

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHILOSOPHY, VOL.  
III, NO 1, THE FUNCTIONAL VERSUS THE  
REPRESENTATIONAL THEORY OF  
KNOWLEDGE IN LOCKE'S ESSAY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649322428

The University of Chicago Contributions to Philosophy, Vol. III, No 1, The Functional Versus the Representational Theory of Knowledge in Locke's Essay by Addison Webster Moore

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VOL. III. No. 1

THE FUNCTIONAL VERSUS THE REPRESENTATIONAL THEORY  
OF KNOWLEDGE IN  
LOCKE'S ESSAY

BY

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CHICAGO

The University of Chicago Press

1902

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NOTE.

THESE comments on Locke's *Essay* are the outcome of work done in Professor Dewey's seminar in advanced logic. The general standpoint of the entire treatment was developed in that course. For interpretations and criticisms of the *Essay*, and for certain elaborations of the general point of view in the course of these criticisms, the writer is to be held responsible.

The treatment does not pretend to cover all the points of doctrine in the *Essay*. It aims to consider only some of the well-known passages, from the standpoint of a conception of the nature and function of knowledge somewhat different from those from which previous criticisms have been made.

In the references to the *Essay* the first arabic figure following the number of the book refers to the chapter, the second to the section.

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## I.

## INTRODUCTION.

THE history of thought shows that every period of great scientific advance, bringing a larger freedom to the practical side of life, has developed at the same time a deep and widespread skepticism in theories of knowledge. As Greek science had its Protagoras and Pyrrho, so modern science has its Hume and Comte. Thus an increasing sense of power in "the conduct of life" and a deepening sense of impotence in the attainment of knowledge have developed side by side. What is the meaning of this paradox?

It is frequently said that this state of affairs is due to the fact that in turning philosopher the "practical man" and the scientist attempt to carry over their standards into the realm of ultimate truth and reality, where they are inadequate, because applied beyond the limited sphere in which and for which they are created.<sup>1</sup> From this statement it appears that the paradox is due to a difference between the epistemologist's standard of ultimate truth and reality and the everyday working standard; and it is assumed that it is the latter that is inadequate. But the statement suggests also that, formally at any rate, the paradox could as well be stated from the opposite side; that is, as due to the fact that the epistemologist is unable to carry his standard of ultimate truth and reality into the realm of everyday life. In still other words, the paradox may be due, not to the carrying over, but to the failure to carry over, the standard of everyday life into our epistemology. Of course, our epistemology professes to make explicit the standard involved in everyday experience. But the very fact that this explanation issues in this paradox suggests that somewhere in the process this standard becomes so changed as to be no longer available for its original purpose.

Very briefly and generally sketched, the transition from the one standpoint to the other is somewhat as follows: The scientist in his laboratory or the workman at his bench is after a certain concrete result. A part of the entire process of reaching this result is thinking—making judgments. And he finds that these new judgments involve apparent rejection of former ones. But from the practical standpoint

<sup>1</sup> Cf. CAIRD, *Critical Philosophy of Kant*, Vol. 1, pp. 26 ff.



this matters not so long as the desired result is reached. At this point, however, the epistemologist appears with the suggestion that all this may be very well as a matter of "practical getting along," but where, in such a procedure, he asks, is there any place for truth — for certain and necessary knowledge? "Here you are making judgments one day only to reject them the next. What possible ground is there to expect that you will ever reach a judgment that will stand? What kind of confidence is to be placed in a knowledge process that is constantly rejecting its own products?" Up to this point, the practical man has not considered the problem of knowledge as such. He has been too busy getting results. In getting these results, to be sure, he has made judgments without number, but always as a *means of reaching the result*. So far, the only certainty he has cared for has been the certainty of attaining the result. But now, as an epistemologist, he is asked to abstract the judgment from its function as a part of the process of getting these results, and to pronounce upon its absolute certainty and necessity in itself considered. At the first encounter with the problem, Hume's final verdict, that the judgment has plenty of "practical," but no "absolute" validity, is likely to be the conclusion. But further reflection may make it possible to say: "It is true these judgments are all partial and imperfect; they wait upon a final absolute judgment for their completion; but, as *contributing factors* in this absolute judgment, they share in its absolute truth."

But in thus getting clear of Hume's skepticism on one side, the danger of running upon Spinoza's Identity Absolute, in which the distinction between truth and error vanishes, appears on the other. If all these judgments "share" in the absolute *truth*, in what does error consist? If it be said that error lies in the *partial* character of the judgment, and that every judgment is, therefore, partly true and partly false, we still must decide *in what* — that is, in what aspect or direction it is true and in what false. And it would seem that we must first have the whole before even this "partial" truth and falsity can be determined. If (as a matter of *practical necessity*, and using a *practical* standard) we *do* make a discrimination between truth and error, what sort of guarantee is there that, when the judgment takes its place in the whole "system of truth and reality," what has been determined as "true" will maintain its character as such?

Again, if this conception of "degrees of truth and reality" be taken purely *quantitatively*, it would seem that the judgment expressing

<sup>1</sup>Cf. BRADLEY, *Appearance and Reality*, chaps. xvi and xlv.

the higher degree of truth and reality must include those expressing the lower ; and, if it is a question of the amount only of truth and reality, the retention of judgments containing the lower degrees would seem to be useless. On the other hand, qualitative differences seem equally difficult to reconcile with the quantitatively complete reality. For here each quality must be a quality of the whole reality. Differences in quality must mean taking the whole reality from different standpoints, from different angles ; else we shall have as many different realities as there are qualities. But if the whole must appear in each quality, what can be meant by a judgment expressing a part of, or more or less of, reality ? How, for example, shall the quantitative scale be applied to such a pair of judgments as, "The apple is red," "The apple is sweet" ? or, "The apple is red," and "Honesty is the best policy" ? Here it may be said that it is precisely the category of quality that makes it possible for the whole to appear in the part—that in abstract quantity the whole cannot appear in the part, but the part can have the *quality* of the whole, and the quality of the whole can be expressed in the part. But, even so, if the whole does thus express itself in the quality, why should there be any complaint of incompleteness ?

In terms of the relativity of knowledge the problem is : To what is knowledge relative ? If we answer that it is relative to more knowledge, to an assumed whole of knowledge, then again we must ask : Whence comes error, and how can we decide on the character of any particular judgment unless we have this whole ? If, on the other hand, we say that the whole of knowledge—*i. e.*, knowledge as such—is relative, then the question, "To *what* is it relative ?" seems pertinent.

Returning once more to the point where the "plain man" and scientist begin epistemologizing, may not the root of the difficulty lie in the fact that in "turning epistemologist" they "turn" too much, and so get the shop and laboratory completely behind their backs ? Do not many of the "metaphysical puzzles," a few of which are suggested above, grow out of the abstraction of the judgment from its function in the laboratory of the scientist and in the larger laboratory of life ? In the latter it does yield an ever-increasing sense of power, security, and certainty ; as abstracted it appears untrustworthy. Returning to the shop and laboratory with the result of our examination of the judgment as a thing or product apart from its function, we say : "The certainty here is, after all, merely practical. Judgments, to be sure, are quite useful, indeed necessary. But this is quite a different matter

from their validity as expressions of ultimate truth and reality." Let it be noted, again, that it is as a partial expression of an assumed whole of truth and reality that the judgment is found wanting. Its value, its validity as a function in the concrete conduct of life, is not questioned.

To sum up thus far: The paradox of increasing practical control and decreasing theoretical certainty suggests that there must be a difference between the standard of knowledge used in the "conduct of life," and the standard used in philosophy. Taking the judgment as the unit of knowledge, we have seen that in the shop and laboratory it is used as a means of getting results valuable in terms of the whole concrete life-process. In philosophy, the realm of decreasing certainty, the judgment is abstracted from this concrete activity. Thus deprived of its native source of value and validity, a basis of valuation is sought for it in some system of absolute reality of which our judgments constitute a progressive revelation. But such a basis appears to offer no criterion for a distinction between truth and error in any particular judgment, and no ground for even a "relative" certainty. The significance of this would seem to be that philosophy is to learn that it is not entitled to a special view of its own of knowledge; that it must take knowledge as it finds it; that it must interpret it on its native heath — the field of the struggles, of the victories and defeats, of concrete living.