#  Title Topic 4

For where is the man that has incontestable evidence of the truth of all that he holds, or of the falsehood of all he condemns; or can say that he has examined to the bottom all his own, or other men’s opinions? The necessity of believing without knowledge, nay often upon very slight grounds, in this fleeting state of action and blindness we are in, should make us more busy and careful to inform ourselves than constrain others.

John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 1689

In the quote above, from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), John Locke raises the question of how much confidence we can have in our own beliefs. Because no man can have truly examined his own or others’ believes, Locke says, everyone should use more time reflecting on their own opinions and less time condemning others’. However, we have to ask ourselves if productive debate and effective dialectics could ever exist with this view on knowledge, information and opinions.

One of the great things about humanity, and especially modern society, is that we share our ideas with each other, and together develop the knowledge we have. This sharing of knowledge must necessarily include some sort of trust. The receiving part has to trust that the other parts are sharing information they believe in themselves. Sharing knowledge would not be effective if each party was to meticulously examine the information they received, however, without studying the information critically and in-depth, the receiving part cannot become completely confident in the information. Yet, it seems from Locke’s essay that taking the time to examine to the bottom all information is a virtue everyone should strive after.

On a human-to-human basis it would be impossible to do in-depth analyses of all information and all opinions one are exposed for. Behind every banal opinion lays thoughts from thousands of humans, relating to how the universe functions and how our minds functions with free will. Even digging somewhat into the matter of all opinions one holds and all facts one believes, would take time from ever applying that information. Everything is too complex for everyone to know everything. As a species, we humans barely have the capacity to understand parts of what surrounds us.

It has been said that “teaching is the art of telling smaller and smaller lies”. In this quote lays a lot of information about how most people learn and what most people know. In order to get an idea of what a concept or idea consists of we tell ourselves a simplified version. We strip out details we deem to be confusing, and are left with what we believe to be the essence of the concept, or the idea. Then, if we find the concept interesting, we delve deeper into it, and try to remove the simplifications we applied. We have the possibility to remove a lot of the simplifications and go far into the matter, but in many cases we might find there is not really anything interesting so deep inside the concept. The general idea is lost, and all the details create confusion. This is why it takes a long time to become a doctorate – one has to strip out the simplifications, and try to make sense of the chaos that follows. Even when the simplifications are removed from one concept, we realize the concept builds upon another concept, which we do not fully understand, and such we are stuck in a loop.

One could say that the deeper one delves into an idea, what one uncovers will become less and less interesting and relevant, yet there will always be more relevant information to be gathered. On the flip side, one does not need to go far into a subject at all to understand quite a lot about it. For instance, everyone knows they can think with their brains, but no-one really understands how the brain works. For all existing practical purposes, every single human knows enough about how the brain works. It is a necessity to believe in what we know, even though we cannot be completely confident in our knowledge.

There is, however, a certain danger associated with believing what one has not delved completely into or completely reflected over – someone could have made a mistake along the way. In the sciences this is known to have happened from time to time; an established hypothesis is found to be false. One needs only look back at the enlightenment or even a few years to find ideas that we today consider false. Our knowledge has developed since then, because some people thought critically about what they had been taught. Locke’s concept worked somewhat – by examining their own beliefs the scientists could find mistakes and solutions to them, however it is impossible to share the solutions, even the problems, without criticizing those who hold the deprecated view.

This applies not only to sciences, but also political, moral and religious ideas. Just one generation ago, the mainstream view on a lot of moral issues was completely different from what it is today. Without dialogue about the existing view, new and better views cannot be formed. Because we cannot be completely confident in anything, we have to go with what we are mostly confident in. Even when really examining a subject, and a problem arises, one cannot be sure that problem is a true problem in the subject, or a result of other concepts controlling how we look at the issue.

In conclusion we can say that Locke’s view on dialectics must be seen in a nuanced light. On one hand, everyone has to go in themselves to find problems and mistakes in their beliefs and their knowledge. On the other hand, once a problem is found it cannot be kept with the one person who found it. Even though it is impossible to be completely confident in that the problem is a problem, and a true problem, it would be impossible to come to a new understanding without sharing the concerns, and criticizing those who do not share them.