

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2004
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, October 20

Starting work on John Locke (1632-1704), 'Simple Ideas of Sensation'.

I. Locke's work comes in large part as a response to Descartes's position

The basic metaphysical question is 'What exists?'

Descartes says that physical objects both can and do exist.

He defends with the new science of the 17th century.

Locke does as well.

The new science countenances a world of material objects.

But what are these objects like?

We think of these objects through use of the imagination (images).

For Descartes, though, these images are confused.

They are subject to the errors of the resemblance hypothesis.

The only real properties are those we can understand by pure reason.

Locke has worries about this pure reason.

II. Worry #1: How can an idea be innate?

See Meditation Five, pp 64-65.

For Descartes, ideas of God, mathematics, and logic are innate.

But we don't know some of these.

Children don't know lots of them.

And even the best mathematicians don't know if Goldbach's conjecture is true.

Descartes says that we use reason to discover them.

Today, we might say that a priori ideas are learned independently of experience.

Locke's solution doesn't rely on innate ideas.

We learn particulars, first.

Then, we generalize to find universals, like those of mathematics.

The mind begins as a blank slate.

Nobody questions whether experience is necessary for us to know these ideas.

The question is whether experience is sufficient to justify them.

Locke says it is sufficient: All knowledge derives from experience.

This is the definition of empiricism.

One problem for empiricists is how we explain the certainty of $2+2=4$.

No possible experience can support it.

2 schminkles + 2 schminkles = 4 schminkles, even if we don't experience schminkles.

Descartes says that experience is not sufficient to justify our knowledge of mathematics.

We know a lot about objects we couldn't possibly sense.

III. Worry #2: How can we learn about objects by using our reason, not our senses?

Recall how Descartes rejected the resemblance hypothesis, and any sensory information.

Locke's claims that we do use the senses to get knowledge.

Consider §21: the water temperature experiment.
What properties do objects really have?
Descartes says we can't trust the senses at all
Locke thinks that's throwing out the baby with the bathwater.
Our senses do give us some misrepresentations.
But some sensory evidence is useful.
If we had no senses, we couldn't even start to understand the physical objects.

IV. The representational theory of mind

Descartes and Locke both hold the representational theory.
Ideas are like pictures in the head.
The resemblance hypothesis says that the movie in my head is a fair representation of reality.
Locke says that this information is partially veridical.
Our ideas are complicated.
Some do represent reality even if Descartes is right that not all do, and in particular that hot and cold do not.

So, how do we draw the line?