GENERAL IDEAS AND THE KNOWABILITY OF ESSENCE: INTERPRETATIONS OF LOCKE'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE (ABSTRACT)

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Is Locke a conceptualist or a nominalist? Numerous supporters of these two opposing interpretative hypotheses are to be found amongst scholars and Locke's concept of universals is the subject of reconstructions which often differ greatly.

In a situation of this sort, it is easy to yield to the temptation to attribute the origin of the divergence to a purely terminological ambiguity. Perhaps the word "nominalism" is understood in different senses? Apparently not. Almost all writers, explicitly or implicitly, agree in considering nominalism to be a doctrine according to which universals exist only as names which are used to designate collections of concrete individuals. Thus, according to nominalism, there is neither correspondence between universal terms (common nouns) and entities which exist in reality, nor with abstract, universal ideas existing in the mind. In modern philosophy the positions of Berkeley and Hume are generally considered nominalist.

According to various scholars, Locke's position is essentially the same as the nominalism of Berkeley. This interpretation is based principally on Locke's assertions in paragraph 9, chapter xi, Book II, of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.* If one considers this paragraph in isolation from the rest of Book II and, especially, from the content of Book III, the following conclusions may be drawn:

a) Notwithstanding Locke's numerous references to the possession and awareness of abstract or general ideas on the part of the human mind, these abstract ideas are none other than particular ideas used as representatives of or signs standing for a class of individuals: what is universal is only the name.

b) The abstraction to which Locke refers corresponds to that which the Scholastics called "improper" or distinguishing, which consists in mentally separating a characteristic, a quality or a part of a known thing from all of the others contemporaneously perceived; this kind of abstraction is radically different from that which is "proper" or non-distinguishing and which allow us to experience the (universal) nature or essence in the perception of the particular.

c) Locke's conception of abstraction would not therefore be incompatible with that of Berkeley; on the contrary, Berkeley's attribution to Locke of a belief in the existence in the mind of general, abstract ideas in reality distinct from particular ideas would seem a polemical exaggeration.

These considerations would make plausible Locke's classification as a nominalist. In my opinion, this would be an incorrect and inadequate interpretation of Locke's philosophy, based upon an arbitrary isolation of the text cited above from the rest of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.* It should be noted that:

1) The principal aim of Book II is to demonstrate that all of man's ideas come from experience and that complex ideas are based upon the simple ideas due to sensation and reflection, which are compared and combined by operations of the mind. From this point of view, the distinction between particular and universal ideas is of marginal importance. In fact, Locke warns at the beginning of Book I that he will use the term idea "to express whatever is meant by *phantasm, notion, species*, or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking" (I,1,8), and hence includes in the semantic category "idea" both individual mental representations (images and phantasms) and universals (notions and species).

2) As Locke explicitly states, the examples given in chapter xi of Book II (which deals with mental operations), "the instances I have hitherto given have been chiefly in simple ideas"; chosen, that is, for the purpose of clarity and to further the aim of Book II, with the explicit warning that "Of compounding, comparing, abstracting, etc., I have but just spoken, having occasion to treat of them more at large in other places" (II,xi,14).

I will try to demonstrate that although for Locke abstract ideas are the connection between general terms and particular things (which are known by means of ideas), it is clear that the link cannot be identified with either of the two elements which it connects: an abstract idea cannot be a particular used as though it were a universal. In other words, that which determines the universality of an abstract idea for Locke is not simply its relation with a number of particular ideas, as for Berkley, but something inherent in and characteristic of the idea itself, the nominal essence which distinguishes all complex ideas (all kinds of complex ideas: of modes, relations and substances).

I do not think that there are evident contradictions between the examples of abstraction given in Book II and the broad theory of language presented in Book III. There is simply a difference of approach and aims and thus, in the final analysis, a complementarity.

Equally widespread amongst scholars is the legend according to which Locke shows a strong aversion to abstract ideas, similar to that of Berkley in the *Treatise*. This legend is endorsed by influential commentators on Locke. A. C. Fraser writes: "Locke has everywhere a sober dread of abstractions, and clings to the particular and concrete, with a sense of the risk of losing the real in the emptiness of the universal". In reality this supposed aversion does not exist; on the contrary, Locke does not even propose the reduction of ideas to "mental pictures" (a reduction which in Berkeley and Hume will form the base of the negation of the existence of abstract ideas in the mind).

Locke is not in the least afraid of abstract ideas; his constant concern, which is evident in his treatment of

the complex question of the relation between real and nominal essence, is to refute the position of the Scholastics, according to which a universal concept in the mind *(post rem)* reflects the universal present in all things as substantial form (the universal *in re*), without assuming positions which are purely conventionalist and nominalist with regard to knowledge, such as those of Mersenne, Gassendi, Hobbes and sceptical and anti-Cartesian free-thinkers.

To show this, I shall offer a careful analysis of the relation Locke makes between real and nominal essence, with regard to the relations which link term to idea and idea to things. For Locke, the term is the sign *(mark)* of an abstract idea and the idea itself is the sign of a plurality of things.

The nature of the relation between signifier and signified is variable, though, in the relation between ideas and things with respect to the various kinds of complex ideas which the human mind may frame. The greatest difference is to be found between complex ideas of mixed mode and complex ideas of substance. With regard to ideas of substance in particular, Locke's thought is interpreted in different and often contradictory ways. Although complex ideas of substance may be reduced to a collection of simple ideas, Locke does not doubt the existence of "the real internal, but generally (in substances) unknown, constitution of things, whereon their discoverable qualities depend" (III,iii,15). The reference of the idea (universal) to things is uniquely determined by the nominal, not the real, essence. Locke insists that nominal essences are not arbitrary because the mind, in forming its complex ideas of substances "only follows nature" and does not join together ideas which do not have a natural connection.

For Locke, man uses a certain discretion in constructing nominal essences, since he chooses perceived qualities considered characteristic of a substance, but this discretion is not arbitrary or unconditional because it is limited to the occurrence of empirically verifiable properties, increasingly so by the growth of the scientific knowledge of nature, although clearly this discretion is never completely eliminated since human knowledge may always be perfected. In Book II, Locke asserts that ideas of substance are all inadequate because they all lack "something we should be glad were in them", since "desiring to copy things as they really do exist, and to represent to ourselves that constitution on which all their properties depend, we perceive our ideas attain not that perfection we intend" (II,xxxi,3), but this perfection (the complete identity of real essence and nominal essence) may never be reached. On the other hand, complex ideas of mixed mode and of relations are always adequate (for Locke an idea is adequate if it represents perfectly the archetype on which the mind supposes it is based).

One may ask a fundamental question: this unknowability of real essence of a substance which has been asserted on numerous occasions, is it an unknowability in principal (absolute impossibility) or an unknowability in practice, due to the limitations of science at the time?

Although the question cannot be resolved once and for all, I am convinced that from the overall spirit of the *Essay* there emerges the idea that human knowledge tends to conform to an objective structure of reality; even though Locke is aware that the complete identity between nominal and real essence is impossible in practice with respect to the knowledge of substances, he remains convinced that this identity constitutes the limit and the ultimate goal of the quest for knowledge.

There is, in effect, in Locke's thought a break with the Cartesian view of science: mathematics and demonstration are no longer the only privileged model of knowledge; experiment regains the essential role that Descartes denied it. For Locke, who was a great admirer of Newton, mechanical explanation remains the ideal model for a scientific explanation, but is not always – in practice – possible (Boyle was also convinced of this) and so the knowledge of nature assumes a merely probable status, having been reached by the process of induction, in contrast to mathematics and ethics which are completely deductive. In fact, Boyle's research and methods had a profound influence on Locke's conception of science and in particular on the doctrine of the knowledge of substances. These observations on Locke's philosophy of science underline the enormous, unbridgeable distance between it and that which Berkeley was to formulate in *De Motu* in 1721 (defined as "instrumentalist" by K. Popper, as opposed to the "essentialism" of Newtonian physics).

In conclusion, in opposition to other widespread opinions, I will seek to demonstrate that: 1) Locke's concept of abstraction is fully compatible with conceptualism and may in no way be considered nominalist; 2) Locke's complex theory of knowledge cannot be considered a conventionalist view of science.

Furthermore, the profundity of Locke's concept of substance with regard to the science of his time will clearly emerge, so as to make evident the inadequacy of Hegel's judgement in conclusion of his comment on the distinction between real and nominal essence in Locke, which finishes with the famous phrase: "This (philosophising) is a very commonplace account of the matter".