Preface

John Locke, born in 1632, was one of the most versatile philosophers of his time. His philosophical contributions not only covered a wide range of topics but also had a profound influence on the philosophers of subsequent generations. Indeed, it is impossible to understand properly the philosophy of his successors, especially Berkeley, Hume, and Kant without understanding Locke’s philosophy. His ‘Essay Concerning Human Understanding,’ referred to as the ‘Essay’ in this work, constitutes one of Locke’s most important contributions, covering epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language, among others. In spite of all its defects, Locke’s work is a philosophical classic in the true sense of the term. It gives us the first characteristically modern statement of the questions about human knowledge. The main theme and concern of Locke’s ‘Essay’ is knowledge and the capacity of the human understanding to acquire it. Here, Locke’s principal objective is to enquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge.

The present work on Locke’s theory of knowledge provides a partial analysis of the ‘Essay’ in the light of the comments and remarks made by other philosophers,
both contemporary and of subsequent eras. The work has a three-fold objective. The first objective is to trace the central line of his argument along with its ramifications that he put forward to demolish the doctrine of innate ideas in his ‘Essay.’ This forms the destructive side of his theory of knowledge. The second objective of this work is to ascertain and explain the exact nature of the claims that Locke made in the ‘Essay’ to establish his theory of knowledge, referred to as the constructive side of his theory of knowledge. The third objective is to examine some major objections related to his theory of knowledge. The present work provides a critical examination of Locke’s work in the ‘Essay’ and in particular, the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge,

The present work has seven chapters, including the introduction. While Chapter I, the Introduction, provides the motivation and the purpose of the work, the second chapter primarily discusses Locke’s refutation of the doctrine of innate ideas and principles. Locke’s polemic against the doctrine of innate principles laid the foundation of his empiricist contention that mind derives all the materials of reason and knowledge from experience. Chapter III discusses the constructive side of Locke’s theory of knowledge with the six sections covering Origin and Meaning of the word ‘idea,’ Function of ideas and Locke’s representative theory of Perception, Classification of ideas into simple and complex ones, the distinction between ideas and qualities and the classification of qualities into primary, secondary and tertiary. Definition and classification of Knowledge is discussed in Chapter IV, while Chapters V and VI deal with the Criterion of Truth and the Extent of Human Knowledge, respectively. Chapter VII is the concluding chapter. It appears from this
work that we cannot call Locke an empiricist in the strictest sense of the term. He was an empiricist in the sense that he believed all the materials of knowledge come from experience, i.e. from sensation and reflection. However, he was not an empiricist in the sense that he thought that we could know only by sense presentation. There is a rationalistic flavour in Locke’s writings. Indeed, Locke has built a bridge between empiricism and rationalism. There is a great deal of evidence (as shown in this work) to show that Descartes had profound influence on Locke’s philosophy but this is not to suggest that Locke lacked originality.

The references and quotations from Locke’s ‘Essay’ are taken from the P.H. Nidditch edition of Locke, which is listed in the Notes and References and Bibliography.

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