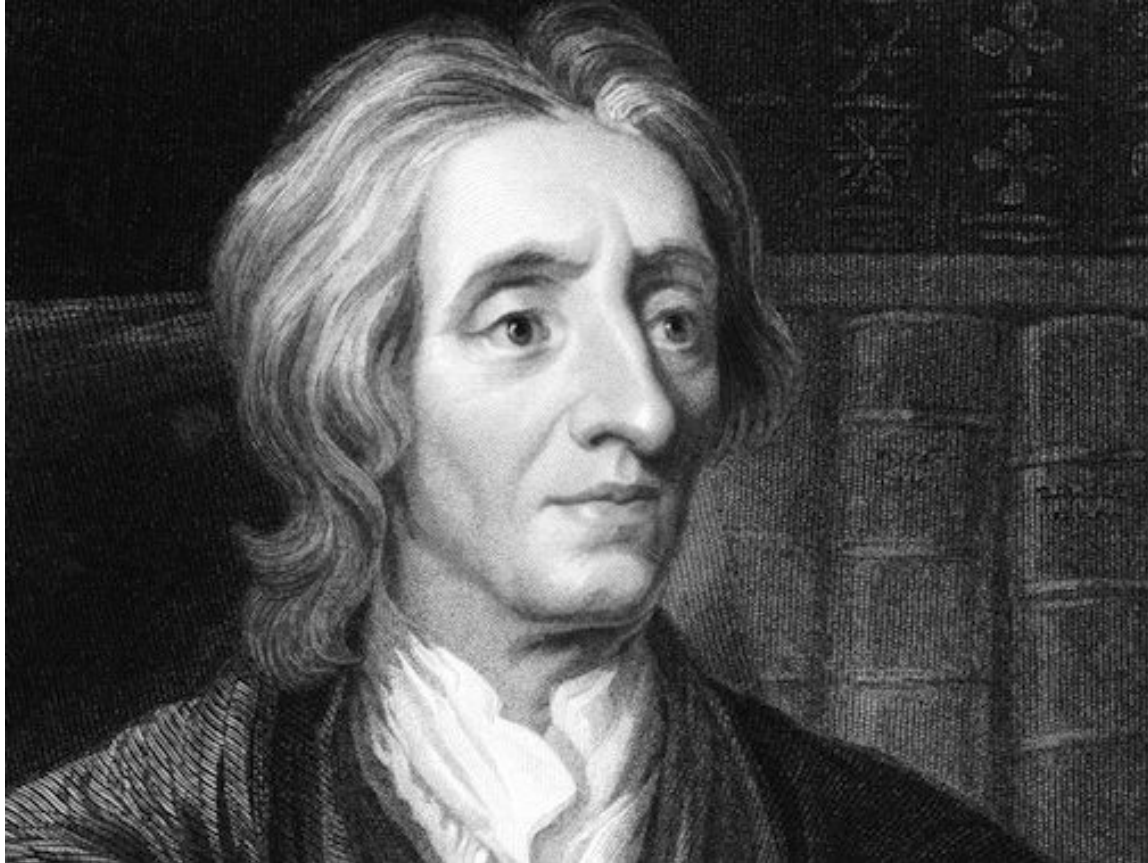
Philosophy

(HONOURS & GENERAL)

Theory of Ideas proposed by John Locke

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JOHN LOCKE

(1632-1704)

Ideas

Simple Ideas

Complex Ideas

Modes

Substance

Relations

Mixed Modes

Simple Modes

Matter

Mind

God

Causality

Identity

Empiricist philosopher John Locke at first refutes the theory of innate idea accepted by the rationalist philosophers. Then he discusses his own theory of idea. Here we discuss the theory of idea explain by John Locke.

IDEA

John Locke believes that the mind of a human being is like a clean slate at the time of birth. He calls it “**TABULA RASA**”. After birth, human beings acquire knowledge through experience. Locke claimed that Ideas are the building material of human understanding.¹

According to Locke, ‘Idea’ means a mode of individual consciousness.²

He also says that ideas may mean a representation of something other than itself. ³

Ideas are mainly two types. Namely,

- 1. Simple Idea.**
- 2. Complex Idea.**

1.THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO LOCKE’S “ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING;
The Taxonomy of Ideas in Locke’s Essay-Martha Brandt Bolton

2.A critical history of Western Philosophy ; Y.Mashy

3.A critical history of Western Philosophy ; Y.Mashy

SIMPLE IDEAS

According to John Locke a simple idea is an idea which 'being in itself uncompounded contains in it nothing but one uniform appearance or, conception in the mind and is not distinguishable into different ideas'. For example: the fragrance of a flower, or the color of a fruit etc.

Locke believes that simple ideas are generated in two ways.

1. Sensation

2. Reflection.

- We gather knowledge about the external world through sensation.
- Reflection informs us about the internal world or, to be precise our mind or, mental states.
- Our mind is passive when we receive simple ideas.
- We receive simple ideas as contents of actual experience.
- Simple ideas are not analyzable.

COMPLEX IDEAS

The human mind actively constructs complex ideas by the help of simple ideas.

There are three ways or, processes involved in the formation of complex idea:

- **Combination**
- **Relation**
- **Abstraction**

- **Combination:** We create complex ideas by combining two or more simple ideas. For example, the idea of a red flower. The combination of simple idea of redness and the idea of flower creates the complex idea of red flower in our mind.

- **Relation:** Sometimes we select two simple ideas or, complex ideas and relate them to make a complex idea. For example: when we see a father we can create the complex idea of his son or daughter.

- **Abstraction:** We generate a complex idea by identifying or, abstracting the common features or, general qualities of two or more ideas. For example: The idea of 'House' is abstracted from two or, more ideas of particular houses we have perceived.

There are three kind of complex ideas.

- **Modes**
- **Substance**
- **relations**



Modes are complex ideas which are invariably dependent on other ideas. For instance: Triangle, murder etc. The complex idea of a 'triangle' invariably depends on the idea of 'three' and 'angle'. In case these two ideas cease to exist, the complex idea also ceases to exist. 1

Modes are two types.

- **Mixed modes**
- **Simple modes**

1.A history of philosophy –v ; Frederck Copleston,S.J;page-81

Simple Modes:

A simple mode is a complex idea, the constituent ideas of which are variations or, combinations of a single simple idea. For example: Space.¹

Mixed modes:

Mixed modes are complex ideas which include several distinct simple ideas. Although such ideas can be acquired through observation of their instances in our experience, Locke supposed that they are much more commonly manufactured by the mind as complex ideas before we apply them to the world.²

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1. [Essay II xii 4-5](#)
 2. [\[Essay II xxii 1-2\]](#)

SUBSTANCE

John Locke has mentioned that he has no personal theory about the nature of substances, however, he has shared his opinion about substances. He defines substance as an 'Unknown substratum'. His popular statement about substance is "*something I know not what.*" According to Locke we never perceive substances with the help of our sense organs. We just perceive the qualities of substances.

There are mainly two kinds of qualities.

- **Primary Quality**: The primary qualities are inseparable from the material object. For example: solidity, motion, extension etc.
- **Secondary quality**: The secondary qualities are representations perceived through sense organs of perceivers. For example: Color, taste, smells etc.

There are three kinds of substances. These are:

1. Matter,
2. Mind and
3. God.

According to Locke, Mind and God are spiritual substances.

Matter: We cannot perceive matter. But we can perceive the qualities of the matter. (Please, look at slide no 11)

Mind: We can prove the existence of mind by the help of pleasure, pain, wish and other feelings , thoughts like faith belief etc.

God: According to Locke, the existence of God is proved by the help of qualities like infinity, supreme power etc.

RELATIONS

The last type of complex ideas are called 'Relations'.

When we compare two or, more ideas then the idea of relations are formed in our mind. There are many types of relations: i.e. **the idea of causal relations, idea of identity, diversity etc.**

According to Locke, 'cause' has the power to create a simple or, complex idea and the end product is called effect. For example: heat converts ice into water. Hence, heat is the cause, and water is the effect.

To discuss the relation of identity and diversity, Locke says that if two objects 'x' and 'y' exist in same space and same time then we can understand that they are identical. But if they can't exist in same space and time or, exist in the same time in same space then we are sure that there have no relation of identity. They share the relation of diversity.

GENERAL IDEA

The last part of Locke's theory of idea is General Idea. Locke believes that general idea is nothing but the abstract idea.

According to Locke by the help of nominal essence we make General idea. There are seven steps to create general idea. These are :

- Perception
- Retention
- Discernment
- Comparison
- Composition
- Abstraction
- Naming

By the help of the above mentioned process we can create the general idea of an object.

Criticism of Locke's theory of idea

Like any other philosophical thesis, Locke's theory of ideas has also been adequately criticized.

1. The rationalists argue that Locke's explanation that the mind remains passive while receiving simple ideas is untenable. The mind is active. Experiments conducted on the brain further demonstrate that there is sufficient neural activity when we gather simple ideas like smell, color, taste etc. through experience.

2. The rationalists further argue to that a complex idea cannot be formed by merely gathering simple ideas through experience. Analytical activities like comparison, abstraction etc. need to be done in order to form a complex idea. These are functions of our rational faculty. Hence, experience alone cannot generate complex ideas. For example: the general idea of 'House' is formed by comparing, contrasting, abstracting common features from multiple simple ideas of individual houses.

Here I briefly discussed the theory of idea explain by John Locke. To learn more please refer to the following books.

References

❖ English Books

- A history of Philosophy : Fredrick Copleston. volume V
- A critical History of modern philosophy : Y. H. Masih
- A critical History of modern philosophy : D. J.O'Connor
- John Locke: R, Aron
- Locke, Berkeley, Hume : J Bennet
- Locke, Berkeley and Hume : C.R.Morris

❖ Bengali books :

- পাশ্চাত্য দর্শনের ইতিহাস : তারক চন্দ্র রায়
- পাশ্চাত্য দর্শনের ইতিহাস : সুশান্ত চক্রবর্তী
- পাশ্চাত্য দর্শনের ইতিহাস : চন্দ্রদয় ভট্টাচার্য