

**THE FUNCTIONAL VERSUS THE
REPRESENTATIONAL THEORIES
OF KNOWLEDGE IN LOCKE'S
ESSAY: A DISSERTATION, VO. III,
NO. I, PP. 5-66**

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHILOSOPHY

Vol. III. No. 1

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

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTIES OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOLS OF ARTS, LITERATURE, AND
SCIENCE, IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

(Department of Philosophy)

BY

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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.² 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

² Cf. Cassirer, *Critical Philosophy of Kant*, Vol. I, 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

¹Cf. BRADLEY, *Appearance and Reality*, chaps. xvi and xlv.