

LOCKE'S MEANING OF SENSATION, PERCEPTION AND IDEA

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Much confusion has resulted in Lock's epistemology on account of his loose use of the terms "sensation," "perception" and "idea". In the introduction to Essay, Locke uses the term "idea" to stand for "whatsoever is the object of understanding when a man thinks".¹²⁹ In Book II, Chap I, pp. 43-44, Locke classifies the immense variety of ideas under two heads: (1) ideas of sensation ; (2) ideas of reflection.

"Sensation" he describes as the source and fountain of most of our ideas. By "sensation" Locke means here either (1) a faculty of indefinable knowledge or (2) the data of sensory knowledge, namely, the sensory manifold. Describing SENSATION as the source or fountain of most of our ideas, Locke writes this term in singular and with capital letters. This suggests that by "SENSATION" Locke understands a faculty of indefinable knowledge. But a more plausible implication of Locke's use of the term "sensation" is that impression or sensory manifold which is imprinted on the mind when the mind is affected by external sensible objects. If this is Locke's meaning, he should have used the term "sensation" in plural. Locke further confuses his meaning by de-scribing sensation as the "fountain" or "source" of knowledge. It is not clear from Locke's use of the term whether this fountain of knowledge is within the subject or without. If it is within "sensation," it is the subject of knowledge; if without "sensation," it is the crude content or object of knowledge. Locke uses the term "sensation" in comparison with "reflection". In this con-text sensation appears to be the same as "senses" or the organic affection that produces perception in understanding.¹³⁰ It is difficult to ascertain what Locke could have meant by "senses". Are "senses" identical with sense organs, or does Locke use the term "senses" to signify a faculty or the mind, through which the mind gets the crude sense data? If the latter, then what is the relation and distinction

¹²⁹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited and abridged by A.S. Pringle-Pattison (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 15.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43, footnote.

between this faculty and the faculty of perception which is later described by Locke as the first faculty of mind?

Locke's language becomes all the more confusing when he uses the terms "perception" and "idea". He defines an idea as "whatsoever is the object of understanding when a man thinks."¹³¹ Understood in this sense a sensation is also an idea, for it is the object of mind's simplest operation, namely, perception. But this does not seem to be Locke's only meaning, for Locke frequently uses the term "idea" to stand for a meaningful sensation and not for bare sensation. Locke calls yellow, white, heat, cold, etc., "ideas". If these are ideas in Locke's language, then an "idea" is certainly a meaningful sensation, and is at a higher level of knowledge than bare sensation. And when he talks about ideas of sensation, this should be taken to mean a sensation to which meaning has been added by the mind. Locke's confusion here is on account of his inability to draw a logical distinction between two different levels of knowledge. One is the level when the sensible object, by affecting the senses, produces sensations. The other is the level when the mind operates upon the sensation and comprehends and connects it with other perceptions or meaningful sensations. Historically, these two levels of knowledge may be simultaneous, and may not be distinguishable in term of before and after, but a logical distinction can certainly be drawn. The level of sensation is logically prior to the level of perceptions and, with regard to the degree of knowledge, the former is lower than the latter. Keeping in view these distinctions, it is difficult to say what Locke must have meant when he used the term "idea" for "whatsoever is the object of understanding when a man thinks". Does he mean by "idea" a percept (bare sensation), or a concept (meaningful sensation)? He seems to imply both. When the mind is employed about an external sensible object, an idea is a percept (bare sensation). But when the mind is employed about some percepts and then relates them to some other percepts, and classifies them, these percepts acquire meaning and are still described by Locke as ideas. In other words, when the mind is at the level of passive thinking,¹³² its percepts are ideas. But when the mind is employed in active thinking, these percepts are distinguished and defined. Locke continues to call them "ideas".

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 15,

¹³² Ibid., p. 92

Locke's language becomes still more confusing when he uses the term "perception" to describe an "idea". He frequently uses the two terms interchangeably. About ideas of sensation he writes: "our senses conversant about particular sensible objects do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways when those objects do affect them and thus we come by those ideas we have of yellow, white..."¹³³

Here again it is difficult to ascertain whether Locke is using the term "perception" for bare sensation or for a meaningful sensation. The above statement of Locke implies two things: (1) the function of conveying to the mind several distinct perceptions belong to the senses; (2) what are conveyed by senses to the mind are "several distinct perceptions". In other words, perceptions are conveyed to the mind each one distinct from the other by senses, which further implies that the task of distinguishing one perception from the other is completed by "senses". Here we are again faced with the same difficulty. What faculty conveys to the mind "several distinct perceptions"? Senses or faculty of perception? Is there any distinction for Locke between senses and faculty of perception? Do "senses" signify certain operations different from mental operations, or do they signify elementary operations of the mind? Locke's language is confusing on this issue. From the above-cited lines of Locke one gets the impression that the task of making one sensation distinct from the other is completed by senses. In such case the function of understanding is unspecified.

Locke again confuses the meaning of perception in Book II, Chap. IX (see I of the Essay) by making three important statements about it:

- (1) "Perception is the first simple idea of reflection."¹³⁴
- (2) "Perception is the first faculty of mind exercised, about our idea."¹³⁵
- (3) "In bare naked perception the mind is for the most part passive."¹³⁶

Locke does not realise that these three statements suggest completely different things. The first suggests that perception is an idea distinguished

¹³³ Ibid., p. 43.

¹³⁴ . Ibid., p. 73.

¹³⁵ . Ibid., p. 73.

¹³⁶ . Ibid., p. 73.

and defined; the second suggests that it is a faculty of mind; the third, that it is bare sensation.

One page 78 of the same chapter, Locke makes another important statement about perception: "Perception is the first operation of all our intellectual faculties and the inlet of all knowledge into our minds."

Perception, then, for Locke is the first degree and first inlet of knowledge and the first faculty of the mind exercised about our ideas; and in bare naked perception, the mind is for the most part passive. This means that perception is the passive function of the mind.

It is difficult to say what Locke's meaning could be when he talks about "bare naked perception" in which the mind is most of the part passive. Perception, according to Locke, is mind's simplest operation which is at the level of passive thinking. What is the role, then, of senses in Locke's system? Their function has been defined earlier by Locke as that of conveying "several distinct perceptions to the mind. Locke is not clear about his distinction between senses and the faculty of perception. When he says that "in bare naked perception the mind is for the most part passive," he seems to imply that the mind's passive function consists in receiving confused sense data, which is "bare naked perceptions" after which the mind requires further activity to arrive at well-defined ideas such as those of red or black colour. The function, then, of mind (understanding or soul—for Locke uses these terms interchangeably) is two-fold: (1) passive function and (2) active function. Through its active function it relates different perceptions in different ways to arrive at well-defined ideas. "Bare naked perception" is a state of mind which is the result of a co-ordination of sensible objects and passive thinking.

Here it is relevant to ask: what kind of function this passive function of the mind is? What does it mean to say that the mind is passive in "bare naked perceptions"? Locke must admit, either that some transformation is brought about in the sensible quality of the object by the mind in "bare naked perception," or no such transformation is brought about. If the former, then it implies some activity of the mind in its function of perception. If the latter, then it is pertinent to ask: what sense does it make to say that the mind simply receives the sensory-manifold without bringing about any change in them? For in what capacity is it called mind then? Locke seems to be misled

by his metaphor "tabula rasa" which he uses for mind before it comes to be furnished with impressions. Locke believes that perceptions are simply impressions, imprinted on the mind without calling any activity of the mind. The bare naked perceptions for Locke are the result of those impressions that are involuntarily¹³⁷ imposed on the mind. Since such perceptions do not necessarily involve volition, Locke concludes that they do not require active thinking. But this does not make much sense. Most part of our thinking is involuntary, whether it is employed about ideas of sensation or ideas of reflection. To call this great part of thinking passive thinking is not to define it clearly. Perception implies an ability of making distinction, which further implies judgment. When mind is said to perceive something it implies that it sifts confused sensory-manifold, and discriminates between different sensations with the help of certain principles, such as similarity, contrast, identity, etc. All this may be involuntary, and we may not all the time be aware of it. But it does imply activity of the mind and is certainly much more than bare reception of sensory-manifold, or impressions on a blank tablet.

Locke makes further confusion when he uses the word "perception" in the context of ideas of reflections. All ideas of sensation are perceptions for Locke. But perception is also an idea of reflection. And every perception, whether sensory or reflective, is an idea. When we analyse Locke's meaning we find that Locke uses the term "perception" for five different things:

- (1) "Perception" is used to stand for an idea of sensation.
- (2) "Perception" is used to stand for the simplest idea of reflection.
- (3) "Perception" is used to signify the faculty of perceiving, the simplest activity of the mind.
- (4) "Perception" is used to denote the receptive or passive state of mind.
- (5) "Perception" is the first inlet of knowledge.

Locke's terminology becomes more inefficient on account of his ambiguous use of the term "perception". He uses the term equivocally. "Perception" is used by Locke both as a noun and as a verb. When he calls ideas of sensation and of reflection perceptions, the word is used as a noun.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

But when he uses the word "perception" to describe the simplest activity of the mind, the word is used as a verb.

As an idea, perception is an object of knowledge. As a faculty, it is the subject of knowledge. Explaining how perception functions as a mental faculty, Locke says that it will be impossible for a thing to be perceived if mind (faculty of perception) does not take notice of it.¹³⁸ Locke's position amounts to this. It will be impossible for a thing to be perceived unless faculty of perception takes notice of it. In other words, the faculty of perception without being active cannot perceive. Locke here contradicts his earlier statement that "in bare naked perception mind is most of the part passive." Locke's confusion is due to the fact that he is not sure himself whether perception or any other operation of the mind can be passive. He calls "perception" the simplest activity of the mind, and the first inlet of knowledge and the first capacity of mind. In Book II, Chap I, Sec. 24, he writes: "The first capacity of human intellect is that mind is fitted to receive the impressions made on it either through the senses by outward objects, or by its own operation when it reflects on them."¹³⁹ As a capacity, by perception Locke either means a bare receptivity or a low mental operation. Locke seems to emphasise the former when he talks about perception as a faculty of reception of impressions through external sensible object, or from mind's own operations. But he seems to acknowledge active thinking as a part of perception when he insists that, unless taken notice of within, no perception is possible.

HEALTH OF THE SOUL*

When the soul is good and virtuous, loving the acquisition of virtues and desirous of attaining them and longing for the true sciences and for sound knowledge, then its possessor should associate with those who are akin to him and seek those who resemble him, and should not enjoy the presence of others or sit in their company. He should be very careful lest he associate with the wicked and the defective among the frivolous or among those who display enjoyment of disgratified pleasures and commitment of vile deeds and boast of them and indulge in them. Let him not listen to these peoples' tales with interest, nor recite their poetry with approbation, nor sit in their

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

company with delight; for sitting once in their company, or listening to one of their tales, or reciting one verse of their poetry would attach to the soul such dirt and filth as would not be washed away except with the passage of a long time and with difficult treatments. It could be the cause of the corruption of [even] the virtuous and experienced man and the seduction of the discerning knower and might lead to their infatuation--to say nothing of the youth who is growing up and the student seeking guidance. The cause of all of this is that the love of physical pleasures and of bodily relaxations is inborn in man on account of his imperfections. We are inclined to them and we covet them by our primitive nature and our original disposition, and it is only by means of reason's restraint that we keep ourselves from them, stopping at the limits which reason prescribes to us and contenting ourselves with what is necessary.

*Ahmad ibn Muhammad Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-akhlaq* [The Refinement of Character, Eng. trans. by C.K. Zurayk (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1968), pp. 158.59.