

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
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Lecture Notes, November 7

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

For Descartes, our knowledge of everything except the cogito depends on God.
In contrast, we seem to be able to know about the world around us, without knowing about God.
Descartes is driven to his position by his method of doubt, and his claim that we must be certain of something beyond any doubt if we are to claim to know it.
Unless we defeat the deceiver, we know almost nothing.
Maybe Descartes has too high a standard for knowledge.
What if we relax this a bit?

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 the new science of the 17th century, and its method of experimentation.
Locke defends modern science as well.
The new science posits 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, Class III ideas (e.g. of the self, God, and mathematics) are innate.
But we do not know some of these.
Children do not know lots of them, §I.I.5.

[Note on Locke references:

Our reading has selections from Book I, Chapter I; Book II, Chapter I; and Book II, Chapter VIII.

There are several sections in each chapter.

§I.I.5 means Book I, Chapter I, Section 5.

§II.VIII.15 means Book II, Chapter VIII, Section 15.]

Consider Goldbach's conjecture, that every even number can be written as the sum of two odd primes.
Even the best mathematicians do not know if Goldbach's conjecture is true.
Descartes says that we use reason to discover the truth values of mathematical claims.
Today, we might say that a priori ideas are learned independently of experience.

Even our knowledge of the physical world is supposed to be innate.

Recall the story of the wax, in MII.

Descartes says that the information we get from the senses is just not good enough to support clear and distinct judgments about the physical world.

We must rely on our reasoning.

(Compare with Descartes response concerning the stick which appears bend in water, Objection number 14 on the handout.)

Locke's solution does not rely on innate ideas.

He says we can account for all of Descartes' Class III ideas on the basis of experience.

We learn particulars, first.

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

The mind begins as a blank slate, §II.I.2.

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 never experience schminkles.

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

We know a lot about objects we could not possibly sense.

III. Worry #2: Don't we need our senses in order to start reasoning?

It seems that our ideas begin with sensation, §II.I.23.

Then, we can start reasoning, or reflecting, §II.I.4.

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

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

Consider §II.VIII.21: the water temperature experiment.

What properties do objects really have?

Descartes says we can not trust the senses.

Locke thinks that Descartes throws out the baby with the bath water.

Our senses give us some misrepresentations, but some sensory evidence is veridical.

(An idea is veridical if it truly represents an external object.)

If we had no senses, we could not even start to understand the physical objects.

IV. The representational theory of mind

Descartes and Locke both hold the representational theory, on which ideas are like pictures in the mind.

The resemblance hypothesis says that the movie in my mind is a fair representation of reality.

Descartes says that no sensory information is veridical.

Locke says that sensory information is partially veridical.

Our ideas are complicated.

Some parts of an idea do represent reality accurately.

Descartes is right that not all do, and in particular that hot and cold do not.

So, how do we draw the line between veridical and misrepresenting ideas?