Chapter V

The Criterion of Truth

According to Locke, the truth consists of joining or separating signs (the two types of signs commonly used are *words* and *ideas*), as the things signified by them agree or disagree with one another.\(^1\) As joining or separating of signs means nothing but propositions, truth belongs only to propositions. Moreover, as there are two types of signs that are commonly used, viz. ideas and words, there are two kinds of propositions, namely mental and verbal. In order to form a clear notion of truth, it is necessary to consider these propositions separately. However, Locke said that it is difficult to treat these two kinds of propositions separately,\(^2\) for, in treating mental propositions, usage of language is unavoidable and this makes the instances of mental propositions verbal. A mental proposition is nothing but a bare consideration of ideas, as they are in our minds, stripped of names. They become verbal as soon as we put them into words.

There is a second reason, which prevents the separation of the two propositions. This is that generally, man in their thinking and reasoning, use words instead of ideas, where the object of their thinking or reasoning is complex ideas. When we make propositions about
simple ideas, e.g. white, black, sweet, and bitter, we can frame in our minds the ideas themselves without reflecting on the names. However, when we frame propositions about complex ideas, like man, vitriol, fortitude, glory, etc., we usually consider the names for the ideas. The reason behind this is that these ideas themselves are imperfect, confused, and undetermined. In these cases, we reflect on the names, which generally stand for the ideas because they are clearer, certain, distinct, and occur more quickly to our thoughts than the pure ideas do. Locke pointed out that the idea of ‘substance’ is an imperfect idea. It stands for real essence, of which we have no idea. Again, the idea of mode, which consists of different simple ideas, is also a confused idea. Most of the constituent simple ideas, which make up the idea of mode, are compounded. So here, the name occurs in the mind more quickly than the complex ideas, which require time and attention for recollection.

We have noticed that Locke has admitted two types of propositions, viz. ‘mental’ and ‘verbal.’ In mental proposition, our mind, by perceiving or judging the agreement or disagreement of our ideas, put them together or separate them in our understanding, without using any word. On the other hand, verbal propositions are words, the signs of our ideas, put together, or separated in affirmative or negative sentences. Therefore, the proposition consists in putting together or separating the signs and truth consists in putting together or separating the signs as they agree or disagree with the things they stand for.

Locke termed mental truths as:

…wherein the Ideas in our Understandings are without the use of Words put together, or separated by the Mind, perceiving, or judging of their Agreement, or Disagreement.³
Truth of words or verbal truth is, however, something more. Locke said that in case of verbal truth, affirmation, or denial is made by words as the ideas they stand for, agree, or disagree. Moreover, verbal truth is two-fold; either (i) purely verbal and trifling, or (ii) real and instructive, which is the object of real knowledge. 

However, Locke has raised a doubt regarding truth, similar to the one that he raised regarding knowledge. He has argued that if truth merely consists in joining and separating of words in propositions, as the ideas they stand for agree or disagree in men’s minds, the knowledge of truth will have no value. For, this account of truth suggests only the conformity of words to the chimeras of men’s brain. It has no connection with the real world. Moreover, by this account of truth, the proposition ‘Centaurs are animals’ and the proposition ‘all men are animal’ are both true propositions, for in both the propositions the words are put together according to the agreement of the ideas in our minds. The mind perceives the agreement of the idea of animal with that of Centaur as clearly as the agreement of the idea of animal with that of man.

In his answer to this objection, Locke has himself distinguished real truth from chimerical or verbal truth. He said that in case of verbal truth, the terms are put together according to the agreement or disagreement of ideas they stand for without considering whether these ideas represent anything in the nature. However, in case of real truth, when we join terms according to the agreement or disagreement of those ideas, the correspondence of ideas with realities in nature must be taken into account.

To sum it up, the agreement or disagreement of ideas as it is when expressed by words is truth. The truth becomes real when these ideas expressed by words agree with their archetypes. This implies that Locke accepted the correspondence theory of truth. According
to the correspondence theory, a judgement is correct or a proposition judged is true, if there is a fact corresponding to it, false if there is not. Regarding the truth and error, two main questions arise. First, how truth and error are constituted, and secondly, how they are known or tested. The first question is related to the nature and the second to the criteria of truth and error.

Locke held that it is not possible for us to perceive the world directly. In our sense experience what we are aware of are ideas, which are wholly mind dependent. Regarding the perception of the external world, Locke said that ideas represent the objects of the external world, which causes them and provide us with a picture of the real world. This is a kind of correspondence theory, referred to as the ‘copy theory of ideas’ or ‘picture original theory of sense perception.’ In section III.3 of this work, we have seen that Locke admitted the copy theory of idea or picture original theory of sense perception as far as our knowledge of outer world is concerned. According to him, ideas may be divided into two classes. Firstly, ideas that not only represents but also resemble their objects, i.e., ideas of primary qualities. Secondly, there are ideas that represent but do not resemble their objects. These are the ideas of secondary qualities. Woozley pointed out that the relation between Locke’s ideas and the material objects is something like a map of the territory of which it was a map.

Different objections are possible regarding the nature of Locke’s picture original theory of sense perception. According to the theory, mental state and physical things both have the same order of existence and the former can copy or resemble the latter. However, we cannot say that when we perceive an external object, our perceptive consciousness also takes the shape of the object. Consciousness has no extension and therefore no shape at all.
Regarding the copy theory of ideas, Woozley has put forward some criticisms. The theory does not explain how a proposition can be a copy of the thing it represents. A proposition has no similarity with the things that it represents. Woozley said the proposition ‘My dog is brown and lazy’ is true if my dog is brown and lazy but this proposition and ‘My lazy brown dog’ are not alike. It makes sense to say of that dog that it is lazy and brown or that it needs brushing. Nevertheless, we cannot say these things about a proposition.

Woozley pointed out that this objection is valid about the theory that holds that a proposition corresponds with an event or a thing. However, it is not effective for the theory that holds that a proposition corresponds with a fact. The fact and the proposition are both unlike the thing to which they refer. Thus, my brown dog’s laziness is not the same as my lazy brown dog; i.e., the proposition is different from the thing.

Woozley argued that we normally take one thing to be a copy or picture of another, if both are visible. Nevertheless, neither the fact that the dog is lazy and brown nor the proposition asserting this is visible here.

Woozley maintained that if ‘copy’ means resemblance, the invisibility of the proposition and the fact does not prove that they cannot resemble each other. He said that not only could other sensible like two smells or two sounds resemble each other but also two insensible, e.g. two arguments or two religious doctrines. Woozley opined that whether this answer would support the correspondence theory is hard to decide unless the supporters maintain that the relation of resemblance is fundamental. He pointed out that this is unacceptable for he has failed to see in which respect a fact and a proposition differ from each other. For two things to be qualitatively similar they must be numerically different, i.e. they must be two things.
Further, Woozley contended that Locke’s theory suffers from a grave disadvantage. If the theory is true, Locke was, by its very truth, prevented from ever knowing that it is true. The arguments, which he has, therefore advanced in favour of his theory, were not available for him. Locke faced a dilemma here. If the arguments for the theory were available to him, the theory cannot be true; if the theory is true, no reason can be available for accepting it. The dilemma is explained briefly below.

Locke held that what we get immediately in our sense perception is not an object but a representation of it. Woozley argued that it is impossible for Locke’s theory to recognize anything to be a representative of something else. He pointed out that there are two ways of identifying anything to be a representative of something. Either this can be done by comparing the representative and the represented or by showing some document, which the representative carries on it, guaranteeing that it does represent what it intends to represent. The first method of recognizing a representative is not open to Locke. For according to him, we never perceive the objects in the external world directly but mediate via ideas. We cannot compare ideas with objects to discern the relation of the copy and the original that holds between them.

The second method is also not consistent with Locke’s theory. This is so because the sense data, which produce ideas, do not carry with them any document, showing that they do represent what they want to represent. Moreover, barely as data of sensation, they claim to represent nothing.

Woozley contended that if Locke’s theory of perception is correct, we have no reason whatever for suspecting that there are such things as ‘original.’ Our experience is confined only to what is representative. We can have no reason for supposing that it is representative.
The relationship to original is verifiable or meaningful only when we can step outside the circle of representative objects into the outer circle of represented objects. Woozley pointed out that it is this step, which we can never take if Locke’s basic epistemological principle is true.

We have already discussed different criticisms raised against the nature of the correspondence theory. Regarding the application of this theory, some criticism remains to be discussed.

S. S. Barlingay and Padma B. Kulkarni pointed out in ‘A critical survey of Western Philosophy,’ that one of the chief defects of correspondence theory is that is difficult or even impossible to know the correspondence without involving either a vicious circle or an infinite regress. According to Locke, we cannot know an object directly but only through its idea. However, we cannot know whether an idea corresponds with its object with the previous knowledge of the object. We know an object through its idea and the idea is validated by the previous knowledge of an object. Therefore, these remain independent. An infinite regress is also involved here. We know an object directly through its idea, which, according to Locke, has a twilight existence, that is, it shares the character of the thing as well as the mind. However, it is impossible to know that aspect of the idea where it shares the thing aspect without an intervention of another idea, which will stand between the first idea and the mind. This will go on indefinitely.

The correspondence theory of truth can be relevant only to Locke’s sensitive knowledge. The question of correspondence in the context of intuitive and demonstrative knowledge is illegitimate. In case of intuitive knowledge, we perceive the agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately by themselves without the intervention of any idea.
We need no proof or examination; the mind perceives the truth as eye sees the light. In order to know the truth, the question of correspondence does not arise. In the case of demonstrative knowledge, the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of any idea, not immediately but by the intervention of some other idea that it uses as a proof. Every step in the demonstration that produces knowledge has intuitive certainty. In demonstrative knowledge, mind requires memory in order to recall that enables it to reach the conclusion. However, memory is fallible. Hence, demonstrative knowledge also becomes uncertain and is less clear and distinct to intuitive truth. The mind requires proofs and memory in order to know the demonstrative knowledge. The question of correspondence in this context is thus illegitimate. However, as the external objects are never directly perceived, the correspondence theory is inapplicable in the case of Locke’s sensitive knowledge also.

Locke adhered to the correspondence theory probably in order to overcome the defects of the naive or direct realism. According to naive or direct realism, truth consists of a direct correspondence between knowledge and reality. Every knowledge or experience reveals the objects as they really are. However, sometimes we do not perceive the things as they really are. Our perception does not correspond to the character of what we claim to have perceived. This doctrine therefore cannot explain such cases as errors of perception, dreams, illusions, hallucinations, and the like. Locke, however, in his representationalism, suggests that we perceive external things through the medium of ideas, which are states of mind. It seems that if sensible appearances are regarded as mental phenomenon then this doctrine can satisfactorily explain illusions, hallucinations, etc. However, it carries the seeds of its own destruction within itself. According to Locke, the immediate data of our perception are ideas, which are completely mind dependent entities. Therefore, it is difficult to pass from ideas to
anything outside them. Our knowledge is confined within the realm of our own ideas and we cannot compare our ideas with those external objects. Hence, Locke’s doctrine of representationalism again fails to explain errors of perception, dream, illusion, and hallucination.
Notes and References


2 ibid.; Book IV, Chap. V, sec. 4, p. 574.


4 ibid.; Book IV, Chap. V, sec. 6, p. 576.


6 ibid.; Book IV, Chap. V, sec. 8, p. 577.

7 Present Work; III.3, p. 85.


9 Chatterjee, Satischandra; The Problems of Philosophy, University of Calcutta, 1964; p. 183.

10 Woozley, A.D.; Theory of Knowledge, Hutchinson, 1976, p. 137.

11 ibid.; p. 137.