

The Reconfiguration of Knowing in Locke's Account within the Age of AI

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Abstract— This study explores how advanced artificial intelligence may reshape traditional ideas about knowledge and about what it means to know. John Locke's philosophy provides a useful starting point because Locke presents knowledge as something grounded in human experience. In his account, we gain knowledge through sensory perception and through reflection on what we experience. These two elements, sensation and reflection, work together to form human understanding. As AI systems become more capable and increasingly able to imitate patterns of human reasoning, the question arises: do AI systems know in a way that resembles Locke's description, or do they challenge the boundaries that Locke's theory seems to assume? The paper follows an analytical approach to connect Locke's epistemology with key features of contemporary AI. It examines the extent to which AI systems can be compared to human knowing by asking what counts as "input," what might correspond to "experience," and whether machine processing can be meaningfully described as a form of "reflection." AI systems often learn from large sets of data, identify regularities, and generate responses that may appear intelligent. Yet, Locke's account emphasizes that knowledge is not only about producing correct outputs; it also depends on the origin and justification of understanding in relation to experience and consciousness. This study therefore considers whether AI's method of learning can be interpreted as a kind of analogue to Locke's sensory basis, and whether AI's internal operations can be treated as analogous to reflective thought. In addition, the paper argues that the growing presence of AI blurs the line between human and machine in epistemic practices. People increasingly rely on AI tools for information, recommendation, and decision-making. This dependence raises concerns about the stability of "knowing" as a human-centered achievement. By combining Locke's framework with the realities of modern AI, the study concludes that traditional views of knowledge are challenged and potentially reconfigured. Rather than treating AI as simply a faster version of human reasoning, the paper suggests that AI forces us to reconsider the criteria of knowing itself, particularly the roles of experience, justification, and meaningful reflection.

Keywords: Knowledge; Artificial Intelligence; Sensation; Reflection; Epistemology; Locke.

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INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, people often talk about “knowing” as if it is a simple thing. If someone has correct information, understands a subject, or can explain a concept clearly, we usually say they know. However, philosophy shows that knowing is not only about having answers. It also involves understanding where the answers come from and why we should trust them. This matters even more today because artificial intelligence is becoming more powerful and is changing the way humans get information and make decisions. The increasing reliance on AI for intellectual tasks has prompted philosophers to ask whether traditional theories of knowledge can accommodate the epistemic practices that now involve machines.

This paper explores what knowledge means in a world influenced by AI, using the ideas of John Locke, one of the most important thinkers in the study of knowledge. Locke believed that human knowledge begins with experience. According to him, we first learn through our senses. We see, hear, touch, and observe the world around us. Then we reflect on these experiences. Reflection means turning attention back toward what we have experienced so we can understand it, connect it, and form ideas. Locke's view suggests that knowledge is connected to human life, human perception, and human reasoning based on experience (Locke, 1689/1997).

The central question of this study is how AI might affect these traditional ideas about knowing. AI systems can now learn from data, recognize patterns, and produce responses that seem thoughtful and intelligent. For example, many AI tools can answer questions, summarize information, and even write text that looks like it was produced by a human (Russell & Norvig, 2020). Because of these abilities, some people wonder whether AI systems “know” things. Others worry that AI might not know in the same way humans do, even if its answers are convincing. These doubts arise because AI does not work through human senses in the same way people do. Instead, AI systems process information using algorithms and mathematical rules (Poole & Mackworth, 2017).

This research is important because AI is not only a technical invention; it is also shaping social and intellectual habits. More and more, people rely on AI for learning, research, and decision-making. When students use AI to study, when professionals use AI to support judgments, and when everyday users depend on AI for information, the meaning of knowledge in daily life may shift. If people trust AI outputs as if they were knowledge, we may begin to treat knowledge as something that can be generated without the human pathway of experience and reflection that Locke describes. On the other hand, if we insist that knowledge must be grounded in human experience and justified understanding, then AI may force us to rethink what counts as genuine knowing (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014).

By bringing Locke's account into conversation with AI, this study aims to clarify how we should interpret AI systems within an epistemological framework. It asks whether AI's learning process can be understood as resembling Locke's idea of gaining knowledge from experience. It also asks whether AI can be said to "reflect" in any meaningful way, or whether reflection remains a strictly human activity tied to consciousness and understanding. In addition, the study considers how the growing closeness between human and machine in intellectual work blurs the boundary between who or what can claim knowledge.

Overall, this paper argues that advanced AI challenges traditional views of knowledge. It does not simply replace human thinking; instead, it forces people to reconsider the foundations of knowing, especially the role of experience, justification, and reflection. By examining Locke's theory alongside AI, the study encourages a deeper understanding of what it means to know when intelligence is no longer limited to human minds alone.

KNOWLEDGE IN LOCKE'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge is generally understood as more than just having information. It is not only about hearing something or memorizing facts. In simple terms, knowledge means understanding something well enough to say that you truly know it, explain it, or use it in a correct and meaningful way. Knowledge usually involves two key parts: experience or evidence, and understanding or reasoning based on that evidence (Popkin & Stroll, 1993).

John Locke, a philosopher who studied knowledge in detail, explains knowledge in a way that starts from human experience. According to Locke, we do not begin with knowledge already inside our minds. Instead, we first receive information through our senses. We see things, hear sounds, touch objects, and observe events. These experiences give us the raw material for understanding (Locke, 1689/1997, Book II, Chapter 1). But Locke also says that knowledge becomes stronger when we use reflection. Reflection means looking back at what we have experienced and thinking about it carefully. For example, you might see a clock and notice its movement through your senses. Later, you might think about how the clock measures time and why it works through reflection. When this thinking connects experiences into clear ideas, it becomes knowledge.

Locke's account of knowledge can be understood through his distinction between three grades of knowledge. The first is intuitive knowledge, which is the immediate and certain perception of the agreement or disagreement of two ideas without any intermediary. The second is demonstrative knowledge, which involves the perception of agreement or disagreement through a chain of intervening ideas, as in mathematical reasoning. The third is sensitive knowledge, which is the awareness of the

existence of particular external objects through sensation (Locke, 1689/1997, Book IV, Chapters 2-4). These distinctions show that for Locke, knowledge is not a single, uniform phenomenon but exists along a spectrum of certainty.

For Locke, knowledge can be described as justified understanding: you not only have an idea, but you can also support it with reasons connected to experience. This is important because people can sometimes believe things that sound convincing but are not really supported. For Locke's view, knowledge needs to be connected to how we come to understand something, not just the fact that we can repeat it. Also, knowledge is different from guessing. A guess may be possible but not fully supported. Knowledge is usually stable, reliable, and tied to evidence. For this reason, when new technologies like AI become involved in learning and decision-making, people begin to ask difficult questions: Can knowledge exist without human experience? If AI produces answers, are those answers knowledge or just information produced by a system? These questions show why defining knowledge clearly matters.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial Intelligence is a type of technology that helps computers perform tasks that normally require human intelligence. These tasks include learning from data, understanding language, recognizing patterns, and making decisions (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). AI is not exactly like a human mind. Instead, it works through computers, using methods such as algorithms and data processing. The field of AI has evolved significantly since its inception, with early systems focused on symbolic reasoning and rule-based approaches, while contemporary systems rely heavily on machine learning and neural networks (Russell & Norvig, 2020; Nilsson, 2009).

A simple way to understand AI is to think of it as a tool that can learn from examples. For instance, if you show an AI many pictures of cats and many pictures of dogs, the AI can learn patterns that distinguish cats from dogs. Then, when it sees a new picture, it can make a prediction. Many AI systems today are based on machine learning, which means they improve their performance over time by adjusting their internal parameters according to the data they are trained on (Rumelhart & McClelland, 1986). AI can also generate content. Some AI systems can write essays, answer questions, or summarize information. This happens because they have been trained on large amounts of text. They learn how words and sentences tend to appear together, and then they produce a response that matches the pattern they learned (Bostrom, 2014).

However, even when AI outputs look intelligent, it does not “know” in the same way humans know (Poole & Mackworth, 2017). AI may produce correct answers, but it may not have human-like understanding, consciousness, or personal experience. In other words, AI can process and produce information, but it may not have the kind of

sensory experience and reflection that Locke describes as the foundation of knowledge. This creates an important challenge: if AI can imitate parts of human reasoning, then people wonder what kind of “knowing” is involved. Is AI giving us knowledge that comes from experience, or is it providing answers that look like knowledge because they are useful and often correct? This question is at the center of reconfiguring knowledge in the age of AI.

AN EXPOSITION OF LOCKE'S IDEAS ON SENSATION AND REFLECTION

Sensation

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke explains that our ideas come first from what happens to us through the senses. He treats sensation as the impressions made on the mind by outward objects. In simple English, this means that when something in the world affects your eyes, ears, skin, and so on, it gives your mind raw information. Locke writes that the ideas we receive from the senses are the “impressions made on our senses by outward objects” and he calls these ideas sensation (Locke, 1689/1997, Book II, Chapter 1). So, sensation is not just “thinking.” It is mainly a passive receiving of information: your senses are affected first, and then your understanding gets ideas from that effect.

Locke emphasizes that sensation is the foundation of all human knowledge about the external world. Without sensation, we would have no ideas of the qualities of physical objects, such as colors, sounds, tastes, and textures. This is why Locke famously argues that the mind at birth is like a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, upon which experience writes its impressions (Locke, 1689/1997, Book II, Chapter 1). Sensation provides the raw data that the mind subsequently works on.

Reflection

Locke also explains a second source of ideas: ideas that come from the mind's own activities. This is reflection. Reflection means that after you have ideas from the senses, you can then look inward and notice how your mind is working with those ideas. For example, you can observe how you perceive, remember, judge, or reason. Locke describes reflection as the mind “comes to reflect on its own operations about the ideas got by sensation” (Locke, 1689/1997, Book II, Chapter 1), and this allows it to gain another set of ideas, which he calls “ideas of reflection.” He also defines reflection as the notice the mind takes of its own operations, saying that by reflection the mind gains ideas that “could not be had from things without.”

Reflection includes mental operations such as thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, and willing. These are activities that the mind performs on the ideas it has received from sensation. Locke argues that these reflective ideas are as important as sensory ideas because they give us knowledge of our own mental

processes and enable us to form more complex and abstract ideas. Without reflection, we would be passive recipients of sensory information without the capacity to organize, analyze, or understand that information in a meaningful way.

How Sensation and Reflection Work Together

Locke's overall point is that human understanding begins with experience, and experience comes in two forms:

1. Outward experience through the senses, which is sensation.
2. Inward awareness of mental operations, which is reflection.

Locke summarizes this by saying that the only “passages” he can find for knowledge to the understanding are “external and internal sensation” (Locke, 1689/1997, Book II, Chapter 1). In this way, Locke's framework makes knowledge dependent on contact with the world through the senses and careful awareness of how the mind processes what it has received.

The relationship between sensation and reflection is not sequential but interactive. Sensation provides the raw materials of experience, while reflection organizes, compares, and abstracts from those materials to form more complex ideas. Both are essential for knowledge. Without sensation, the mind would have no content; without reflection, the mind could not transform sensory data into meaningful understanding.

THE RECONFIGURATION OF KNOWING IN LOCKE'S ACCOUNT WITHIN THE AGE OF AI

Locke is regarded as an important thinker because he explains knowledge in a way that starts from the human mind, based on experience and reflection. The “reconfiguration” mentioned in the topic means that knowledge may be understood differently once AI changes how people obtain information and form beliefs.

Locke believed that the human mind is not born with complete ideas. Instead, people gain ideas first through sensation, what we receive through our senses, and then through reflection, thinking about our own experiences and mental activities. In simple terms, knowledge begins when a person experiences the world and then thinks carefully about that experience. Locke's view implies that knowledge is not only about having a correct answer. It is also about having a correct answer that is supported by a process connected to experience and reasoning (Locke, 1689/1997, Book II). This matters because Locke's theory connects knowing with a person who can explain how they came to believe something. The knower is active: they observe, remember, compare ideas, and form justified understanding.

Modern AI systems can learn patterns from data and can produce answers that sound knowledgeable. For example, AI can respond to questions, summarize

information, generate essays, and even recommend actions. This can lead people to treat AI outputs as knowledge. However, we must analyze whether AI outputs count as knowledge in the Lockean sense.

A key point is that AI does not have human senses in the same way. AI does not directly see the world as humans do. Instead, it works with data. Data can be records from sensors, text collected from the internet, or information from previous human experiences. So, although AI may use information that came from human experience, the AI system itself does not have lived experience. From a Lockean perspective, this raises a serious issue: if knowledge depends on sensation and reflection in the mind of the knower, can AI “know” in the same way? (Locke, 1689/1997, Book IV).

RECONFIGURATION: DOES AI CHANGE THE CRITERIA OF KNOWING?

One major change in the age of AI is that people may begin using different criteria for what counts as knowing. Traditionally, knowing is linked to a justified connection to experience. But with AI, people might accept a claim because it is produced by a system that appears reliable, even if they do not understand the reasoning process. This is what Hardwig (1985) has called “epistemic dependence,” where we rely on the testimony of others for knowledge. AI extends this dependence to non-human systems.

So, the criteria may shift from “I know because I experienced and reflected on this” to “I know because the AI produced a correct or useful answer.” This is a reconfiguration because it changes what people rely on when they decide whether something is true. Locke would likely remind us that belief is not automatically knowledge. Knowledge requires understanding that is grounded properly and can be justified. AI may generate belief, but it does not automatically provide the Lockean kind of justification tied to human experience and reflective understanding (Locke, 1689/1997, Book IV).

Reflection in AI

Another part of reconfiguration concerns the idea of reflection. Locke's reflection is a mental activity where the mind thinks about ideas and the mind's own processes. AI can perform internal steps that look like reasoning, but those steps do not involve consciousness or self-awareness in a human sense. Damasio (2010) and Chalmers (1996) have argued that consciousness is essential for genuine understanding and reflection. From this perspective, AI systems, which lack consciousness, cannot engage in true reflection.

This creates two possible interpretations. The strict view holds that reflection requires consciousness, so AI cannot reflect in the Lockean sense. The functional view suggests that reflection might be understood more broadly as processing that improves

understanding based on inputs and feedback. If we adopt the functional view, we could say that AI systems “update” outputs after learning from data, which resembles a kind of reflective improvement. But even then, the AI's processing is not the same as a human's lived and aware reflection. The question remains: is that enough for knowledge?

Human-AI Knowledge Becomes Social and Distributed

Finally, AI reconfigures knowing by changing who the knower is. In many cases, humans do not simply know on their own; they rely on AI tools. Knowledge becomes a human-AI network where AI generates information, humans choose what to trust, institutions test and approve results, and teachers explain and interpret. This shift moves knowing from being purely individual, as Locke mainly emphasizes for the learning mind, to being partially technological and social. Even if Locke's theory still helps us analyze knowledge, AI forces us to look at how knowledge is produced, verified, and shared.

Nonaka (1994) has argued that knowledge creation in organizations is a social process involving both tacit and explicit knowledge. In the age of AI, this social process is extended to include machines. The integration of AI into knowledge practices requires us to rethink traditional notions of epistemic agency and responsibility. Who is the knower when a human and an AI collaborate on a problem? How do we attribute epistemic credit and blame in such cases?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the reconfiguration of knowing in Locke's account within the age of AI happens in at least three ways. First, AI challenges Locke's link between knowledge and human sensation because AI does not have human sensory experience. AI processes data rather than having direct sensory contact with the world. Second, AI pressures us to reconsider what reflection means, since machine processing may resemble reasoning but not human consciousness. Third, AI changes the criteria for knowledge in real life, because people may trust AI outputs for their usefulness rather than for direct justification based on experience.

Locke's ideas remain valuable because they help us ask the critical question: Does the process behind a belief connect to genuine evidence and understanding, or is it only producing convincing answers? As AI continues to advance, this question will become increasingly important for epistemology and for our understanding of what it means to know. The future of knowledge may involve a reconfigured relationship between human and machine, where the boundaries of knowing are redrawn, but the need for justification and understanding remains central.

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