

Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"

A study of human understanding which he considered necessary as a preliminary to Natural Philosophy (Science). Locke's aim in the *Essay* is to remove things which hinder achieving real results in philosophy.

The understanding is to be analyzed in two ways.

- * by revealing those tendencies which hinder it from producing knowledge

- * by revealing the process by which it generates knowledge, i.e. what it does naturally when it is not hindered.

Locke's plan for the essay is similar to that of Bacon in his New Instruments (*Novum Organum*). Locke thought of the *Essay* as a successor to the old-fashioned logic texts.

Some hindrances to the understanding, from the *Essay's* "Epistle to the reader".

- vague and insignificant forms of speech, technical jargon
- bondage to false methods (e.g. that all sound reasoning is syllogistic)
- unquenchable, boundless curiosity. The assumption that everything can be known.

These get one bogged down in problems that can't be solved by human power. They tend to produce discouragement and excessive skepticism (another hindrance to the understanding). We are in need of an explanation of what kinds of things people can know and which are beyond the limits of our power to know. We will then not be diverted from our true task: the achievement of the good life.

Locke uses what he calls a "historical plain method", an attempt to study the workings of the mind as they present themselves to inward observation without the use of technical terminology, relying mainly on

ordinary language. An attempt to describe how the mind works without trying to conform to any philosophical theories or authorities on ultimate realities or the real natures of things