

# Contextualizing the Essentials of John Locke's Natural Philosophy

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**Abstract:** This paper dwells on Locke's early contributions in the domain of natural philosophy, laying more emphasis on how nature operates as perceived through human observation. It equally focuses on specific stages, notably between the years 1658 to 1664, marked by exhaustive medical studies. These six years interval and more gave Locke the opportunity to meet some key figures and to be acquainted with significant personalities such as Robert Boyle, Thomas Sydenham, and Rene Descartes, who contributed remarkably in influencing Locke's thoughts on natural philosophy and medicine by providing him the possibility of writing semi essays on aspects like diseases, respiration, education, and many others in the subsequent years. The rationale revealed in this paper comprises a re-visitation, reconstruction, and scrutinizing Locke's earlier neglected works constituting the basis of natural philosophy, which have not yet been well investigated, not well interpreted, undigested, and improperly understood.

**Keywords:** Boyle, Corpuscular Theory, Human Understanding, Locke, Natural Philosophy, Qualities, Scholastics

## I. INTRODUCTION

From Locke's era till present day, several interpretations, opinions, misunderstandings, and comments have emerged among readers, scholars, commentators and politicians geared at clearly understanding Locke's ideas, intentions and impacts on the society. One of such difficulties stems from the exploration of one of Locke's most monumental works titled *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, comprising four voluminous books and many hundred pages. Given the cumbersome nature of the *Essay* embodying lengthy pages, arguments, beliefs, opinions, and assertions are bound to arise as a means to uncover the obscurity of Lockean views so as to transmit Locke's original ideas properly. However, the *Essay* is significant because of its insightful, intriguing, disputable, instructive, and prescriptive goals. Notwithstanding, despite these credible features of the *Essay* that took at least nineteen years to be documented, it has still been experiencing thorough and numerous revisions and adjustments, as several questions are constantly posed, arguments advanced in almost all the chapters which resulted to Locke's acknowledgement of the shortcomings that are evident from his appeal to "Epistle to the Reader". This Epistle comprises part of his *Essay* in which he admits that the book was "written by incoherent parcels and after long intervals of neglect, resumed again, as my humor or occasions permitted" (Locke, 1975: p. 7), adding that, "but to confess the truth, I am now too lazy, or too busy to make it shorter" (p. 8).

Moreover, some of the aspects of the *Essay* that pose more problems include the parts that are inconsistent, contradictory, and equivocal. For instance, concerning a proper scrutiny of Locke's impressions about natural philosophy, he initially adopted a corpuscular ground, that is, he firmly believed that, natural occurrences are better understood and easily interpreted only through mechanical activities as manifested by various operations through mobility and effect. To buttress this stance, Locke proceeds by distinguishing between the primary and secondary qualities. Surprisingly, he advanced a rather contrary conception later, by

constantly advocating that humans do not possess any knowledge about the real form of nature, since such knowledge, to him, is beyond human understanding as noted from the unpredictability and fallibility of mankind. However, worth taking cognizance of is that, Locke's rationale here was to show the extent to which man can know the real nature of things and the precise prescribed approach to be adopted.

So, to Locke, individual knowledge is limited only at the level of observable features of objects or things (bodies) as derived from investigations about nature, coupled with a full knowledge about them as portrayed by natural histories. The inconsistencies of Locke's claims cannot be overemphasized since he clearly admitted that one does not have knowledge about natural processes on one hand, but still emphatically posits that processes manifest through such or such particular pattern. How does he know about the nature of processes when he earlier claimed that knowing about natural processes is incomprehensible, impossible, and beyond human capacities?

## **II. The Indispensability of Locke's Acquaintance with Boyle**

Locke's meeting and interaction with Boyle (1660; 1661; 1663; 1666, 1772), paved a smooth path for a better grip of his ideas on natural philosophy since it provided many responses to several inconsistencies, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations of Locke's earlier assertions. This indispensable acquaintance dated since 1660 when Boyle was a writer, scientist, and staunch proponent of Corpuscular theory and who seldom succeeded in defending his ideas in some of his works, most especially in his text titled *The Origin of Forms and Qualities, according to the Corpuscular Philosophy* (1666). Both Locke and Boyle were residents in the same city of Oxford as Locke was serving as a teacher. It is worth pointing out that, numerous sections of Boyle's works addressing natural philosophical concerns also appear in Locke's works years later. The similarity in content inculcates in most readers and commentators the belief that Boyle's views and relationship with Locke greatly influenced Lockean conceptions in the *Essay* remarkably. As a result, Boyle has always been referred to as the main foundation and bedrock of Locke's natural philosophy.

Similarly, thinkers such as Richard Aaron (1965), from one of his works published in 1937, signaled the need to first of all consult Boyle's *The Origin of Forms and Qualities* before understanding Locke's views on natural philosophy better when he admits that "Boyle published his work when the co-operation between him and Locke was at its peak" (p. 122), coupled with the confirmation that, 1666 was the exact year that co-operation between the two men was closest (p. 13). In the same vein, commentators like Peter Alexander (1977) advances more significance derived from Locke's acquaintance with Boyle by insisting that their relationship constituted a primordial importance in unveiling Locke's natural philosophy. To support this assertion, a typical example is the distinction of primary and secondary qualities as he adds "My main thesis is that Locke was not attempting to make the primary/secondary quality distinction, but was accepting it, ready made from Boyle as an essential part of the corpuscular hypothesis" (Alexander, 1977: pp. 62-76). This affirmation highlights the common doctrinal links that characterize both Locke and Boyle on natural philosophy.

Following this perspective, recent scholars including Edwin McCann (1994) in his text *Cambridge Companion to Locke* (1994), prescribes Boyle's work as a guide to a better understanding of Locke's ideas on primary and secondary qualities evident in his declaration "In respect of the content of the distinction and the basis for drawing it, Locke is simply following Boyle" (1832: p. 60). However, the varied confirmations advanced so far as a portrayal of Locke's indebtedness to Boyle on natural philosophy has been a cause for concern for many decades.

## **III. Exploring and Contextualizing Diverse Versions of Locke's Responses**

Based on numerous varying interpretative contributions from readers, scholars, and commentators of Locke, more clarifications become immanent and obligatory in order to render Lockean ideas more readable, comprehensible, and insightful. On one hand, some thinkers hold the view according to which, based on the corpuscular theory, Locke simply meant that people can acquire knowledge of nature's causes, as well as revealing the claim that misinterpretations, mistakes, and misunderstandings from readers are elements that qualify Locke as inconsistent, incomprehensible, and above all contradictory to a greater degree. On another

hand, other commentators adopt a skeptical approach by accusing Boyle's works for being accountable for Locke's determination to face the corpuscular theory. In simpler terms, they firmly think that, Locke did not scrutinize Boyle's ideas thoroughly before accepting them (Nde, 2022: p. 30). Nevertheless, as a philosopher, Locke laid more emphasis on the belief that man cannot have knowledge of nature, but in an attempt to tackle various scientific theories, Locke usually appeals to his mentor's (Boyle) work as final solution.

Although these standpoints appear caricatured, they are necessary catalysts in portraying the extent to which a majority of Lockean scholarship is centered in relation to his natural philosophy. Historically, it is clear that Locke's own understanding and progress of natural philosophy, following this conception, originated from, and was enormously influenced by Boyle. Notwithstanding, this premise greatly depends on the strengths for or against the claim since existing textual references are enumerated through a comparison of Boyle's work that dates from 1666 as well as Lockean written works from 1689.

#### **IV. Critiquing Outdated Ideas and Scrutinizing Locke's Drafts**

Despite Locke's interest in pursuing medicine which took most of his earlier life, he developed a novel interest focused on human understanding. In his "Epistle to the Reader" of his *Essay*, he demonstrates the origin of this new interest characteristically. To Locke, most of his friends focused on discussions of outdated and remote issues which counteract those based on the ability of the human faculties, discovering themselves in face of difficulties emanating from every direction (p. 7). To buttress this self-realization, Locke writes: "It came into my thoughts that we took a wrong course; and that, before we set ourselves upon Enquiries of that nature, it was necessary to examine our own abilities, and see, what Objects our Understandings were, or were not fitted to deal with. This I proposed to the company, who all readily assented; and thereupon it was agreed, that this should be our first Enquiry. Some hasty and undigested thoughts, on a subject I had never before considered, which I set down against our next meeting gave the first entrance into this Discourse" (Locke, 1975: p. 7).

Nonetheless, Locke initially believed that after his self-consciousness, he would be ready to quickly resolve all knowledge related problems through his bulky *Essay*, but the more he penetrated deeper, the more his hopes and desire to know multiplied painstakingly as he admits "I thought all I should have to say on this matter, would have been contained in one sheet of paper; but the farther I went, the larger prospect I had" (pp. 7-8). Concerning the Drafts comprising A and B (1671) and Draft C (1685), marked the last stages of completion of his *Essay*. The first Draft was considered more renowned and most interesting piece due to its richness in both form and content, as well as for its similarities to other prior works of natural philosophical tradition. Also, the Drafts in general, constitute the first reference sources that evoked Lockean thought on the matter at stake before he embarked on the writing of other parts of his text.

Systematically, the first and second sections address ideas, their sources, and their interrelatedness that results to substances. Sections three through twenty six, treat the connections among ideas in varied ways, meanwhile sections twenty seven to thirty one comprise a summary of things that are knowable as certain, coupled with the critique of the scholastic mode of deriving knowledge and truth about the natural world. Worth stating is the idea that, sections thirty two to forty two which handle beliefs, do not contribute to knowledge and can be classified as "opinion and probability". Finally, sections forty three to forty five involve a reaction to various objections advanced in previous arguments, precisely those concerned with grounding innate ideas.

Draft A is not left out of critique, since it is considered as hasty and undigested, stemming from earliest notes. This discredit of Draft A results from the quick impression Locke had as if the *Essay* would have left very little debates and resolved crucial issues within a short range. This hastiness limited Locke's views as many crucial and pertinent issues were left unaddressed and unresolved wholly. Again, the availability of Memoranda on the Drafts shows Locke's dissatisfaction on the Drafts which could be understood as a reason for abandoning Draft A to embark on Draft B. The in exhaustiveness hampered a proper digestion of the Drafts. Lastly, satisfaction could be derived from the texts only after engulfing the final copy of the *Essay*, so doing, the readers might miss the solid foundations of Lockean thoughts which appear mostly in his earliest writings.

## V. On Locke's Critique of the Scholastic Method

After critically examining the Scholastic approach that characterizes learning, Locke spent much time downgrading and watering down their method since to him, it was synonymous to the Aristotelian culture. Following his experiences while in Oxford in which he participated in disputations, causing him to write his *Essays on the Law of Nature* and *Respirationis Usus*, as obligated by the University, disputation did not in any way win his heart as a method of enquiry since he believes that, disputes contribute more in inculcating doubts than any other strategy does as he asserts "...to arise rather more doubts than any clear determination of the point" (Locke, 1954: p. 33). In addition to the setbacks of disputes, Locke adds the following "Men speaking the proper language of their country that is according to the grammar or rules of that language do yet speak gibberish to one another...their words which are but signs stand for not being determined amongst them, and so they often fall into endless and often senseless disputes. Which I cannot but say is much improved by the learned arts of disputing which generally serve more than vulgar conversation to perplex and make undetermined and doubtful the signification of words which hath hitherto passed under the laudable name, though it be a very useless skill of subtlety and acuteness" (Locke, 1990: Drafts A, 4, p. 14).

It is vital to state that, the above cited critique lays more emphasis on those elaborated in 1668 and 1669. The *raison d'être* focused on the clarification of words, since disputes are worthless. Sections twenty seven and twenty eight of Draft A examines the functions of self-evident maxims, considered as the basis of all demonstration as well as devalues the role of disputes in the quest for knowledge and truth. From this premise, principles like "what is, is and it is impossible for the same to be and not be", are regarded as typical illustrations of "the great standards and measures of truth and falsehood" (p. 44), though the scholastics still open them for disputation. Too, the scholastics intention was mostly concerned with the manipulation of words and ideas in order to present a very narrow picture about the world since most people still disbelieve in their senses.

Lastly, the scholastics were reluctant to embrace new ideas or adopt innovations that were not in accordance with their traditional teachings. The rationale for relying solely on their teachings are considered by Locke as tantamount to being ashamed and disgraced if they confess to their students taught thirty years ago that, all what they taught them were erroneous and fallacious and that, the act of trading their ignorance at high prices using hard words, could not be an easy bone of contention. As response to this burden, Locke prescribes "Experience" as the best source of knowledge because "it is the clearest and most certain knowledge that mankind can possibly have of things existing. Without him is but experience, which is nothing else, but the experience and the observation of his senses about particular objects" (Locke, 1990: pp. 62-63).

## VI. Discussion and Recommendations

It is worth taking cognizance of the fact that, the over twenty years ranging between 1666-1689 impacted the interpretations of Locke's natural philosophy considerably. The reason here is because readers and scholars pay very little or no attention to the materials that Locke wrote before the publication of his renowned *Essay*. Surprisingly, Locke wrote and left numerous Tracts, notebooks, and manuscripts which scholars could consult in order to grasp and ensure correct interpretations of his ideas, especially those related to his natural philosophy as Nde declares (2020: p. 31). For instance, three Drafts of Locke's *Essay* exist, two discovered from 1671 and the other centered on human understanding. More so, at different intervals, Locke documented several essays addressing his natural philosophical concerns. Similarly, there exist a voluminous collection of books in which Locke provided thousands of notes related to natural philosophy. Worth underscoring here is that, most of the notes on this subject matter were written from the 1660s, a period when the acquaintance and collaboration with Boyle was at its highest level. Unfortunately, very little attention and investigation have been portrayed so far, concerning these very early manuscripts and notes left by Locke.

Emphatically, very limited attention has been paid to Locke's Drafts of the *Essay*. However, many scholars and readers of Locke's *Essay* propound that, since the *Essay* was written after Locke's links with Boyle, it follows that Locke's work was merely an evolution of Boyle's and not an expansion as evident from his former position and in his future works (Nde, 2021: pp. 52-57). Furthermore, given the enormous parts of

Lockean thoughts on natural philosophy that are left uninvestigated and inadequately explored, it is therefore incumbent to properly identify and reveal the similarities and dissimilarities of the *Essay* alongside Boyle's work. By revisiting, reevaluating, and examining Locke's whole works, mistakes committed by commentators would be redressed accordingly. Lastly, adopting the historical context analysis method on all of Locke's earliest works, merged with the original words and quotes from Locke himself would obviously ease and bring positive changes to present day differing opinions.

## VII. CONCLUSION

As concluding remarks, between the years 1632-1671, Boyle's work did not influence Locke either directly or otherwise. But this does not in any manner negate the fact that within this period, Locke's stance especially in 1671, was not that of corpuscular nature. Draft B ended with the interconnection of Locke and Boyle on the theory which extends to the final wordings of *LockeanEssay*. Nevertheless, no clear proofs exist showing that Locke's philosophical ideas were not inherited from Boyle (Nde, 2020: pp. 361-370). Moreover, during the publication of Boyle's *The Origin of Forms and Qualities* in 1666, Locke was still a fervent mechanist. Worth pointing out here is the fact that, Locke's *RespirationisUsus* advanced contrary claims to Boyle's already documented views as they focus more on biological aspects. Again, Locke was equally closely connected to Helmontianism and mechanism, thereby dismissing the claim of all those who believed that 1666 was the most apt period in which the co-operation between Locke and Boyle was closest (p. 13). Finally, due to the absence of concrete proofs showing Lockean and Boylean links on natural philosophy, Aaron Richard concludes as follows: "Locke borrowed the term from Boyle when the co-operation between him and Locke was at its height, they might very well have been suggested by Locke himself or have been already in use in the scientific circles at Oxford to which both Locke and Boyle belonged. The whole theory might have been worked out in conjunction by Boyle, Locke, and others" (Aaron, 1965: pp. 122-123).

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