



JOHN LOCKE'S CRITICS OF METAPHYSICS AS A PATH TO CAROL ROVANE'S QUEST FOR REVISIONARY METAPHYSICS: A NEED FOR *META-EPISTEMIC* CONSOLIDATION

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ABSTRACT

The unique focus of this paper is to overcome the controversies between metaphysics and epistemology as raised in the philosophy of John Locke a modern empirist and Carol Rovane a contemporary metaphysician. The aim is to propose a need for *meta-epistemic* consolidation which will insist on a combine approach of metaphysical theories and epistemology that will ensure the realization of an authentic human knowledge. We shall argue that Locke attitude of valorizing the epistemological analysis base on the content of experience without taking into consideration the metaphysical basis of reality is insufficient. In addition, we shall equally go beyond Rovane's value of metaphysics which to her remains a fundamental science since it deals with intuitive cognizing consciousness as oppose to common experiences that was being admitted by Locke her predecessor.

KeyWords:

Experience, Epistemology, Innate Ideas Metaphysics, Revisionary Metaphysics, Multimundialism, Unimundialism

INTRODUCTION

As earlier mentioned by Stephen Priest, philosophy is all about philosophical problems and nothing else. These problem lies in the basement of common sense and intellectual enquiry. Among these philosophical problems, is the problem of the origin of human knowledge that constituted the base of philosophical enquiries for years. This epistemological quest engendered controversial views as seen where others think that knowledge is innate founded on metaphysics as opposed to those who held that, it is acquired based on sensory experience. This then inspired the necessity for this topic which centered on John Locke's critics of metaphysics and Rovane's quest for revisionary metaphysics. The focus of this topic is to show that metaphysics constitute an obstacle to knowledge as stated clearly in *An Essay concerning human understanding* of John Locke in opposition to Carol Rovane a contemporary metaphysician. John Locke an English philosopher of modernity was born in a well-to-do family in 1632 in Wrington a small village in southwestern England. He was among the most famous philosophers and political theorists of the 17th century often regarded as the founder of British Empiricism. Carol Rovane (Carol Anne), was born in 1955, and is from *Massachusetts*. Much is said about her especially in the academic research. Rovane is said to have earned her PhD in philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1983. Currently, she is a professor of philosophy in the Philosophy Department University of Columbia. Columbia University department of Philosophy is ranked 9th in the United States and 8th in the English speaking world in the 2018 ranking of philosophy. She specializes in the topics of *Ethics, Metaphysics, and Philosophy of Language and Mind*. Carol Rovane argued against the epistemological position defended by John

Locke. According to her, there is a necessity to reframe a question of metaphysics.¹ This work seeks to examine the controversial view that surrounds the question of metaphysics and epistemology in reference to John Locke and Carol Rovane. That is, it seeks to know why John Locke valorizes the epistemological analysis based on the content of experience there by criticizing metaphysics; while Rovane on her part prefers to valorize metaphysics. The question that guides our reflection goes thus: what therefore constitute the bases and specificities of Locke and Rovane's controversies between metaphysics and epistemology? Better still in valorizing metaphysics (Rovane) at the detriment of experience that constitute the content of epistemological analysis defended by Locke in opposition to metaphysics, will their conceptions not lead us to a reductionist perspective of reality? These interrogations permit us to argue beyond Locke and Rovane there by proposing an alternative perspective that will help to overcome the controversies that surround their thoughts. We then intend to defend the necessity for the adoption of a *Meta-Epistemic* stand. Such a position will lead us to the concept of Meta-Epistemology which deals with questions that concern the nature of authentic reality (*Meta-Epistemic* Facts). Such propositions will help to overcome three fundamental aspects which are controversies between realism and anti-realism, the purpose of epistemic language and the formulation of theories about epistemic concepts that will help to overcome the crisis of internalism. Our proposition is based on the necessity to ensure a *Meta-Epistemic* consolidation that will help to overcome the classical controversies between epistemology and metaphysics.

I. LOCKE CRITICS OF METAPHYSICS AS AN OBSTACLE TO KNOWLEDGE

The beginning of Locke's epistemology is the rejection of the rationalist doctrine that men are born with innate ideas which serves as the foundation of knowledge. This point seeks to show the basis of John Locke's critics of metaphysics through his critics of innate ideas. This is because the aim of John Locke was to combat all forms of dogmatism. In order to establish human knowledge based on experience; firstly Locke had to reject the rationalist 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 at birth before we come to this world. Plato, Descartes and Leibniz were proponents of this theory. Following the Platonic view, they emphasized on inborn truths as the only truths and they denied the validity of experience. These innate truths were defended based on the principle of universal assent according to which innate principles are universally assented to by every mankind. Locke pointed out that there are no innate principles with which every human being agrees. He begins by rejecting the speculative innate ideas also known as the theoretical innate ideas or logical and metaphysical. He analyzes these critics in book one, chapter two of his *Essay concerning human understanding*. In this chapter, the author engaged in the project of combating metaphysical theories. He affirms that; I shall in the following part of this discourse [show] how men, barely by the use of their natural faculties, may attain to all knowledge they have without the help of innate principles². Locke embarked here in what Rudolf Carnap terms as epistemological analysis which consist in the "analysis of the contents of experiences, more precisely the analysis of the theoretical content of experiences. We are concerned only with the theoretical content of the experience, that is, with the possible knowledge that is contained in the experience"³.

For instance, as he remarked that; it is evident, that all children and idiots have not the least apprehension or thought of them...⁴. That is they both have minds but do not have assent to these innate truths and this is being considered as argument from transparency. It was for this reason that Locke held that; A child knows not that three and four are equal to seven until he comes to be able to count to seven, and got the name and the idea of equality...[this will make him] to perceive the truth of those propositions⁵. It is through excess experience that the child will come to realize afterward the truth of certain propositions for instance that it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be which is the logical principle of non-contradiction as well as the truth that what is, is which the principle of identity. Locke points out that; it is a contradiction to say, that there are truths imprinted on the soul, which it perceives or understands not⁶. He equally thinks that; no proposition can be said to be in the mind which it never yet knew, which it has never yet conscious of⁷. Locke wonders how can they be innate, if they are not notions naturally imprinted and how can they be unknown if they are notions imprinted. This is because it seems to Locke contradictory to say that there are truths imprinted on the human soul which at the same time could not be known to all. This justifies why he thinks that; "To imprint anything on the mind without the mind perceiving it seems to me hardly intelligible. if so, why is it that children and idiots have soul, have minds but are not capable to assent to those impressions...to say that a notion is imprinted on the mind and yet at the same time to say that the mind is ignorant of it, and never yet took notice of it is to make this impression nothing."⁸

John Locke after rejecting innate ideas which to him, is like an obstacle to knowledge, wanted to establish a fundamental theory of human ideas which will serve as a true source of knowledge void of all metaphysical system or of all cognizing consciousness. This is because, there often as earlier indicated, an established opinion amongst men that ideas are already innate or inborn in us.

¹ Carol Rovane, *Forward-looking Collective Responsibility: A Metaphysical Reframing of the Issue*, in *Mid-West Studies in Philosophy*, Vol 38, 2014, pp.12-25.

² John Locke, *An essay concerning human understanding*, twenty-sixth Edition, London, printed for Thomas Tegg 1828, book one, chapter two, p.8-9.

³ Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World*, USA, University of California Press, 1968, p.308.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, P.14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

But the question posed by the author here is how do we come to the disposition of ideas? Or how do ideas come in to the mind? In an attempt to answer this question, Locke held that; we need to appeal to every one's own observation and experience...in that, all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derived itself⁹. All ideas to Locke therefore come from experience which could either be the experience of sensation and reflection since the human mind as supposed by him is like; white paper void of all characters without any ideas¹⁰. This phrase expresses Locke's conception of the mind as a tabular rasa which designates the original state of the mind which from birth contains no idea. All the materials of knowledge to Locke come from experience which is the ultimate foundation and limit of all our knowledge. Our observation employs either the external sensible objects or the internal operations of the mind perceived and reflected on by ourselves. Our observation also supplies our understanding with all the materials of thinking. It is through our senses that the distinct perceptions or diverse sensible objects do enter our mind. Sensation therefore is the great source of all the ideas we have. This was under the inspirations of British philosophers like Roger Bacon as well as Francis Bacon, who equally advocated that observation and experience are the door to knowledge and the criterion of truth. Supported by later thinkers like A. J. Ayer who in relation to this then affirms that; the view of philosophy which we have adopted may, I think, fairly be described as a form of empiricism. For it is characteristic of an empiricist to eschew metaphysics, on the ground that every factual proposition must refer to sense-experience¹¹. The above quotation still support Locke claims that the base of true knowledge or science is experience.

Generally, the project of John Locke was to distinguish metaphysics and epistemology in view of valorizing epistemology. This is the reasons why Carol Rovane develops more interest in defending and ensuring the reform of metaphysics as opposed to epistemology. This will better be illustrated through her conception of revisionary metaphysics which seeks to reconsider the question of metaphysics. This is because she thinks that "when philosophers argue against a metaphysical doctrine, they do not usually rest with the charge of mere falsity. They tend to register the much more radical charge of incoherence."¹² Rovane in this regard want to prove the values of metaphysics against those philosophers who develops a bias attitude toward metaphysics for instance like the case of John Locke her major influence. This will better be illustrated in the subsection that follows.

II. NECESSITY FOR THE VALUE OF METAPHYSICS THROUGH ROVANE'S QUEST FOR A REVISIONARY METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics has been a field of study that has cut up the minds of many thinkers right from the antiquity till the contemporary period with Carol Rovane. The quest for metaphysics is what has preoccupied the minds of thinkers as they discuss it from different levels. Our point of focus as earlier mentioned is based with two outstanding philosophers; John Locke who levies some critics about metaphysics and a contemporary defender of metaphysics like Carol Rovane. However one can start to see that metaphysics is an academic tool for developing the minds of learners cultivating in them the spirit of reflection. This view confirms the affirmation of Emile Meyerson when he says: "thinking metaphysically is as natural as breathing."¹³ From the above remark, thinking can be credited to be more natural than breath reason being that breath is the common gift living things share while thinking is something that only humans have.

Locke in his critics of metaphysics has based his arguments on personal identity; and it's for this reason Rovane sees a need for revisionary metaphysics. Rovane in one of her works *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism* define metaphysics as: "any inquiry into the most general aspects of what there is, or how things are, or the nature of the things that are."¹⁴ Also, Rovane remark that: "metaphysics consists in the systematic study of the most fundamental logical and modal properties of things. And these fundamental properties leave the specific nature of persons almost completely undetermined."¹⁵ This is to say that there have been hopes that purely metaphysical considerations might directly resolve disputes about personal identity by showing one side or the other as being incoherent. To Rovane, philosophers will always begin by making metaphysical assumptions about the nature of persons and then go on to draw appropriate conclusions. Rovane begin her arguments with an ethical assumption about the nature of persons which serves as a critical and defining starting point for further metaphysical investigation into the kind of "person." In this light, Carol Rovane after identifying the kind of person equally sees a need of identifying the metaphysical properties that distinguish its members.

The question of personal identity being one of the most central and most contested exciting in philosophy, Locke's psychological and bodily criteria have vied with one another in conflicting accounts of personal identity. To Rovane, as such conflicts consist to exist; the debate is irresolvable since both camps hold coherent positions. For this reason, any resolution to the debate is bound to be a revisionary theory of personal identity looking first at the nature of persons. Moreover, Rovane levy a premise about the distinctive ethical nature of persons to which other ethical doctrines follow. With this, she derives two startling metaphysical possibilities which hold: there could be group persons composed of many human beings and multiple persons within a single human being. However, the Rovanean conclusion supports Locke's distinction between persons and human beings but on new grounds. John Locke had argued about personal identity that a person is a certain kind of agent, namely, an agent who is both rational and self conscious while for Rovane, it is a substantive claim about the nature of persons that animalist can perfectly well accept.

Moreso, Rovane maintains that Locke did not present his thought experiments about the prince and the cobbler as a sole ground for his analysis of personal identity in term of consciousness alone. But Rovane in her revisionary metaphysics thinks that thought

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, first edition, 11 Fouberts place London, July 1935, p.37.

¹² Carol Rovane, *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism*, p.1.

¹³ Emile Meyerson, *De l'explication dans les sciences*, Paris, 1927, p.20.

¹⁴ Carol Rovane, *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2013, p.4.

¹⁵ Carol Rovane, *The Bounds of Agency: An Essay in Revolutionary Metaphysics* Princeton University Press, 1987, p.77.

experiment plays a bigger role in recent attempts to carry out the neo-Lockean project of providing a purely psychological analysis of personal identity. Furthermore, Rovane thinks that inconstancy of intuition in response to the Lockean thought experiments signifies the philosophical study of personal identity in that there are basic conflicts in our commonsense beliefs about personal identity. Equally, there is a need for a revision to overcome such a conflict. Nevertheless, if there are any conflicts in our commonsense outlooks then any tenable view of personal identity need to revise some aspects of our commonsense. Rovane in her revisionary proposal remark:

we cannot resolve the philosophical dispute about personal identity, between the proponents and the opponents of Locke's distinction between personal and animal identity, without revising some aspect of our commonsense outlook; since both sides of the dispute are coherent and well supported by common sense, we cannot strictly prove that one side or the other must be correct; we must seek positive reasons to embrace one side or the other anyway; we must seek these positive reasons in a substantive account of the kind 'person'.¹⁶

This explains the fact that conflicts arise because commonsense both denies and affirms Locke's distinction between personal and animal identity; whereas on the one hand, it is deeply rooted in our commonsense thinking that persons are human beings whose life spans are constituted by the biologically defined sequence of birth, maturation, and death. Yet on the other hand, it is just as deeply rooted in our commonsense thought that a person's life can in principle diverge from any particular human life as when we imagine life after death, reincarnation, other kinds of metamorphosis, and even possession. It would be a mistake to suppose that this latter conception of us, as distinct from the human being, is exclusively the product of religion and myth or that it arises only in connection with spiritual matters.

Carol Rovane has equally carry on an investigation of metaphysics in ethical issues concerning individuals. This aspect of her discussions is found in one of her works *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism*. She begins by saying that what falls within metaphysics is not the important contrast the Kant emphasized between metaphysics and science where metaphysics employs traditional philosophical methodology of a priori argumentation from first principles which science employs methods of induction and confirmation. But in her understanding, she remark: when science addresses the most general aspects of nature it is every bit as "metaphysical" as a priori philosophizing. Thus such a contrast that matters for Rovane is between metaphysics and epistemology but she valorizes metaphysics at the expense of epistemology; while for Locke such a contrast between metaphysics and epistemology he take stands on epistemology over metaphysics.

The notion of worlds to Rovane remains a metaphysical issue; she is defending as far as the reformulation of the doctrine of relativism is concern in contemporary period. Metaphysically speaking, Rovane thinks there exist a conflict between worlds as Locke already presume such a conflict between the psychological and the bodily or a group of persons composed of many human beings and a multiple persons within a single being already discussed by Rovane. So she thinks that if there are alternatives, this means there is not one world (Unimundialism), but many worlds (Multimundialism). According to Unimundialism, logical relations run everywhere among all truth value bearers so that there is a single consistent and comprehensive body of truth which amounts to a metaphysical commitment to the oneness of the world.¹⁷ It is also a metaphysical thesis which claims that there is just one world; it makes no particular claims about the character and/or limits of our knowledge of it. On the other hand, multimundialism is a view that denies each of these claims. Here, some truth value bearers do not stand in logical relations to one another, that there are many non-comprehensive bodies of truths that cannot be conjoined, that there are many worlds rather than one. Also, it is metaphysically neutral on matters that are not directly settled by its fundamental logical commitment, and this neutrality extends to the issue that divides realists and antirealists, concerning the mind independence of reality. This is a clear indication of saying that Locke's distinction of person and human beings are like the Rovanean unimundial and multimundial worlds respectively.

III. BEYOND LOCKE'S AND ROVANE'S CONSTROVERCIES ON THE QUESTION OF METAPHYSICS TOWARDS THE SEARCH FOR META-EPISTEMIC CONSOLIDATION.

After having seen the contrasting views developed by Locke and Rovane concerning metaphysics and epistemology, as Locke is taking side in epistemology and Rovane on her part is crediting metaphysics. However the aim of this work is to look towards a Meta-Epistemic consolidation that will ensure the kind of unity that exist between metaphysics and epistemology without valorizing any but merely carrying a revisionary study of them. This confirm to the words of Shang Nelson when he talks about: concrescence which describes a genetic process in which multiple things in the universe originally unify. Prehension better describes the activity of each of the actual entities when they make a concretion or unit with each other entities. The unity of the universe is constructed by way of the prehension of entities upon others.¹⁸ To better enhance the unity between Locke and Rovane, there is a necessity of being encyclopedic; that is, let us desire to know without limits the knowledge of knowledge's, basing not our knowing abilities on epistemology as Locke did and not in metaphysics as Rovane did, but giving an open way for a Meta-Epistemic consolidation. This therefore remains us when Paul Feyerabend who says "anything goes" be it epistemological or metaphysical approaches. So there is really a need of uniting them from the views of Feyerabend bridging the gap between metaphysics and epistemology.

¹⁶ Carol Rovane, *The Bounds of Agency: An Essay in Revolutionary Metaphysics* Princeton University Press, 1987, p.75.

¹⁷ Carol Rovane, *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2013, p.79.

¹⁸ Shang Nelson, *Metaphysics a Historical Exposition*, Cameroon, Sirroland Mile 2 Bamenda, 2020, p.176.

Conclusion

The major question that preoccupied this work was to look at the controversies that exist between John Locke and Carol Rovane on the question of metaphysics and epistemology. This controversy is because Locke criticizes metaphysics thereby valorizing epistemology; while Rovane on her part stand to valorize metaphysics at the detriment of epistemology. In an attempt to resolve this problem, it was needful to first of all look at how John Locke levied his arguments for the valorization of commonsense. It is for this reason Locke had rejected innate ideas focusing his attention on experience as the genuine source of knowledge in which the human mind is empty. Rovane on her part based her arguments for metaphysics by remarking that aspects of commonsense should be worked upon. However, one could see that in such a debate neither of the methods can be satisfactory. It is therefore why we think the need for a *Meta-Epistemic Consolidation* should be put in place to better enhance the nature of an authentic reality. This is to put in place the unity between metaphysics and epistemology, which will also overcome the controversies between realism and anti-realism, formulation of theories and internalism. This will be done through that concept of Meta-Epistemology which handles questions of authentic reality.

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