

John Locke's Analysis of Belief

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The problem of Belief and Knowledge has fascinated philosophers since Plato. The chief concern was the fact that belief is a weaker version of knowledge, inferior to knowledge. Some refer knowledge as a species of the genus belief. It was Hume who shifted the attention to the "nature of belief" itself from the relation between belief and knowledge. He claims to be the first person to evaluate the conception of belief itself. ".....when we join belief to the conception, and are persuaded of the truth of what we conceive. This act of the mind has never yet been explained by any philosopher; and therefore I am at liberty to propose my hypothesis concerning it; which is, that it is only a strong and steady conception of any idea, and such as approaches in some measure to an immediate impression."¹ Hume finds the problem of causal inference or necessary connection very tough. So he began by 'beating about all the neighbouring fields in the hope of something useful turning up'.² It was here that he introduces the conceptual analysis of belief. Hume finds that it is the principle of 'Custom or Habit' which makes the relation between cause and effect as necessary. Custom is the great guide of human life. It makes us expect a repetition of train of events which have appeared in the past to appear in the future also.

Although David Hume acknowledges himself to be the pioneer researcher of belief, the seeds of this problem may be traced back to John Locke, who uses belief, assent, opinion and faith interchangeably in his "The Essay Concerning Human Understanding." He defines belief as the "being which makes us presume things to be true, before we know them to be so."³ Belief is not necessarily true but there is likeliness to be true. Locke writes, "The very notation of the word signifying such a proposition, for which there be arguments or proofs to make it pass, or be received for true." He further defines belief as "the admitting or receiving 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"⁴. It is a probability and not knowledge. So belief is uncertain knowledge, which lacks intuition present in all the parts of knowledge. In knowledge each immediate idea, each step has its visible and certain connection which is absent in belief.

The origin of religious or moral beliefs lies in the superstition of a nurse and/or the authority of an old woman (grandmother) which by length of time and consent of neighbours, grow up to the dignity of principles. Children are like white papers who receive any characters or doctrines to retain and profess. Beliefs are catered to "them as soon as they have any apprehension; and still as they grow up confirmed to them, either by the open profession or tacit consent of all they have to do with; or at least by those of whose wisdom, knowledge, and piety they have an opinion, who never suffer those propositions to be otherwise mentioned but as the basis and foundation on which they build their religion and manners, come, by these means, to have the reputation of unquestionable, self-evident, and innate truths"⁵.

We call some principles as innate because we do not remember when we began to hold them. When we reflect on our own minds we cannot find anything more ancient than these opinions; reason being that they were taught before the memory began to keep a record of their actions, or date the time when any new thing appeared to it. So we conclude that the propositions we find in ourselves are certainly innate, i.e., the impress of God; present with the birth and not taught by anyone else. We believe in such principles and follow them because we are trained so and we have no

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recollection about the origin of these ideas. Hence we take them to be natural. There is hardly anyone who do not possess some admired propositions which are believed by him as these principles on which his reasoning are based and by which he judges the truth and falsehood, right and wrong. It is difficult to break free from or to challenge the 'received opinions of their country or party'.⁶

The belief of divine is inured in all children and young folk by custom which is a greater power than nature. Custom seldom fails in accomplishing its task. Kids bow their minds and submit their understandings to the teachings of custom. In grownup men belief is developed due to "either perplexed in the necessary affairs of life, or hot in the pursuit of pleasures, should not seriously sit down to examine their own tenets; especially when one of their principles is, that principles ought not to be questioned."⁷ He also cites reasons like "some, wanting skill and leisure, and others the inclination, and some being taught that they ought not to examine, there are few to be found who are not exposed by their ignorance, laziness, education, or precipitancy, to take them upon trust."⁸ Locke notes that none dares to shake the foundations of all his past thoughts and actions, and bears the shame of having been a long time wholly in mistake and error. Anyone who dares to resist custom is called by the name of whimsical, skeptical, or atheist. So he will be much more afraid to question those beliefs than anyone else.

Locke notes that the "wrong connexion of ideas a great cause of errors. This wrong connexion in our minds of ideas in themselves loose and independent of one another, has such an influence, and is of so great force to set us awry in our actions, as well moral as natural, passions, reasoning, and notions themselves, that perhaps there is not any one thing that deserves more to be looked after."⁹ He groups the connection between ideas into two sets. "Some of our ideas have a natural correspondence and connection one with another: it is the office and excellence of our reason to trace these, and hold them together in that union and correspondence which is founded in their peculiar beings. Another connection of ideas is wholly based on chance or custom. Wholly non-related ideas appear to the mind in such a manner that it is very hard to separate them. They are found segregated such that appearance of one idea in the mind is followed by the appearance of the other. And if they are more than two then the whole gang shows together, as inseparable"¹⁰. This strong combination of ideas is associated by custom and not by nature. The mind makes this connection either voluntarily or by chance; and "hence it comes in different men to be very different, according to their different inclinations, education, interests, &c."¹¹

Reasons for error lie in 'believing without knowledge, nay often upon very slight grounds'¹². People often stick to their past judgment, and adhere firmly to conclusions formerly made, such stubborn behavior is often the cause of great obstinacy in error and mistake. The fault lies in the fact that people judge their memories and propositions before examining. They never question or examine their own opinions even then everyone holds his opinions with the most firmness. The sorriest part of it is the fact that people who is completely certain and generally the most fierce and firm in their tenets are those who have least examined them. Locke calls this as. Locke concludes that "which thus captivates their reasons, and leads men of sincerity blindfold from common sense, will, when examined, be found to be what we are speaking of: some independent ideas, of no alliance to one another, are, by education, custom, and the constant din of their party, so coupled in their minds, that they always appear there together; and they can no more separate them in their

Variorum Multi-Disciplinary e-Research Journal
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thoughts than if they were but one idea, and they operate as if they were so. This gives sense to jargon, demonstration to absurdities, and consistency to nonsense, and is the foundation of the greatest, I had almost said of all the errors in the world¹³.”

Lock names three grounds for belief viz., evidence and reason; revelation; and enthusiasm. Only the first is the proper normative base for justified belief:

(i) Evidence and reason

Evidence covers broadly two types of experiences. First is the conformity of anything with our own knowledge, observation, and experience. Second is the testimony of others, their observation and experience. The testimony of others is to be assured through the following considerations: the number; the integrity; the skill of the witnesses; the design of the author, where it is a testimony out of a book cited; the consistency of the parts, and circumstances of the relation; and the contrary testimonies.

Reason: all the arguments’ pro and con ought to be examined, before we come to a judgment. Probability wanting that intuitive evidence which infallibly determines the understanding and produces certain knowledge, the mind, if it will proceed rationally, ought to examine all the grounds of probability, and see how they make more or less for or against any proposition, before it assents to or dissents from it; and, upon a due balancing the whole, reject or receive it, with a more or less firm assent, proportionably to the preponderancy of the greater grounds of probability on one side or the other.¹⁴

Unquestionable testimony, and our own experience that a thing is for the most part so, produce confidence. For example when our own experience is in agreement with all others who mention it; so the particular instance is attested by many but undoubted witnesses providing our assent a sufficient foundation to raise itself to assurance. Fair testimony, and the nature of the thing indifferent, produce unavoidable assent.

When testimonies contradict common experience, and the reports of history and witnesses clash with the ordinary course of nature, or with one another; there it is, where diligence, attention, and exactness are required, to form a right judgment, and to proportion the assent to the different evidence and probability of the thing: which rises and falls, according as those two foundations of credibility, viz. common observation in like cases, and particular testimonies in that particular instance, favour or contradict it.

(ii) Revelation:-

‘Revelation is natural reason enlarged by a new set of discoveries communicated by God immediately; which reason vouches the truth of, by the testimony and proofs it gives that they come from God¹⁵.’ The bare testimony of divine revelation is the highest certainty. The only kind of propositions that defy the certainty of bare testimony is that which is contrary to common experience and the ordinary course of things. The reason of certainty in bare testimony is that it is the testimony is of God himself who never deceives nor is deceived. Hence in it lays an assurance beyond doubt, evidence beyond exception, Locke calls it revelation and our assent to it as faith. Faith determines our minds absolutely and perfectly excludes all wavering, hence leaves no manner of room for doubt or hesitation.

But Locke tells that revelation is not necessarily true, the problem is not on the part of the divine but on the human part. “The proposition taken for a revelation is not such as they know to be true, but taken to be true. For where a proposition is known to

Variorum Multi-Disciplinary e-Research Journal
Vol.,-03, Issue-I, August 2012

be true, revelation is needless: and it is hard to conceive how there can be a revelation to any one of what he knows already. If therefore it be a proposition which they are persuaded, but do not know, to be true, whatever they may call it, it is not seeing, but believing.” Locke further acknowledges that “all their confidence is mere presumption: and this light they are so dazzled with is nothing but an ignis fatuus, that leads them constantly round in this circle; It is a revelation, because they firmly believe it, because it is a revelation¹⁶.”

(iii)Enthusiasm:-

Enthusiasm is the third ground of assent. Enthusiasm accepts its supposed illumination without search and proof resulting into odd opinions and extravagant actions. But the love of something extraordinary; the name and fame one gets from being inspired; and becoming above the common and natural ways of knowledge, tempt many men, particularly who are lazy, ignorant, and vanity. It is not easy to give up these easy ways. Enthusiasm ignores reason completely and the persons “see the light infused into their understandings, and cannot be mistaken; it is clear and visible there, like the light of bright sunshine; shows itself, and needs no other proof but its own evidence: they feel the hand of God moving them within, and the impulses of the Spirit, and cannot be mistaken in what they feel. Thus they support themselves, and are sure reasoning hath nothing to do with what they see and feel in themselves: what they have a sensible experience of admits no doubt, needs no probation.”¹⁷ Locke comments “This is the way of talking of these men: they are sure, because they are sure: and their persuasions are right, because they are strong in them.”¹⁸

John W. Yalton notes that only the first of these three grounds for belief is a proper normative base for justified belief. The second, revelation, is accepted with some qualifications and only for specific types of claims. The third ground for belief is rejected.¹⁹

References:

¹ David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature, Book 1.iii.7.

² Hume: Treatise of Human Nature Ed. Selby – Bigge, Oxford University press London, P-78,

³ Locke, John: The Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 4.XV.3

⁴ Ibid., 4.XV.3

⁵ Ibid., 1.III. 22.

⁶ Ibid., 1.3.25

⁷ Ibid., 1.III. 25

⁸ Ibid., 1.III. 24.

⁹ Ibid., 2. XXXIII. 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2. XXXIII. 5.

¹¹ Ibid., 2. XXXIII. 6.

¹² Ibid., 4. XVI.4

¹³ Ibid., 2. XXXIII. 18.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4. XV.5

¹⁵ Ibid., Ch XIX 4.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4. XIX.10

¹⁷ Ibid., 4. XIX. 8

¹⁸ Ibid., 4. XIX. 9

¹⁹ A Locke Dictionary by John W. Yalton, Blackwell, London 1951

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