The Paper

A Comparative Reading into the Early Buddhist and Lockean Theories of Knowledge

Rev. Wadinagala Pannaloka

Graduate Institute of Philosophy, National Central University, Taiwan

Introduction

The Buddhism preserved in Pali Nikaya texts and Chinese Agamas is known as early Buddhism. And it is accepted as the closest form to the teachings of the Buddha. Some Buddhist scholars versed in Pali Buddhism have concluded that epistemologically early Buddhism is a form of empiricism. This claim has been subjected to criticism and has opened space to look into early Buddhism from various forms of empirical theories in a comparative basis. So, in this paper, to compare with early Buddhism, I have selected the epistemology of John Locke (1632-1704), the initiative philosopher of British empiricism, which was dominant during the seventeenth century. Having denied the rationalist view of ‘innate ideas’ as the source of knowledge, Locke attempted to establish his theory of knowledge on experience. His main objective was to construct a philosophical theory of knowledge. In this attempt, he analyses the external objects and certain process in mind to understand how knowledge is formed. Early Buddhism being a set of teachings that provides path to liberation from worldly suffering emphasizes the cultivation of correct knowledge as a means to get emancipation. And it analyses both psycho and physical entities as a means to get the truth. In this paper, I am to compare the epistemological background of early Buddhism with Lockean empiricism in order to discover the fundamental differences between them and consequently to examine the validity of claim that early Buddhism is a form of empiricism.

Backgrounds to Buddhism and Locke:

It is useful to know the epistemological backgrounds wherein early Buddhism and Lockean empiricism arose. In the Buddha’s time, there were three epistemological groups who claimed the truth. According to the Pali

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Nikayas, those groups were traditionalists (anussavika—who were based on the authority of scriptures), rationalists and metaphysicians (takki-vimamsi), and those who claim direct personal knowledge. The Buddha identifies himself with the third class of thinkers. In many places of the Nikayas, we can find reference to direct personal knowledge by the Buddha (janam janami, passam passami). Through the refutation of sole dependence on authority (sruti) and reason, the Buddha invites to exercise one’s own capacity to find the truth (attanava janeyyatha).

By the seventeenth century, European philosophy was influenced by platonist rationalism and this asks to accept certain ideas as truth without question and assumes that those were impressed in our mind by God. Locke did not accept this dogmatism and his position was that God has given us reason to exercise before accepting anything.

Thus, we can see that both early Buddhism and Locke were not willing to accept any concept merely based on authority.

**Purpose of Locke vs early Buddhism:**

It is useful to know the purpose of Locke and early Buddhism to attempt to show how to get knowledge. First, early Buddhism was aimed to get liberation from the worldly suffering. Once the Buddha, mentions that his research was to seek freedom from birth, death etc and get sublime peace. In order to realize the truth of phenomenal world, one need to develop knowledge but knowledge is not the final goal and it is only a means to liberation (nissaranathaya).

As Locke mentions in his work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, his objective was to establish a theory of knowledge, which is philosophical. He has attempted to clear the ground to form knowledge by others of mastery with science like Newton. From the reference given in the

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8 References of this paper are based on the edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990 (reprint). *Essay* I.1:243: *my Purpose to enquire into the Original, Certainty, and Extent of human Knowledge; together, with the Grounds and Degrees of Belief, Opinion, and Assent*;
Essay, we can understand that the discussion of knowledge in Lockean account and that of early Buddhism take different directions, the former is secular while the latter is supramundane.

**Locke’s empirical thesis:**

In order to establish human understanding on experience, first Locke had to repudiate the doctrine of ‘innate ideas’ as the source of human knowledge. According to this rationalist view of the origin of knowledge, there are certain principles impressed in our minds even before we come to this world. 

9 Descartes and Leibniz were proponents of this theory. Following the Platonic view, they emphasized the inborn truths as only truths and they denied the validity of experience and experiment. Locke pointed out both in the speculative and moral spheres of knowledge, there are no innate principles with which every human being agrees.

If the knowledge does not come from innate ideas, then there is the question where from it comes. The answer to this question by Locke was ‘experience’. Here experience means sense-experience. Experience is made up of sensation and reflection. According to Locke, mind is a white paper (tabula rasa) and it is provided with ideas through the sensation and reflection. Primarily, our senses contact with sense-objects which have power to produce sensation. And sensation generates perception of the qualities in objects. The mind is passive in the reception of sense-data and it has no power to alternate them, mind is like a mirror that merely reflects what fall upon it. Having been impressed by sense-objects, mind operates on them and generates the ideas like willing, believing etc. and this function is called as reflection. As Locke says, there is no any idea that was not touched by sensation and reflection. Thus, Locke establishes his empirical thesis of the source of knowledge.

**Sense experience in early Buddhism:**

Early Buddhism has accepted the role of sense-perception as vital in human person. The cognitive modes of sanna (perception) and vinnana

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9 Essay I.II.5:48 : It is an established Opinion amongst some Men, That there are in the understanding certain innate principles; some primary notions, Characters, as it were stamped upon the Mind of Man, which the Soul receives in its very first Being; and brings into the world with it.

10 Essay I.II.4:49: …Because there are none to which all Mankind give an Universal Assent.

11 Essay II.I.2:104 : Whence has it all the materials of Reason and Knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, From Experience: In that, all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self.

12 Essay II.I.25:118

13 Essay II.I.24:117f
(sense-awareness) represent the process of sense experience. The standard description of the sense-experience has occurred in a discussion which accounts for the arising of different views (ditthi). The Pali reference to sense perception runs as:

Depending upon the visual organ and the visible object, O monks, arises visual consciousness; the meeting together of these three is contact; conditioned by contact arises feeling. What one feels one perceives; what one perceives, one reflects about; what one reflects about, one is obsessed with. What one is obsessed with, due to that, concepts characterized by such obsessed perceptions assail him in regard to visible objects cognizable by the visual organ, belonging to the past, the future, and the present.

According to this reference, the process of sense-experience consists of several stages. The initial step is the contact of internal senses with their external objects which give rise to bare awareness (vinnana). Following the vinnana, there arises contact (familiarity) and in turn, contact leads to feeling (vedana). Feeling is a crucial stage in this process since ‘what one feels one perceives (yam vedeti tam sanjnati).

A notable characteristic in the Buddhist account of sense-perception is the element of emotion. The familiarity of the cognitive awareness gives rise to feeling (sensation); what one perceives is what one feels. Sensation gives rise to perception. This is a point where early Buddhist account and that of Locke on sense-experience shows difference. As Locke puts the account of sensation:

Our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind, several distinct Perceptions of things, according to

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16 The concept of vinnana has different meanings and in this context it stands for the concept Cognitive awareness: William S. Waldron, The Buddhist Unconscious, London:RouthledgeCurzon, 2003, p. 28 fn.45; P. D. Premasiri interprets ‘vinnana’ in the context above as ‘the perceptual awareness of the respective senses prior to conceptualization, and therefore, that it supplies raw data for the growth of concepts and the psychological activity referred to by the term sanjanati. See : P. D. Premasiri, op.cit., p. 163
17 D. J. Kalupahana, A History of Buddhist Philosophy Continuities and Discontinuities, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994, p. 33
those various ways, wherein those Objects do affect them...I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean, they from external Objects convey into the mind what produces there those Perceptions.\textsuperscript{18}

Locke directly comes to the process of perception through the stages of contact between external object with sense organs and consequent sensation. But in the Buddhist account, before perception has to pass the stages of meeting of senses with the object, bare consciousness, contact and feeling, then, there is perception. Moreover, according to Locke, the powers of qualities generate ideas through sensation leading to perception. \textsuperscript{19} In contrast, Buddhism does not attribute priority to sense objects and the primary awareness is dependent on simultaneous meeting between sense and object (depending upon the visual organ and the visible object, O monks, arises visual consciousness). By not emphasizing external object, as D. J. Kalupahana points out, early Buddhism denies the concept of mind as ‘\textit{tabula rasa}’.\textsuperscript{20}

The second source of knowledge in Lockean epistemology is reflection. Its role is to perceive the operations of mind over data provided through sensation. The ideas of perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing etc. come from reflection.\textsuperscript{21}

The latter part of the above Pali Nikaya reference is concerned with the process of thinking takes place after perception. Perception leads to more complicated stages of reflection (\textit{vitakka}) and obsession (\textit{papanca}). When the person is assailed with proliferation of concepts, he is governed by them. In the Buddhist account of sense perception (both sensation and reflection), what has been aim is to show how the person is obsessed with his own concepts.

In the early Buddhist literature, there are different modes of knowledge like \textit{sanna}, \textit{vinnana}, \textit{panna}, \textit{parinna} and \textit{abhinna}.\textsuperscript{22} Both ‘\textit{sanna}’ and ‘\textit{vinnana}’ are considered as ordinary cognitive modes. The concept of \textit{vinnana} in the context of ordinary cognition, is considered as functioning to

\textsuperscript{18} Essay II.I.3: 105
\textsuperscript{20} D. J. Kalupahana, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 32
\textsuperscript{21} Essay II.I.4: 105: The other fountain, from which Experience furnisbeth the Understanding with Ideas, is the Perception of the Operations of our own Minds within us, as it is employ’d about the Ideas it has got; which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on, and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of Ideas, which could not be had from things without: and such are, \textit{Perception}, \textit{Thinking}, \textit{Doubting}, \textit{Believing}, \textit{Reasoning}, \textit{Knowing}, \textit{Willing}, and all the different actings of our own minds...This source of Ideas...I call Reflection, the ideas it affords being such only, as the mind gets by reflecting on its own Operations within itself
\textsuperscript{22} P. D. Premasiri, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.154-177
provide raw materials for perception. The difference between \textit{sanna} and \textit{vinnana} is shown as the former differentiate colours\textsuperscript{23} and the latter differentiates sensations.\textsuperscript{24} In the early texts, \textit{vinnana} is considered as contributory to human suffering, so it has to be well understood (parinneyyam).\textsuperscript{25} In early Buddhism, knowledge come through sensation and reflection is classified under ordinary knowledge and they are considered as problematic knowing modes for the individual. In contrast, Locke’s view is that they are the reliable sources of knowledge.

\textbf{Extra-sense perception in early Buddhism:}

The concept of \textit{abhinna} which is pointed out as the epistemological foundation of early Buddhism is classified as extra-sensory knowledge. The word ‘\textit{abhinna}’ is defined as special super-normal power of apperception and knowledge to be acquired by long training in life and thought.\textsuperscript{26} And this knowledge becomes six-fold. The Buddha\textsuperscript{27} and his disciples are said to have achieved them all.\textsuperscript{28}

The prefix \textit{abhi} signifies in this context ‘superiority’, ‘specialty’, ‘extraordinariness’ and ‘greatness’. Therefore, it can be said that \textit{abhinna} signifies a kind of super-cognition. Then, the questions arise as to their nature and content. The nature of them can be understood through reading into forms of knowing referred to as \textit{abhinna}. There are six forms of such knowledge. They are:

1. Psychokinesis (\textit{iddhividha})
2. Clairaudience (\textit{dibbasotadhatu})
3. Telepathic knowledge (\textit{cetopariyanana})
4. Retrocognitive knowledge (\textit{pubbenivasanussatinana})
5. Clairvoyance (\textit{cutupapatanana})
6. Knowledge of the destruction of defiling impulses (\textit{asavakkhayanana})

With the exception of \textit{asavakkhayanana}, other types of super cognition were common to all those who practiced mental training. It was considered as a by-product of ‘mental-concentration’ (\textit{samadhi}) in \textit{jhana} or yoga. Buddhism

\textsuperscript{23} Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, \textit{op.cit.}, p.389: What does it perceive? It perceives blue...yellow...red...and white.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 388: What does it cognize? It cognizes: [This is] pleasant...painful...neither painful-nor-pleasant.
\textsuperscript{25} It is interesting to compare this with the position that early Buddhism maintained with regard to ‘tanha-(craving)-the origin of suffering’, the second truth of suffering, which has been mentioned something should be well-understood (parinneyyya).
recognizes a causal relationship between the mental concentration and the emergence of those cognitive abilities. K.N. Jayatilleke points out that even though the Upanishads also have referred to such super cognitions, they differ from Buddhism. According to him, the Upanishads conceived of this knowledge as a mystical form of intuitive knowledge, whereas the Buddha offers a causal explanation for the arising of such knowledge. Buddhism speaks of the possibility of human super-cognitive ability without mystifying such a natural capacity in human psyche. In the Upanishads, such knowledge was considered as what reveals metaphysical substances such as atman or Brahman. An examination of the concept of *abhinna* proves that there is no reference to such entities in Buddhism.

A special characteristic seen in Buddhism is the requirement of physical senses to gain extra-sensory perceptions. For example, to gain the clairvoyance, one needs to possess physical eye as its natural causal basis. According to the text *Itivuttaka*, the presence of the physical eye (*mamsacakkhu*) is necessary for *dibbacakkhu* (clairvoyance). In another place in the Pali canon, physical eye has been mentioned as the causal ground for clairvoyance.

Except the knowledge, *asavakkhayanana*, all the other forms of knowledge mentioned above do not qualitatively differ from the content of ordinary sense-experience and the introspective experience of the mind, the genuineness of a claim to possess such a capacity could in principle be tested even by someone who does not possess those powers of cognition.

**Ideas as content of knowledge:**

The contents of knowledge, ideas, have been subjected to a subtle analysis by Locke. An idea is defined as whatever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks. The major division of ideas is simple ideas and complex ideas. The simple ideas come from both sensation and reflection. Examples for the simple ideas of sensation are coldness, whiteness, and

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30 *Itivuttaka*, p.52: *mamsacakkhusa uppādo maggo dibbacakkhuno*
31 *Milindapañha*, p.119
32 Essay, I.I.8:47:It being the Term, which, I think, serves best to understand for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks, I have used to express whatsoever is meant by Phantasm, Notion, Species, or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ'd about in thinking; E.II.viii.8:134: whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call Idea
hardness of a piece of ice. This class of simple ideas comes through only one
sense. And there is another class of simple ideas which we receive through
two senses, for example, extension, figure, rest, and motion. These are
perceivable impressions both on eyes and touch; and we can receive and
convey into our minds the ideas of extension, figure, motion, and rest of bodies
both by seeing and feeling.33

There is a class of simple ideas comes through reflection, principally ideas
of perception or thinking, and volition or willing.34 The other class of simple
ideas comes through both sensation and reflection: pleasure, pain, power,
existence and unity. Ideas of pleasure or pain accompany almost all ideas,
both of sensation and reflection.35 Thus, we can see that there are four kinds of
simple ideas and the common characteristic of them is they are received by
mind passively. Moreover, these ideas cannot be altered by the mind.36

The mind frames the complex ideas using the simple ideas as material. We
can combine two or more simple ideas into one complex idea. Here we are
not confined to bare observation and introspection, but we can voluntarily
combine the data of sensation and reflection to form new ideas, each of
which can be considered as one thing and given one name. Such are, for
example, beauty, gratitude, a man, an army, and the universe.37 By using the
simple ideas of whiteness, sweetness, and hardness we form the complex idea
of sugar.

In the early Buddhist literature, we cannot find such a detailed
explanation about the contents of knowledge, or the ideas filling the mind.
However, the concept of sanna (idea) can be related to the simple ideas
which represent ideas or concept of the external world through both
sensation and reflection. In the discourse named Mahavedalla sutta , sanna is
explained as the activity of ‘cognizing in the sanna way’(sanjanati sanjanati ti
kho avuso tasma sannati vuccati).38 The instances given of such cognition
refer specifically to the perception of colour.

What does one cognize in the ‘sanna-way’? One
cognizes...blue...yellow...red...and... white?

33 Essay II.V.1:127
34 Essay II.VI.1:127
35 Essay II.VII.1:128
36 Essay II.II.2:119
37 Essay II.XII.1: 163f
One could conjecture that *sanna* in this context implies the concept forming procedure associated with perceptual activity as well as the natural tendency of the human mind to recognize the data given to the various senses in terms of concepts. *Sanna* could be taken as a stage beyond the bare excitement of the sensitivity of the sense-organs.

The activity of *sanna* seems to depend on repeated perceptual experience as well as the mind’s ability to formulate abstract ideas and recognize the sensory environment in terms of such ideas. *Sanna* could therefore be seen as that which provides material for thought. That which one knows in the *sanna* way is that which one thinks about (*yam sanjanati, tam vitakketi*).

In perceiving the external sense-sphere, early Buddhism does not separate the colour, shape etc. All the sense objects are divided into six groups corresponding to their internal senses. Form is the object of eye and colour and shape etc included in the form itself. And there is no attempt to recognize them as distinct ideas. Specially, in the Lockean account the description of complex ideas finds no parallel in early Buddhism. Putting two or three simple ideas together we form a complex idea. Sugar is the complex idea of adding the simple ideas of whiteness, sweetness and hardness. In early Buddhism, there is no such a view that consciousness synthesizes the concepts to form another concept.

**Contents of super cognition:**

It is interesting to know what is the content of knowledge that gained through extra-sensory perception as given in early Buddhist texts. In this case, Buddhist scholars like K.N.J ayatilleke and P.D. Premasiri maintain that the super cognitions have an empirical basis and no any mystic contents. As it was mentioned above, to achieve the knowledge like clairaudience (*dibbasota*) and clairvoyance (*dibbacakkhu*), one should possess unhindered physical sense organs. According to early texts, the enlightenment consists of three knowledges (*tevijja*), the knowledge of previous existences (*pubbenivasanussatinana*), the knowledge of death and rebirth of sentient beings (*cutupapatanana*), and the knowledge of destruction of cankers (*asavakkhayanana*). The *pubbenivasanussatinana* is not a direct

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perception of the past but extension of the memory, which is indicated by the
term ‘satanusarivinnana’. The knowledge of passing away and rebirth of other
beings is (cutupapatanana) is a special application of clairvoyance and it
sees the contemporaneous events but not future events. The last knowledge,
asavakkhayananana which is considered the highest and unique to Buddhism, is
normally interpreted as verification of four truths of suffering, its origin, its
cessation, and way to cessation, the understanding of the three
characteristic of being (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and
non-substantiality), and the comprehension of the law of cause and effect
(paticcasamupada). So, the asavakkhayananana is understood first as
knowledge which results in the elimination of cankers and the second as the
introspective knowledge of one’s liberated condition of mind.

It is obvious that there is no concept of extra-sensory perception and
enlightenment in the Lockean system as found in early Buddhism. The
important difference is that Locke has not referred to as internal
transformation through the knowledge gained either through sensation or
reflection.

**Substance:**

Through the analysis of the process how we form knowledge, Locke finds
that there should be a support for the ideas impress upon mind through
sensation and ideas form through reflection. This support is known as
‘substance’ or substratum. This is unchangeable. This substratum is hidden in
the changing phenomena. As Locke states, through the a priori methods of
intuition and demonstration we can get ideas of real essences, and the
knowledge of essences is “certain and universal knowledge”.

In the analysis of knowledge, his conclusion about substance it is cannot be known. This idea
of substance by Locke forms a contrast with the early Buddhist understanding
of the phenomenal world.

According to early Buddhist understanding, the material objects are
composed of four elements, earth, water, fire, and wind. These are not
considered as unchangeable substances but mutually dependent. On the
other hand not something unknowable but can be understood through their

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42 E.IV.XII.10:645
characteristics. The conditioned world is characterized with changing (impermanent-anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) and nonsubstantiality (anatta). This indicates that in the conditioned world there is no something unchangeable (anicca vata sankhara).

Conclusion

From the discussion we can derive significant differences and similarities between early Buddhist account with regard to knowledge and Lockean empiricism. Both early Buddhism and Locke came up against certain epistemological backgrounds. When the Buddha arose, there were three groups of epistemological thinkers who relied on authority of religious scriptures, reason and direct personal knowledge. Buddha claimed himself as one belonging to the third group. The Buddha did not accept mere dependence on scriptures or reason as efficient ways to find the truth. As for Locke, Platonic view of innate principles as the true knowledge was influential and he it as sort of hinder to exercise reason forcing dogmatic views. Early Buddhism agrees with Locke with his denial of innate principles but early Buddhism accepts influence of innate tendencies in receiving sense-data and in tum denies ‘tabula rasa’ theory.

Locke established his theory of knowledge based on experience, which is composed of sensation and reflection. Early Buddhism accepts the sense-experience as a source of knowledge but it does not accept mind is passive in receiving sense data. Moreover, Locke has not provided a detailed account how sensation occurs. Early Buddhism has been more explanatory and perception is seen as mixture with feeling. The element of feeling before perception is crucial difference between early Buddhism and Locke.

While early Buddhism accepts sensation and reflection as sources of knowledge, it advocates them as contributory to suffering since they lead the individual into obsession with concepts. But for Locke they were reliable sources of knowledge. Through them, one can get to the ideas of essences of objects. As for Buddhism, they cause psychological obsession and consequently contributory to suffering. Moreover, Buddhism accepts variety of knowledge modes which can be achieved through mental cultivation.

The contents of knowledge, ideas in Lockean theory and the concept of ‘sanna’(ideas) in early Buddhism bear similarity as the material for thinking. For, complex ideas are result of putting two or more ideas together by reflection. Early Buddhism has not accepted that sort of process in mind. The variety of

sense-data determined by the fact through which sense the objects reaches into mind. In addition to knowledge come through sense-experience and reflection.

Through the analysis of knowledge, Locke concludes that there is a support from which ideas of object flow out. This support is called substance or substratum and it lays unchanged behind the changing phenomena. It is also unknowable. Early Buddhism does not accept any sort of unchanging substance lay behind the phenomenal objects and every object is a collection of elements and they are interdependent, so no any permanent substance.

Finally, it should be mentioned that early Buddhism accepts the fundamental character of Lockean empiricism, sense experience as the source of knowledge but it does not rely on it in the process of gaining the truth about suffering. Locke has paid attention to build a theory of knowledge whereas early Buddhism sees knowledge as a means to get rid of mental propensities like greed, hatred and ignorance and in turn get liberation from suffering. The analysis of the knowledge by Locke is concerned with the phenomenal world whereas early Buddhism analyses the psychological characteristics in its explanation concerning the human suffering. The conclusion we can reach is though early Buddhism has been characterized with empirical analysis even in the context of extra-sensory knowledge, it has differed from the Lockean empiricism following a different direction and also significantly varying method of mental cultivation and analysis of mental phenomena. So, the claim that early Buddhism is a form of empiricism becomes hardly acceptable.