

## John Locke on the Goal of Education

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the goal of education will be identified and discussed in the light of John Locke's philosophy. Regarding this, I will attempt to answer the following questions through Locke's perspective and eventually, relate them to the context of education at present time: (a) What is education? (b) How does an individual acquire knowledge? (c) What are the importance and uses of education? (d) What can an educated person contribute to the society? Moreover, in order to understand Locke's viewpoint, it is necessary to know where his ideas are coming from, hence his life and educational background will also be presented. At the end of this paper, John Locke's thoughts and methods concerning education will be applied as possible solutions to the societal problems that we are facing nowadays.

**Keywords:** Education, Current Societal Problems, Locke

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“I have always thought the actions of men the best interpreters of their thoughts.”

Looking into the history of mankind, it can be established that education plays a significant role in the life of the rational beings. It gives us necessary knowledge, which is needed in our daily living.<sup>1</sup> Technological developments, innovative medicinal treatments and other helpful discoveries would not be possible without edification. Furthermore, education is also used as a tool in reducing societal problems, like poverty. Hence, its importance is emphasized by the society. It can be observed that the governments in each country aim to improve the quality of education their citizens have. Substantially, they intend to build more schools and improve the facilities of the established institutions. Moreover, new methodologies in teaching were being upheld to capture the students' attentions and divert it into the desire of learning. Such examples could be the following: flipped classroom model, design thinking or case method, gamification

and the use of social media. Traditionally, the teachers explain lessons first, before the assignment of tasks. But in the flipped classroom model, students were encouraged to prepare for the discussions beforehand. In the design thinking or case method, students are exposed on resolving real life cases through group analysis, brainstorming, innovation and creative ideas (McIntosh, 2014). On the other hand, gamification imparts learning through the use of games. Lastly, through the use of the social media, students' motivation in studying is augmented. For example, the Brazilian Academy of Languages encourages their students to review the tweets of their favorite artists, and correct their grammatical errors in an effort to improve their English language skills (Santos, 2013). In the context of our country, despite the previous development plans and projects formulated by the government and different sectors, the

quality of Philippine education still leaves much room for improvement. In fact, as part of the efforts of the present administration to respond to the perceived needs of the education sector, the “Enhanced K to 12 Basic Education Program” was pursued and eventually was implemented.<sup>2</sup> This step and the abovementioned matters are mostly directed towards economic development. Typically, the mindset of people nowadays, is to earn a certain degree, in order to find a job that suites his standard of living. Academic achievement is often related to one’s mental capacity and the worth of his salary. However, does the purpose of education primarily centers on the acquisition of knowledge and material progression?

In this paper, I will discuss a different notion regarding the goal of education: *virtue*, which is derived from John Locke’s work entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. This work is mainly concerned in childhood education only, which is why for further considerations; I will also present his other work *Of the Conduct of Understanding*, who’s concerned with cultivating the minds of adults. Both the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct* aim at the habituation of the mind to reasonableness. The former focuses on education for morals, while the latter is more on politics. At the same time, for additional information, his theory of knowledge will also be discussed in the light of the book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In order to further understand his viewpoints and methodologies that will be presented in the succeeding chapters, it is necessary to look into his life and educational background, because these factors greatly influenced his way of thinking.

John Locke is an English philosopher, physician and educator. He was born in Wrington, Somerset, England, on August 29, 1632. He wrote works on politics, religion, human

understanding and *education*. His primary writings are *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises of Government*. Locke’s parents were both Puritans. His mother died during his infancy, which is why he and his brother were raised by their father, who was a lawyer and Parliamentarian. At his early life, John Locke was taught at home by their father, which explains why he favored the tutorial form of education.<sup>3</sup> From there, he attended Westminster School and in 1652, he went up to Christ Church, Oxford, where he studied a variety of subjects, such as Greek, grammar, Hebrew, history, logic, moral philosophy and rhetoric. Eventually, he became a college tutor and Lecturer in Greek in this institution, whereby he tutored 13-18 years old students. During Locke’s years in Oxford, he became more interested in the field of science, particularly chemistry and medicine, even though he is not formally qualifying as a practitioner that time (not until 1674); he went in 1667 to London to serve as a physician to Lord Ashley, later Earl of Shaftsbury. Whence, Lord Ashley is the one who influenced him to be more interested in politics. Moreover, Locke was also assigned to take care of Lord Ashley’s 15 year old son.<sup>4</sup> Based from the above mentioned background of Locke’s life, the severe importance and the kind of approach he attributed into educating children can be traced. For example, in reference to his profession as a personal tutor to a future Earl, the kind of character the child should possessed is in its utmost relevance. Hence, when it comes education, Locke views virtuosity as its primary objective.

“Know Thyself”. Like Socrates, John Locke believes in the importance of knowing oneself first before posing inquiries in nature, however in a different context. For Socrates, it is necessary that one should know thyself, because he believes in the theory of reminiscence

or in Plato's words, *anamnesis*. By introspection, we will be able to remember the knowledge that is inherent in us. On the contrary, Locke believes otherwise. For him, there are no innate ideas in the mind, everything we know came from our experiences. Knowing thyself for Locke is the examination of our own abilities, especially the *capacity of the mind*<sup>5</sup>. By determining the power of our individual minds, Locke said that we will be able to do everything, at the same time be happy. In his *Epistle to the Reader* that can be found in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he narrates the story behind this essay, wherein the concept of knowing thyself will be underscored:

I should tell thee that five or six friends meeting at my chamber, and discoursing on a subject very remote from this, found themselves quickly at a stand, by the difficulties coming any nearer a resolution of those which perplexed us, it came into my thoughts, that we took a wrong course; and that before ourselves upon the inquiries of nature, it was necessary to examine our own abilities and see what objects of understandings were, or were not fitted to deal with. This I propose to the company, who all readily assented and thereupon it was agreed, that this should be our first inquiry.<sup>6</sup>

As an empiricist, Locke claims that the sole source of knowledge is experience, if this is so, the cultivation of the minds of the children must be monitored, because the knowledge that they will acquire in their childhood will be the foundation of their principles and attitudes. The mind as a *tabula rasa* as defined by Locke, denotes the significant role of the parents as the first educator of their children, because during childhood, their experiences are formative. Education then is a tool that can be used in shaping their future dispositions. This topic is thoroughly discussed in Locke's work entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Wherein he states that, "Great care is to be had of the

forming children's minds, and giving them that seasoning early, which shall influence their lives always after (Section 32)." This book was written during his stay in Holland and it was dedicated to his friend, Sir Edward Clark, of Chipley, Esq., advising him how to best raise his son. Unlike the standard goal of education we have nowadays, he claims that the true objective of education is not to create scholars, but virtuous men, hence the principle of virtue was formed, which is defined as the ability to subvert one's immediate appetites and desires to the dictates of reason. Locke's experience in tutoring children when he was still at Oxford, might be one of the reasons why he focused on educating the young aged. On the other side of the coin, his other work entitled *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, is also directed towards the cultivation of the mind, not of the children, but of the adults. Nonetheless, both the aim of the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct* is reasonableness.

According to Baldwin Bird, in his article entitled *John Locke's Contribution to Education*, John Locke in his writings embodies the characteristics of a practical Englishman, dealing vigorously, directly and carefully with whatever object he wishes to analyze, but still has positive rather than negative conclusions. English philosophers concentrate to the study of human mind and society from an empirical viewpoint. In the succeeding chapters of my paper, it can be observed that Locke was a typical English philosopher. He treated every problem he wants to solve in a common-sense manner; he analyzed rather than synthesized and described rather than explained.<sup>7</sup>

### **On the Acquisition of Knowledge**

At the early beginnings of the Renaissance period, the "Methodic Doubt", a new method of thinking was introduced by Rene Descartes, which supports the notion of innate ideas of

Socrates and Plato. Descartes was not able to clearly define what innate ideas are, but Locke regarded these as object of consciousness. Unlike the Cartesian view of knowledge, for him knowledge is entirely a product of experience, and these determines the kind of person we will become. This is supported by his claim that there are no principles which are universally agreed upon by mankind.<sup>8</sup> He then established that the human mind, at birth, is a *tabula rasa* or a blank slate and that everything we know came from experience. Aside from attributing the term *tabula rasa*, which can also be related to Aristotle, he also compared the mind into an “empty cabinet” and “white paper”, which can only be furnished with the use of our senses such as the sense of sight, smell, touch, taste and sense of hearing. For Locke, these sense faculties enable us to acquire knowledge, as if they were originally imprinted on the mind. . For him, the mind is not only a passive receiver, because through reflection we can think, believe or even doubt.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Locke also supposes that we have other faculties that enable us to receive process and even manipulate information, and these are the existence of our memory and our ability to use language. In his *Essay*, he also established that the ideas in our minds determine our behavior, hence in his work concerning education he proposes that as earliest as possible, a child’s mind must be filled with good principles, so that when he grow up he will live a virtuous life.

According to Locke, through experiences *simple ideas* were created, and as these ideas combine, they became *complex*, and form knowledge.<sup>10</sup> For example, our concept of a salad is derived from our individual notions of vegetables such as lettuce, cucumber, carrots etc. Likewise, the concept of a garden will not be possible without first knowing varieties of plants and flowers. As John Locke writes,

Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but the *perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas.*” In connection with this, he presented four sort of agreement or disagreement, and these are as follows: **(1)** identity or diversity, **(2)** relation, **(3)** co-existence or necessary connection and **(4)** real existence.<sup>11</sup>

Firstly, the knowledge of identity and diversity is an act of the mind that recognizes the differences of ideas from each other. This enables the mind to perceive each idea clearly and infallibly. This can be linked to the objective of the Principle of Non-Contradiction, wherein without the knowledge of the distinction between things, man will always be undergoing a dilemma brought by inconsistencies. Second is the knowledge of relation. With regards to the first sort of agreement or disagreement, positive knowledge would not be possible. Since, distinction among ideas constantly denied each other, the perception of the relation between ideas is necessary. Thirdly, the knowledge of co-existence perceives the conterminous appearance of a collection of qualities. Fourthly, and the last sort of agreement or disagreement is that of actual real existence agreeing to any idea. Among the said kinds, Locke considered this sort as the agreement or disagreement that contained all the knowledge we have or even those which we have the ability to know.

Upon describing how we acquire our ideas, the question whether we can rely on what our senses tell us can be raised. How can we be sure whether the world really is the way we perceive it? John Locke responds on this concern by first distinguishing *primary* and *secondary qualities*. *Primary qualities* for him these are the extension, weight, motion, number or anything that can be perceived by the senses objectively, in other words these are quantitative qualities. On the other hand, *secondary qualities* are sensations like

color, smell, taste and sound, which reproduce on the effect of the outer reality of our senses, which are qualitative. Everyone can agree on the primary qualities, because they inhere within the objects themselves. However, when it comes to secondary qualities, disagreement arises, because these depend on the individual sensations of each person.<sup>12</sup> For example, the smell of *durian* is adequate for Juan, but unpleasant for Maria. Neither of them can be considered as right or wrong, because they are just describing how *durian* affects their senses. From this, John Locke introduced these three degrees of certitude: (1) *intuitive*, the most immediate and certain form of knowledge, which comes from self-reflection; (2) *sensation*, it established the existence of the things of the world and (3) *demonstration*, which are rationalistic arguments.

### On Education

In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, John Locke describes and discussed the ideal education of a gentleman, yet since women when it comes to virtue and obedience do not differ from men, his educational manual for a gentleman do not differ either.

John Locke's fondness in the field of science has greatly influenced his methodologies and viewpoints when it comes to educating children. He established the importance of how we should take care of our physical bodies, because for Locke, what we must aim for is not only a sound mind, but also a sound body. By keeping the body in strength and vigor, the *young master* as used by Locke to termed children, will have the ability to obey and execute the orders of the mind. Underpinning, vis-à-vis health and education, is the significant role of parents to their children.

John Locke's pedagogy addressed three key themes, which are as follows: (1) the development of self-discipline, (2) the

significance of developing a good character and (3) the importance of developing reason in a child.<sup>13</sup> In Section 33, Locke writes:

As the strength of the body lies in being able to endure hardships, so also does that of the mind. And the *great principle*<sup>14</sup> and foundation of all virtue and worth is plac'd in this: that a man is able to deny himself his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason directs is best, though the appetite lean the other way.<sup>15</sup>

In the section above, the "great principle" that was mentioned is referring to self-discipline. For Locke, by being a disciplined individual, one will be able to set aside external factors like desires and bodily inclinations that will lead him to exclusively follow what the reason dictates, and eventually use them as guidelines on how to properly act in any given situation. However, he observed that when it comes to disciplining the children, parents often err by being too lenient or too strict. According to Locke, the secret of education lies on the reconciliation of these said contradiction. The educator must have the ability to keep up the child's spirit easy active and free, yet at the same time to restrain him from many things he has a mind to, and to draw him to things that are uneasy to him (Section 46). When it comes to Locke's idea and methodologies about self-discipline, the teachings of Buddhism can be associated. Like in Buddhism, parents must avoid the two extremes; instead they must focus on the *middle path*.

From his *Essay*, Locke denies the existence of innate ideas, nonetheless in his *Thoughts*, he take into consideration the fact that there are "natural tendencies implanted on the minds of men"<sup>16</sup>. He states that, "God has stamped certain characters upon men's minds, which like their shapes, may perhaps be a little mended, but can hardly be totally altered and transformed into the contrary."<sup>17</sup> It seems like

he's implying that when it comes to educating children, we cannot totally alter their aptitudes. On the contrary, all we can aim for is to make the best out of what nature has given them, and to prevent the corruptions and faults to which such a constitution is most inclined (Section 66). In developing the child's character, Locke strongly disagree in the concept of schooling, instead he favored tutoring. This kind of mentality can be questioned at present times. Usually, the reason why parents send their children to school is to enable them to learn how to interact with peers, at the same time to show them the larger picture of the world apart from their home. Nevertheless, according to Locke, these kinds of understandings can also be experienced at home, hence there is no need for schooling. At the same time, he points out that children require individual attention, in order to determine and eventually correct the natural weaknesses and faults they possess. This kind of attention cannot be given in school, because in there, the teacher's attention is divided among the students who are present in the class. At one hand, parents, whose role is to act as the bridge to the development of their children's good character, must not impose numerous rules, because their child will not be able to understand them all at once, and at the end of day, those percepts will only be forgotten, therefore they are useless. Instead, Locke suggests only two guidelines, and these are as follows: (1) Firstly, parents should guarantee that their children understands, at the same time are capable of performing the tasks that will be given to them. (2) Secondly, is about the repetition of tasks that were set, until they became habitual to the children. Locke claims that through habituation, certain acts and mentality that were based on memory or reflection will turn out as natural. The latter guideline that was given by Locke is a crucial step for the development of the character of a

child, because as said in the earlier chapters of this paper, it is at this stage, in which one can easily implant anything into their minds. As Locke writes, "Having this way cured in your child any fault, it is cured forever; and thus one by one you may weed them out all, and plant what habits you please (Section 64). For example, if a person, as part of his daily routine, is used to take a shower before eating, throughout his lifetime this practice can be observed. At one hand, habituation can also be related to tradition or culture, because both share a common characteristic: repetition. The Filipino culture of saying "po" and "opo" and the gesture of "pagmamano" as signs of respect are evident examples that could support Locke's concept of habituation. In a traditional Filipino family, these forms of politeness are practiced every day. It can be realized that, even as the young members of such families grow up, the said culture will still be visible and it will continually be passed throughout generations. Based from the examples enumerated, it can be said that acts which were acquired from habituation are difficult to change and can last for a lifetime. Hence, good values must be repeatedly taught during one's childhood.

As said in his *Essay*, the most certain form of knowledge comes from intuition, hence in regards to the second key point that was given by John Locke, one of the most important habit that a parent must develop in his child is the *habit of reasoning*<sup>18</sup>. Being curious is a trait that comes along with having a young mind, looking into this, Locke recommends the educator to end this natural curiosity by channeling it into knowledge. This can be possible by answering their inquiries clearly, truthfully, and in accordance to their level. In the end, the three main themes of Locke's pedagogy are related to each other. In summary, a child that is governed by reason, which can be acquired through

habituation, is an adult marked by self-discipline.

From the education of the children, let us now move on to the cultivation of the minds of the adults. The highlight of his work, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, is intellectual independence. If in the *Thought*, the role of an educator is necessary; in the *Conduct* this character is shunned. For Locke, adults must “see with their own eyes” (paragraph 24), because at this stage, an individual already has the capacity to discover the truth, at the same time guide others who are also in their search for it. The state of one’s understanding is now wider, in connection with this, Locke describes the proper conduct that must be attributed to it and it is: the ability to resist external factors in the indifferent examination of one’s own beliefs, which is similar to what is discussed in the former paragraphs. This kind of conduct is what an adult should use in the field of politics.

The education of the children and adults that were defined by John Locke are interrelated and somewhat dependent on each other, dependent in a sense that, there is a cycle of responsibilities and obligations. Education then is a continual endeavor.

### **Importance and Uses of Education**

As presented above, the importance of education from the viewpoint of John Locke lies on its ability to shape a person’s character from childhood, even up to adulthood; and to tame desire with reason. From his *Essay*, it can be established that whatever is in the mind, it governs the behavior and the kind of principle a person upholds, and it supported in the *Thoughts* and in the *Conduct*. This practical kind of viewpoint explains the reason behind the inevitableness of simple misunderstandings and even greater disputes. People act in this world according to what they believe, hence it seems

like both morality and politics, which are the two main concern of society, are founded on the accumulated individual opinions. If this is the case, the kind of education we practice greatly influence the kind of nation we will have. Ergo, if we want to live in a peaceful world, the teaching virtue must be imposed to mankind.

### **Conclusion**

As a notable empiricist, John Locke’s works are noticeably related to his experiences. His inclination towards medicine, philosophy and politics are evident in his writings. Despite the discrepancy in the situation that was experienced by Locke, and what we lived by today, the applicability of his proposed philosophies can still be observed. In the context of our society nowadays, the mentality of people regarding education is far different from Locke’s. If for John Locke, the main goal of education is virtue, today it is not the case. As materialism continuously consume the minds of people, the quest for self-reflection and self-actualization decreases. Education simply became a means to the kind of life status an individual want to have, which often became the reason why we forget to cultivate the most important aspect of our being: *goodness*.

Lockean education can be used as a tool in the necessary shift of the standard goal of learning to a more practical implication. The significance of this kind of edification lies on its distinct approach that diverts from the abovementioned context. Instead of encouraging and persuading young individuals to take a ‘marketable degree’, they must be first taught on how to act and carry themselves virtuously. By doing so, the former will eventually follow. The value of cultivating a child’s attitude must be the first priority of a parent over the acquisition of knowledge (and/or the yearning towards a

profitable future, which is one of the criterions at present time). However, this does not mean that the latter are not necessary. The above mentioned is both significant in the formulation of one's character, in fact they are related. The former cannot be possible without the latter. Nonetheless Locke is reminding us, that before we pursue our desires and aim for understanding, we must first look into ourselves internally. By doing so, we will realize that, at the end of the day, all of the things we do are subjected to the law of morality. This can be related to Paul Ricouer's notion about being as oneself with the other. On the contrary, for Locke, in order for an individual to be with the other, he must first dwell into cultivation of his personality.

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<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited and with an Introduction by Roger Woolhouse (England: Penguin Group, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Kristine Carla Oteyza, "Enhanced K to 12 Basic Education Program: Opportunities and Challenges", *Economic Issue of the Day*, 7:2 (2012) URL = <http://dirp3.pids.gov.ph/ris/eid/pidseid1202.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> This will be further discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Woolhouse, "Introduction" in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

<sup>5</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>6</sup> John Locke, "The Epistle to the Reader", in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Baldwin Bird, "John Locke's Contribution to Education", *The Sewanee Review*, 18:2 (April 1, 1913), 177-187.

<sup>8</sup> Ideas are considered as innate, if they have *universal consent*. There are two kinds of principles which can be considered as innate and these are the *speculative principle* (Principle of Identity or Principle of Non-Contradiction) and the *practical principle* (e.g. *Synderisis*). However, for John Locke, these principles do not prove the existence of innate ideas, because they are not universally known by mankind. Locke used the illustration of the propositions 'What is, is' and 'Tis impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be.' These propositions are more likely to be considered as innate, however they are far from having a universal consent, because not everyone knows these principles. To support this claim, Locke presented the thoughts of the

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*children* and *idiots* as examples. Certainly, the aforementioned propositions are not present in their mind. Hence, innate ideas do not exist. *Ibid.*, 59-74.

<sup>9</sup> Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World* (New York: Orion Publishing Group, 1996), 218-221.

<sup>10</sup> *Simple ideas* are based on the senses, reflection and sensation; while *complex ideas* are formed through combination, comparison and abstraction. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> John Locke, "Book IV, Chapter I: Of Knowledge in General", in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 467.

<sup>12</sup> Gaarder, *Sophie's World*, 219.

<sup>13</sup> Goodyear, Dwight, "John Locke's Pedagogy", *Encyclopaedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, URL = [http://eeapat.net/doku.php?id=john\\_locke\\_s\\_pedagogy](http://eeapat.net/doku.php?id=john_locke_s_pedagogy) (accessed December 8, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>15</sup> Locke, John, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. John William Adamson (USA: Dover Publications Inc., 2007), 17.

<sup>16</sup> Baldwin, "John Locke's Contribution to Education", *The Sewanee Review*, 18:2 (April 1, 1913), pp. 180.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Italics mine.

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