


KNOWLEDGE, LANGUAGE AND TRUTH ACCORDING TO JOHN LOCKE

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ABSTRACT

This text consists of the result of a theoretical research on the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), whose objective is to deal with three categories of his thought, namely: knowledge, language and truth. Thus, the question it proposes to answer is the following: What is the relationship between knowledge, language and truth, according to Lockean thought? The justification of the present investigation is based on the need to clarify the links between these categories within the scope of his philosophy. His main work on epistemology (Essay on Human Understanding) will be the theoretical reference for the construction of the argumentation present in this research work.

Keywords: Knowledge. John Locke, Language. Truth.

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INTRODUCTION

John Locke (1632-1704), whose work is a reference for both epistemology in general and empiricism in particular, is an author who contributes to the reflection on the relationship between knowledge, language, and truth. Thus, the purpose of this text is to explain how this relationship is expressed in his thought, dealing, firstly, with the question of knowledge; then, the question of language; finally, the question of truth. His work entitled *Essay on Human Understanding* (hereinafter simply referred to as *Essay*) is the fundamental reference used to support the argumentation developed in this text.

THE QUESTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN JOHN LOCKE

Discuss the category 'knowledge', as well as about the categories that most closely concern it, it is one of the most important pieces to assemble the curious puzzle that constitutes Lockean thought; after all, any and all efforts undertaken primarily by Locke in his *Essay* converge to a single end: to deal with the problem of knowledge (which, in turn, converges with the educational problem). Therefore, it is necessary to present the definition from Locke's own pen of what he means by such:

It seems to me that *knowledge* is nothing other than the *perception of connection and agreement, or disagreement and opposition in any of our ideas*. That is all it consists of. Where this perception is, there is knowledge, and where it is not, we cannot reach knowledge, although we can imagine, conjecture or believe (LOCKE, 2005, p. 719 – emphasis added).

According to this quote, Locke, in addition to distinguishing knowledge from imagination, conjecture and belief, defines it starting with the category 'perception', which has already been addressed by the present study; then, the philosopher resorts to four other terms (connection or agreement, disagreement or opposition); treating the first two as synonyms with each other, as well as the last two. Although he does not concern himself with defining them, he, on the one hand, tries to explain what types they can be, and on the other hand, he tries to define such typology, thus constituting them into categories of his thought. The types of agreement or disagreement that you mention are four, namely:

'identity' or 'diversity'²; 'Relationship'³; 'coexistence' or 'necessary connection'⁴; 'Real existence'⁵.

In addition to suggesting his own definition of knowledge, Locke also endeavors to examine other meanings of this term. Thus, before exposing the degrees of knowledge defended by him, he dedicates himself to explaining other ways in which knowledge is conceived; They are: 'Current knowledge' and 'Habitual knowledge'. Current knowledge is the category by which Locke designates "the present perception that the spirit has of the agreement or disagreement of some of its ideas or of the relationship they have with each other" (LOCKE, 2005, p. 725), that is, it is the knowledge that consists of the perception that the mind has at a given current or present moment of its activity. In relation to habitual knowledge, it is held that this category expresses, according to Locke, that knowledge that occurs when:

A man knows a proposition when this proposition was once present in his mind, and he has evidently perceived the agreement or disagreement of the ideas of which it is composed, and has fixed it in his memory in such a way that, every time he reflects on this proposition, and always sees it from his true point of view, without doubt, nor hesitation, he gives it his assent, and is sure of the truth it contains. This is what can be called, in my opinion, *habitual knowledge* (LOCKE, 2005, p. 725 – emphasis added).

² Here is how Locke defines the categories 'identity' and 'diversity': "Let us speak of the first kind of agreement or disagreement, that is, *identity* or *diversity*. The first and main act of the spirit, when it has some feelings or ideas, is to perceive the ideas it has, and as much as it perceives them, to see what each one is, and, by this means, also to perceive its difference, and how one is not the other" (LOCKE, 2005, p. 720 – emphasis added).

³ The category 'relation' is thus conceptualized by Locke: "The second kind of agreement or disagreement which the mind perceives in any of its ideas may, I think, be called *relative*, and is nothing else than the perception of the relation between two ideas, whatever their kind, whether they be substances, modes, or any other" (LOCKE, 2005, p. 721 – emphasis added).

⁴ Regarding the category called 'coexistence' or 'necessary connection', Locke defines it in the following terms: The third kind of agreement or disagreement which is found in our ideas, and on which the perception of the mind is exercised, is the *coexistence* or *non-coexistence* in *the same object*, and this belongs particularly to substances. Thus, when we declare of gold that it is non-volatile, the knowledge we have of this truth boils down to this alone: that non-volatility, or the power of remaining in fire without being consumed, is an idea which is always found together with this particular species of yellow color, weight, fusibility, malleability, and solubility in *aqua regia*, that forms our complex idea that we designate by the word *gold* (LOCKE, 2005, p. 722 – emphasis added).

⁵ As for the category 'real existence', Locke elaborates on it as follows: The fourth and last kind is that of an *actual and real existence* that agrees with any idea. Within these four kinds of agreement or disagreement is, I suppose, contained all the knowledge we have or may have. For all the investigations we can make concerning any of our ideas, all that we know or can affirm concerning any of them, is that it is, or is not, the same as another; that it always coexists or does not coexist with any other idea, in the same object; that it maintains this or that relation to any other idea; or that it has a real existence outside the spirit (LOCKE, 2005, p. 722-723 – emphasis added).

Therefore, it is noted that habitual knowledge is the knowledge that consists of the record that the mind makes through the memorization of perception, that is, it is the knowledge that is opened to the mind through its mnemonic faculty, which leads to the conclusion that, without memory, it would not be possible to speak in such a meaning of knowledge. Locke further addresses two degrees of habitual knowledge, doing so in the following terms:

There are also, ordinarily speaking, two degrees of habitual knowledge. [§] One concerns those truths stored in the memory that, every time they come to the mind, it sees the relationship between these ideas. This is what is found in all truths of which we have an intuitive knowledge, where the ideas themselves discover, by an immediate vision, the agreement or disagreement that exists between them. [§] The second degree of habitual knowledge belongs to those truths of which the spirit, when it hurts once convinced, *retains the memory of conviction without proof* (LOCKE, 2005, p. 725-726 – emphasis added).

Continuing in his task of discussing knowledge, Locke exposes that it has three degrees, which are designated by him by the following categories: 'intuitive knowledge' (or, simply, 'intuition'), 'demonstrative knowledge' (or, simply, 'demonstration') and 'sensitive knowledge'.

In the case of intuitive knowledge, it must be stated that such a degree of knowledge occurs, according to Locke, in the following circumstances:

If we reflect on our way of thinking, we will see that sometimes the spirit perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas *immediately by themselves* without the intervention of another, which, I think, can be called *intuitive knowledge* (LOCKE, 2005, p. 729 – emphasis added).

Considering demonstrative knowledge, it is perceived that it is the degree of knowledge in which "the mind mediately perceives the connection or disconnection between two or more ideas, that is, when perceiving the agreement or disagreement between two or more ideas, there is the intermediary of an idea or even more than one" (BATISTA, 2003, p. 61). Such a degree of knowledge occurs due to the insufficiency of the mind to always perceive the agreement or disagreement between its ideas immediately. Therefore:

when the mind cannot put its ideas together to perceive its agreement or disagreement, by means of an immediate comparison, and so to speak by juxtaposing or applying them to each other, it is then obliged to make use of *the intervention of other ideas* (one or more, as the case may be) to discover the agreement or disagreement it seeks; and this is what we call *demonstration* (LOCKE, 2005, p. 730-731 – emphasis added).

The demonstration consists, therefore, in the degree of knowledge that requires, according to Locke, the category that he called 'proof'⁶, which, according to Yolton's opinion, acts in the following sphere:

Demonstrative knowledge for Locke involves the intuition of the agreement or disagreement of ideas. This intuition often needs to be mediated by other ideas that connect the ideas between which we are trying to discern the connection. Locke called these intervening ideas, the ideas that mediate between two other ideas, "proofs" (*Essay*, 4.2.3.7). The "proof" of the connection between one idea and another resides in some idea that is immediately related to each of the ideas under examination (YOLTON, 1996, p.216 – emphasis added).

Demonstrative knowledge, in addition to involving, above all, the category 'proof', it also involves another category, namely: the 'proposition'. According to Yolton's comment about this category used by Locke:

The joining or separation of signs makes a proposition. As for Locke there are two kinds of signs, ideas and words, there are correspondingly two kinds of proposition: mental and verbal. The first kind of proposition *"is nothing more than a simple consideration of ideas as they are in our minds, stripped of names"* (*Essay*, 4.5.3). Mental propositions are produced "in our understandings" without the use of words; the ideas which are the components of the mentals are *'gathered or separated'* by the mind which perceives or judges with respect to its agreement or disagreement" (4.5.5). It is difficult to work only with mental propositions, since we use words to speak or think about them. It's hard not to put words into our ideas. *We are able to form some ideas without words; for example, simple ideas such as white, black, sweet or bitter, triangle or circle; but in making propositions about complex ideas "we usually substitute the name for the idea"* (4.5.4). Despite these difficulties, Locke does not want to renounce the notion that mental propositions exist. To do so would not be far from denying the existence of ideas, at least complex ideas (YOLTON, 1996, p. 203 – emphasis added).

Considering the category 'proposition', it is necessary to refer to the category 'sign', since it is the signs that constitute the propositions, as can be seen from the quotation above. According to what can be inferred from Lockean thought, signs are, in principle, "the mental devices by which the mind establishes the link between ideas and things" (BATISTA, 2003, p. 62), that is, signs are secondary ideas, made to refer to the primary ideas of the objects that are in the mind, either via sensation, or via reflection, or via both simultaneously; for example, take the word 'horse'; this is a sign, because it refers to the idea that represents in the mind the object 'horse', so that in addition to designating those ideas that refer to previous ideas, in the mental sphere, the signs also constitute the basis

⁶ "These intermediate ideas that serve to show the agreement of two others, are called *proofs*; and when by means of these proofs one perceives distinctly and clearly the agreement or disagreement of ideas, this is called *demonstration*; this demonstration being *shown* to the understanding, the spirit sees that this is so" (LOCKE, 2005, p. 731 – emphasis added).

of the process of communication between human beings, a process through which human beings interact with each other (Cf. BATISTA, 2003, p. 63). Signs are, therefore, for the human being, "symbols of the ideas he has in the spirit, so that these can be, by this means, manifested to others, and the thoughts of men can be transmitted among them" (LOCKE, 2005, p. 541). However, it should be noted that, as Locke points out, not all signs serve to refer to one or more ideas, since there are signs (words) that are used by human beings and that designate no idea, but rather its absence:

Besides these names which signify ideas, there are other words which man uses, not to signify any idea, but the lack or absence of a certain simple or complex idea, or of all ideas together, as, for example, the words *nothing*, *ignorance*, *sterility*. It cannot be said that all these negative or deprivation words do not belong to or signify any idea, because, in that case, they would be meaningless sounds; but, referring to positive ideas, they designate their absence (LOCKE, 2005, p. 542 – emphasis added).

The Lockean approach to signs is a vitally important link in understanding not only other categories of his thought, but his thought as a whole. Regarding the categories that are most closely linked to the category *sign* They are: 'language' and 'truth' (which will be addressed in the next topics).

Considering sensitive knowledge, it is a category that expresses the degree of knowledge that consists in the perception of the particular existence of external objects, a perception that lies between the immediate certainty of intuition and probability⁷ mediate of

⁷ Here it is necessary to bring up the definition of another category presented by Locke, namely, the category 'probability':

Just as *to demonstrate* is to show the agreement or disagreement of two ideas, by the intervention of one or more proofs, which have a constant, immutable, and visible connection of one with the other, so *probability* is nothing else than the appearance of such agreement or disagreement, by the intervention of proofs, the connection of which is not constant and immutable, or, at least, it is not perceived to be so, but it is, or seems in a general way to be so, and it is enough to induce the mind to judge the proposition true or false, rather than the other way around (LOCKE, 2005, p. 909 – emphasis added).

In fact, the mind still has another perception of the particular existence of finite beings outside us, which, going beyond simple probability, but not perfectly attaining any of the preceding degrees of certainty, passes under the name of knowledge. [...] That is why, I think, we can add to the two previous kinds of knowledge also that which concerns the existence of external particular objects, by virtue of this perception and knowledge which we have of the entrance of the ideas that come to us from these objects, and thus we can admit these three degrees of knowledge, namely, the intuitive, the demonstrative, and the sensitive. in each of which there are different degrees and means of evidence and certainty (LOCKE, 2005, p. 738-739 – emphasis added).

the demonstration, being, therefore, different from both. When referring to sensitive knowledge, Locke does so in the following terms:

In the light of this quote, it can be seen that, with regard to the fact that it is closer to certainty (state in which perception becomes indubitable knowledge) and evidence (state in which perception becomes clear and distinct knowledge), sensitive knowledge is between intuitive knowledge and demonstrative knowledge, since sensitive knowledge, on the one hand, inferior to intuition (because it does not have the same levels of certainty and evidence as it), is, on the other hand, superior to demonstration (considering that it is at a level in which its certainty and evidence are superior to those that are present in demonstration). Thus, Locke establishes a hierarchy among the three degrees or modes of knowledge, according to their degree of more or less immediate certainty, a hierarchy that could be expressed in these terms: on the supreme level, intuition, whose certainty is incontestable, because it is immediately evident; at the intermediate level, sensitive knowledge, whose characteristic is that it is more uncertain than intuition and less doubtful than demonstration, no longer being as immediate as intuition nor lacking as much proof as demonstration; at the lowest level, demonstration, whose certainty is the least immediate in relation to the others (intuition and sensitive knowledge), since it is the type of knowledge that most needs proof, which makes it the knowledge that is not immediately evident (Cf. BATISTA, 2003, p. 65).

After addressing the types and degrees of knowledge, Locke tries to make it explicit that the act of knowing is something circumscribed to the realm of ideas, given that:

Considering knowledge, as stated above, in the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our ideas, it follows, first, that we can have knowledge only in so far as we have *ideas*. [§] Secondly, that we can only have knowledge as long as we have the *perception* of this agreement or disagreement. This perception is: 1. Either by *intuition*, that is, by the immediate comparison of two ideas; 2. or by *reason*, examining the agreement or disagreement of two ideas, by the intervention of some others; 3rd or by *sensation*, perceiving the existence of particular things. [§] Thirdly, it follows, that we cannot have an *intuitive knowledge* which extends to all our ideas and to all that we would like to know about them, because we cannot examine and perceive all the relations which they bear to each other by juxtaposition or immediate comparison of the one with the other. [...] [§] Fourthly, our *rational knowledge* cannot embrace the whole range of our ideas, because between two ideas which we wish to examine, we do not always find intermediate ideas which we can connect with each other by intuitive knowledge in all parts of the deduction; and wherever this is lacking, we also lack knowledge and demonstration. [§] Fifthly, as *sensitive knowledge* does not extend beyond the existence of the things which present themselves to our senses, it is much more limited than the two preceding ones. [§] Sixthly, from all this it follows that the extent of our knowledge falls not only short of the reality of things, but even of the extent of our own ideas (LOCKE, 2005, p. 741 – emphasis added).

Thus, it is not possible, on the one hand, to know beyond the ideas that one has, although it is possible, on the other hand, to know beyond the ideas that are in mind, since knowledge is not only conditioned by the perception of ideas, but, above all, consists precisely in this. Consequently, ideas are the beacons that determine the extent of knowledge, thus delimiting not only what is part of the sphere of knowledge, but also what is not part of it. Such a statement is indispensable to understand the distinction made by Locke between knowledge and opinion or between knowledge or faith/belief, categories (opinion and faith/belief) that will be addressed below. First, however, it is necessary to emphasize that, when it comes to exposing the extension of knowledge, Locke emphasizes that, although knowledge does not transcend the ideas that support it, this does not make its nature conform to the nature of ideas:

But since our knowledge is founded and used only on our ideas, does it not follow that it conforms to our ideas, and that where our ideas are clear and distinct, or obscure and confused, our knowledge will also be so? To this I answer: no, because as our knowledge consists in the perception of the agreement or disagreement that exists between two ideas, its clarity, or its obscurity, consists in the clarity, or obscurity, of this perception, and not in the clarity or obscurity of the ideas themselves (LOCKE, 2005, p. 740).

The considerations elaborated by Locke about knowledge converge on the fact that it is necessary to conceive it as something different from what he calls opinion and faith, which is why these should not be confused with it. As a consequence, Locke is forced to present his definitions of opinion and faith, which makes them epistemological categories and, in the case of *faith*, theological categories of his thought, which is why it will be treated in more detail when Lockean theological categories are reviewed.

The common denominator that Locke uses to address opinion and faith is the fact that both are excluded from both the realm of intuition and the realm of demonstration⁸; therefore they are not knowledge; with this, Locke intends to expel from philosophy any and all forms of dogmatism⁹. However, this is still not enough to specify its meaning, which requires, on Locke's part, a more exact explanation.

⁸ Locke states that: "These, that is, intuition and demonstration, are the two degrees of our *knowledge*. That which cannot refer to one of the two, regardless of the certainty with which it is received, is only *faith* or *opinion* but not knowledge, at least in relation to all general truths" (LOCKE, 2005, p. 738 – emphasis added).

⁹ This term is understood here in the light of one of his various conceptions that, according to Abbagnano, who, based on the Kantian conception, in the entry entitled DOGMATISM, writes that it "consists of venturing reason into research that is outside its purview, because it is beyond the sphere of possible experience" (ABBAGNANO, 2003, p. 293).

To set the 'opinion' category, Locke draws attention to the fact that, in the mind, the faculty of knowing (knowledge) and the faculty of judging (judgment) are not the same, since knowledge and judgment, also understood as the respective activities of these two mental faculties, are not identical, despite being interconnected by the rational faculty (reason). Thus, the difference between one and the other lies in this:

Knowledge (understood not as a result but as a mental activity) implies the perception of the agreement or disagreement between ideas. Judgment [i.e., judgment] corresponds to the act of relating ideas when the agreement or disagreement between them is not perceived by the understanding but simply supposed (TADIÉ, 2005, p. 157).

The separation between knowledge and judgment allows Locke to circumscribe opinion to the sphere of judgment, an activity that also consists of "thinking or supposing that two ideas agree or disagree, by the intervention of one or more, whose agreement or disagreement with them is not perceived but has been observed to be *frequent* and *habitual*" (LOCKE, 2005, p. 950 – emphasis added). Thus, judgment is a mental faculty that operates not at the level of certainty, but at the level of probability; consequently, opinion will also be conditioned by it. Therefore, opinion is the result of the operation of judgment about what is only probable or, as Locke himself said:

Probability is the likelihood that a thing is true; the term even indicates a proposition for which there are arguments or proofs that allow it to be accepted as true. The consideration which the mind gives to this kind of proposition is called *belief*, *assent*, or *opinion*, which is to admit or receive any proposition as true, in view of arguments or proofs which enable us to persuade us to receive it as true, without the certain knowledge that it is true. And therein lies the difference between *probability* and *certainty*, *faith* and *knowledge* (LOCKE, 2005, p. 910-911 – emphasis added).

THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE IN JOHN LOCKE

Language is conceived by Locke as the capacity that God conferred on the human being so that he could not only live in society¹⁰, but so that he could interact, through it, with his fellow human beings, either by expressing his own thoughts or by internalizing the thoughts of others¹¹. In addition, language also lends itself to instruction and knowledge of

¹⁰ This is how Locke expresses himself:

God, by creating man to be a sociable creature, not only inspired in him the desire and instilled in him the need to live with those of his species, but also gave him the faculty of speech, so that language would be the great instrument and the link of union of society. That is why man naturally has organs capable of forming the articulate sounds that we call words (LOCKE, 2005, p. 541).

¹¹ Said by the words of Locke:

the human being¹² – hence its indispensability in the educational process, since, since the gentleman must be educated to live in society, his education (which is done mainly through language) will prove its effectiveness if he knows how to live well (that is, virtuously) in the society in which he is inserted and, for his virtuous conduct to be recognized by his peers, it is indispensable that he knows how to make use of the various resources made available by language in order to express himself in the way that best suits a gentleman.

THE QUESTION OF TRUTH IN JOHN LOCKE

Regarding the category 'truth', one of the greatest and oldest philosophical inquiries, Locke defines it in the following terms:

It seems to me, then, that truth is nothing else, according to the proper signification of the word, than *the union or separation of signs, according as the things signified by them agree or disagree with each other*. The union or separation of signs here signified is what we call by another name: *proposition*; so that truth properly belongs only to propositions. There are two kinds of them, namely: mental and verbal; as there are also two types of signs that we commonly use, namely: ideas and words (LOCKE, 2005, p. 791 – emphasis added).

According to this quote, it can be seen that, for Locke, truth is not only an epistemological question of a metaphysical or ontological, ethical or moral nature, but a linguistic and semantic question, that is, it is a problem of terminological significance, which consists not in reality, nor in the representation that is made of it in the mind through ideas, but rather in the agreement or disagreement between the terms (signs) that represent them. Thus, to affirm that, for example, "a centaur is a mythical being made half man, half horse," is as true as to affirm that "the triangle is a three-sided figure," since in each of the propositions there is an agreement between their signs, which is made by the agreement they maintain among themselves. However, Locke admits that truth also has a metaphysical and moral character, which is proven by the following quote:

In addition to the truth taken in the strict sense mentioned above, there are other kinds of truths. One of these is moral truth, which consists in speaking of things according to the conviction of our mind, although the proposition we pronounce does

Although man possesses a great diversity of thoughts, to the point that others and he himself can profit and take advantage of them, they are nevertheless all closed in his spirit, invisible and hidden, and cannot appear by themselves. Just as we would not know how to enjoy the advantages or comforts of society without a communication of thoughts, in the same way it was necessary for man to invent some external and sensitive signs by which these invisible ideas, of which his thoughts are composed, could be manifested to others (LOCKE, 2005, p. 545).

¹² Cf. LOCKE, 2005, p. 544.

not agree with the reality of things. Another is the metaphysical truth, which is nothing more than the real existence of things, in accordance with the ideas to which we have attached their names (LOCKE, 2005, p. 797).

According to what can be inferred from the excerpt made here regarding the Lockena approach to the problem of truth, it can be seen that he treats it not only as a theoretical question, but mainly as a practical question, since he conceives it as the maximum criterion that must be adopted for the human being to guide both his thoughts and his actions. Thus, the value of truth for Locke lies in the fact that, through it, one arrives at the correct knowledge of reality, in the same way that it is through it that due moral action is performed; this epistemological and ethical status conferred on truth by Locke enables him to make it a very strong ally in the process of constructing and establishing his philosophy.

CONCLUSION

When dealing with the question of knowledge, John Locke is led to deal with the question of language, since perceiving the existence or not of a connection between ideas is something that is done through language and, when dealing with language, the philosopher refers to the question of truth, because uniting and separating signs to be used linguistically is imperative to reach knowledge. Thus, the relationship between knowledge, language and truth can be described as follows: knowledge is processed and expressed by language, which, in turn, requires knowledge as a matter of construction and communication; Truth is that which consists of the adequacy between knowledge and language, that is, it is that which translates the agreement between what is perceived and what is expressed.

The theory of knowledge proposed by John Locke is therefore linked to his theory of language, which, in turn, is associated with his theory of truth, so that these theories, although they can be treated separately, are, in fact, complementary, considering that they support each other, since knowledge offers content to language, which offers transmission to knowledge; Both are only validated by truth, which requires knowledge as a foundation and language as expression.

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