Philosophy 203: History of Modern Western Philosophy Hamilton College
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Class 13 - March 2
Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, Chapters 1-2

I. Locke's *Essay*

Locke's 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is over-written and long-winded, but contains some of the most insightful and fecund work of his time.
Marianne Janack reported to me a friend's comment comparing reading Locke's *Essay* to going into your grandmother's attic.
There's a lot of stuff in there, and a lot of it is really cool.
But, you have to find it amid the dust and clutter.
Leibniz worked through the whole thing in detail, responding with a book-length commentary, *New Essays on Human Understanding*.
If you are looking for a paper topic, there are lots of good ones there.
Ariew and Watkins have already chosen just a portion of the text to reprint.
We will read only a portion of their selections.

Locke's work comes in large part as a response to Descartes, and also to Spinoza and Leibniz, though Leibniz is really a contemporary of Locke.
Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* was written four years before Locke's *Essay*, though the *Monadology* was not written until almost twenty-five years later.
The rationalists based their philosophy on intuition and reasoning, on what Locke calls *koinai ennoiai* (primary notions), or innate ideas.
Descartes claimed that we have pure intuitions, and clear and distinct perceptions of innate ideas.
For Descartes, ideas of the self, God, and mathematics are innate, built into our minds.
Laws of physics, depending as they do on mathematics, are also innate, the result of pure, intellectual judgment.
Spinoza relied on innate ideas, as well, under the names of rational and intuitive knowledge.
Leibniz defended innate truths of reason as the source of the most certain beliefs, opposing truths of fact.
The very nature of the monad, which reflects the entire history of the universe, makes its ideas innate.
Leibniz denied transeunt causation, which entails that ideas can not, strictly speaking, ever be acquired.
All three of the rationalists we read built grand metaphysical systems which claimed that reality is much different from our ordinary interpretations of sense experience.

Locke takes as his goal to limit the scope of the understanding, and reign in the speculative metaphysics.

> It may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension, to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether, and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities (I.I.4, AW 317a).

Locke's belief that many philosophers claim to know more than they can know might seem to lead to skepticism, a denial that we can know anything.
Recall that Descartes seemed unable to justify any of his beliefs without relying on the existence and goodness of God, the arguments for which he supposed to be innate.
Descartes is driven to his position by his claim that we must be certain of something beyond any doubt if we are to know it.

Unless we defeat the deceiver, we know almost nothing.
One might think that rejecting speculative metaphysics entails ceding all of our beliefs, unable to defeat the deceiver argument or the dream argument, but Locke does not.

> If we disbelieve everything because we cannot certainly know all things, we shall do quite as wisely as he who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly (I.I.5, AW 317b-318a).

In contrast, Locke thinks, we can know about the world around us, without knowing about God.
He believes that Descartes's standard for knowledge is too high.
While knowledge may not, contra Descartes, entail certainty, it does require justification, and truth.
If we know that p, then p must be true, and we must have good reasons to believe that p.
But, it does not seem to follow that I must not be able to doubt that p.

Locke does not worry about defeating a deceiver.
And he thinks that there are easy refutations of the dream doubt.

> If anyone says a dream may do the same thing, and all these *ideas* may be produced in us without any external objects, he may please to dream that I make him this answer: 1. That it is no great matter, whether I remove his scruple or not; where all is but dream, reasoning and arguments are of no use, truth and knowledge nothing. 2. That I believe he will allow a very manifest difference between dreaming of being in the fire and being actually in it (IV.II.14, AW 392a).

Instead of overcoming such doubts, Locke pursues good justifications for the beliefs he will count as knowledge.
We will cover four central topics in Locke's work:

> Arguments against innate ideas
> The primary/secondary distinction
> An account of personal identity, including Locke's approach to the mind/body problem
> Locke's philosophy of language, including the doctrine of abstract ideas

Locke, like Hobbes, is known as much for his political theory, and his work on the social contract, as his metaphysics.
In this course, though, we will hardly mention those aspects of his work.

II. Against Innate Ideas

Locke, like most philosophers of the modern period (Berkeley is one significant exception), defended the new science and its method of experimentation.
The new science posits a world of material objects, available to sense perception.
We think about material objects through the use of our imagination, our capacity to receive sense images.
The rationalists derogated those beliefs that were based on sense perception.
For Descartes, these images are confused, and the only real properties are those we can understand by pure reason, through innate ideas.
An innate idea is one that is implanted in our minds, or souls, rather than learned from sense experience.
We are born with innate ideas, according to their proponents, which is why everyone has them, and everyone agrees about them.

Locke argues that he can avoid appealing to innate ideas by accounting for all of human knowledge on the basis of sense experience.

> Men, barely by the use of their natural faculties, may attain to all the knowledge they have, without the help of any innate impressions, and may arrive at certainty without any such original notions or principles (I.II.1, AW 319a).

Locke points out that we do not know some of the ideas which Descartes alleges are innate.
For example, children do not know lots of them.

> It is evident that all *children*...do not have the least apprehension or thought of them. And the lack of that is enough to destroy that universal assent which must be the necessary concomitant of all innate truths... (§I.II.5, AW 319b).

For accounts of innate ideas on which mathematical claims are innate, we need not even appeal to the limitations of children.
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.
If it is supposed to be innate, it is hard to see why we couldn't find a proof of it.

Given that every one doesn't know some of their innate ideas and some people don't know any of them, the defender of innate ideas might claim that such ideas require development.
We have to reason to them, or unfold them from within.
For example, our knowledge of the physical world is supposed to be innate, according to Descartes.
Recall the story of the wax, in Meditation Two.
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.

Locke takes such recourse on the part of the rationalist to be a concession.

> It [seems] to me near a contradiction to say that there are truths imprinted on the soul which it does not perceive or understand (§I.II.5, AW 319b).

Remember, for Descartes, consciousness is the mark of the mental.
We need not recall all of our clear and distinct ideas in order to know them.
But, to think that there are innate ideas that are inaccessible to us seems to push the claim of innateness too far.

Locke's example of children, and my example of Goldbach's conjecture, are intended to undermine a general principle of universal assent, that Locke attributes to the defender of innate ideas:

> UA: If everyone agrees that p, then p is innate.

It is unlikely that any defender of innate ideas would have accepted UA.
Still, some defenders of innate ideas do appeal to universal assent as evidence for the claim of innateness.
Locke argues that UA is false by presenting some claims that engender widespread agreement while at the same time being tied to sense experience.
For example, he argues that the claim that green is not red is self-evident.

But, no one believes that experience of color is innate.

> I imagine everyone will easily grant that it would be impertinent to suppose the *ideas* of colors innate in a creature to whom God has given sight and a power to receive them by the eyes from external objects... (I.II.1, AW 319a).

Nobody questions whether experience is necessary for us to have knowledge.
The question is whether experience is sufficient to account for what we know.
Locke's empiricist claim is that we are born with no innate knowledge, no principles imprinted on the understanding.
Thus, he is willing to forego claims that depend on the rationalists' innate ideas, especially claims the nature of God and the soul.

Locke doesn't reject the claim that we have knowledge of God.
He just argues that our idea of God comes from experience, rather than from naturally imprinted first principles.

> If we examine the *idea* we have of the incomprehensible supreme being, we shall find that...the complex *ideas* we have both of God and separate spirits are made of the simple *ideas* we receive from *reflection*: e.g. having, from what we experiment in ourselves, got the ideas of existence and duration; of knowledge and power; of pleasure and happiness; and of several other qualities and powers, which it is better to have than to be without. When we would frame an *idea* the most suitable we can to the Supreme Being, we enlarge every one of these with our *idea* of infinity; and so putting them together, make our complex *idea of God* (II.XXIII.33, AW 366b).

As a rule, the empiricist has difficulty explaining our knowledge of mathematics.
It is difficult to see how experience can support universal claims about mathematical objects, which are not sensible.
Locke's account of our knowledge of mathematics, like his account of our knowledge of God, does not rely on innate ideas.
Instead, it relies on intuition and demonstration, starting with ideas of sensation, and then using reason to discover relations among them.

> I do not doubt but it will be easily granted that the *knowledge* we have of *mathematical truths* is not only certain, but *real knowledge*, and not the bare empty vision of vain insignificant *chimeras* of the brain. And yet, if we will consider, we shall find that it is only of our own *ideas* (IV.IV.6, AW 404b).

Locke's empiricist strategy thus has two lines of attack.
In one direction, Locke gives up some of the general principles supposedly known innately.
In the other direction, Locke attempts to reclaim some of the knowledge that was formerly thought to rely on innate ideas.

Locke has two sets of tools for that reclamation project.
First, he has sensation, and any ideas which can be attributed to our sense experience.
Second, he has the psychological capacities of our minds, including memory and the ability to reflect on our ideas.
While Locke rejects innate principles, he does not deny our natural capacity to reason and intuit.

III. Sensation and Reflection

Locke claims that the mind begins as a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*.

> Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any *ideas*. How does it come to be furnished? From where does it come by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? From where does it have all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *experience*; our knowledge is founded in all that, and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either about *external sensible objects* or *about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking*. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from which all the *ideas* we have, or can naturally have, do spring (II.I.2, AW 323a).

We learn particulars, first, beginning with sense experience.
We get simple ideas of sensation from individual sense experiences of particular objects.
Tlumak calls Locke's theory of perception causal representative realism: (at least some of) our ideas truly represent the world, which causes our perceptions.

Individual perceptions are simple.
They are so simple, in fact, that impressions of the same object under different sense modalities are independent.
The taste of the lemon is independent of its yellowness, and of its texture and odor.
Locke's claim that the sense modalities are independent explains his response to the Molyneux problem.
Here's the Molyneux problem, which I unfortunately neglected to assign:

> Suppose a man born blind, and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere of the same metal, and nearly of the same bigness, so as to tell, when he felt one and the other, which is the cube, which the sphere. Suppose then the cube and sphere placed on a table, and the blind man be made to see. Quaere, whether by his sight, before he touched them, he could now distinguish and tell which is the globe, which the cube? (II.IX.8, AW 338b).

Locke denies that the blind person could tell which was the sphere and which was the cube without touching the objects.
In other words, our sense of touch is independent of our vision.
There is experimental research supporting Locke's solution, but the question has not been resolved completely.

Once we have received simple sense impressions, we can hold the ideas they create in memory, and recall them.
Our ability to recall simple ideas is facilitated by our use of language, which primarily consists of names of our simple ideas.
We can also reflect on those simple ideas.

> The other fountain from which experience furnishes the understanding with ideas is the *perception of the operations of our own mind* within us, as it is employed about the *ideas* it has gotten - which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of *ideas*, which could not be had from things without. And such are *perception*, *thinking*, *doubting*, *believing*, *reasoning*, *knowing*, *willing*, and all the different

> actings of our own minds, which we, being conscious of and observing in ourselves, do from these receive into our understandings as distinct *ideas* as we do from bodies affecting our senses... I call this REFLECTION (II.I.4, AW 323b).

Using our naturally developing ability to reflect, we can go beyond the limits of particular sense experience, and memory of such experience.
Locke uses 'reflection' to cover a wide variety of psychological capacities, including contemplation, memory, discerning, comparison, composition, and abstraction.
We can, for example, generalize, or abstract, to find universals, like those of mathematics.

> The senses at first let in particular *ideas*, and furnish the yet empty cabinet, and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them. Afterwards the mind proceeding further abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names (I.II.15, AW 321a).

Thus, despite Locke's rejection of innate ideas, he believes that we have some innate, if developing, capacities to reflect on our own ideas.
For another example, we can recognize similarities and differences among our ideas, an activity which yields intuitive knowledge of the agreement or disagreement of ideas.

> If we will reflect on our own ways of thinking, we shall find that sometimes the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two *ideas* immediately by themselves, without the intervention of any other. And this, I think, we may call *intuitive knowledge* (IV.II.1, AW 389a).

For those of you who took Ancient, you might recall Plato's argument, in the *Phaedo*, that we can not learn about equality merely by seeing equals, that we must have knowledge of equality in order even to see two objects as equals.
Plato uses that argument to conclude that we are born with knowledge, foreshadowing the moderns' doctrine of innate ideas.
Locke uses the argument to deflate the innatists' claims.
He claims that there are four kinds of agreement or disagreements of ideas which can be intuitively apprehended, without commitments to innate ideas:

1. Identity or diversity;
2. Relation;
3. Coexistence or necessary connection; and
4. Real existence.

Locke claims that our ability to recognize identity and diversity is undeniable, but does not reflect our having been born with innate principles.

> This is so absolutely necessary that without it there could be no knowledge, no reasoning, no imagination, no distinct thoughts, at all. But this the mind clearly and infallibly perceives each *idea* to agree with itself, and to be what it is, and all distinct *ideas* to disagree, i.e., the one not to be the other, And this it does without pains, labor, or deduction, but at first view, by its natural power of perception and distinction (IV.I.4, AW 386b).

In addition to intuitive knowledge, Locke claims that reflection yields demonstrative knowledge.
Demonstrative knowledge requires proof, and each step of the proof has to be intuitive.

Because demonstrative knowledge requires chains of reasoning, doubt, which does not infect intuitive knowledge of agreement of ideas, can arise, even though the individual steps are intuitively justified by sense perception.
Demonstrative knowledge grounds both mathematical and moral claims.
The picture of mathematical beliefs being justified by a combination of intuitive first principles and secure methods of proof has a long history.
In mathematics, as in philosophy, though, the kinds of claims that are made on the basis of intuition have given that capacity a bad name.
By the late 19th Century, serious worries about the consistency of calculus, which relied on intuitive claims about infinitesimals, combined with strange results in non-Euclidean geometries and transfinite mathematics, impelled mathematicians to seek a more secure standard of proof.
Gottlob Frege replaced Locke's intuitive guarantee of the steps in a proof with a syntactic criterion, and revolutionized logic, creating what we now know as modern, symbolic logic.

In moral philosophy too, Locke claims that we have intuitive knowledge of some primitive relations among ideas.
And in both cases, we derive more complex ideas by reflecting and abstracting from them.

> *Morality* [is] *among the sciences capable of demonstration*; in which I do not doubt but from self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestable as those in mathematics, the measures of right and wrong might be made out to anyone who will apply himself with the same indifference and attention to the one as he does to the other of these sciences... "*Where there is no property, there is no injustice*," is a proposition as certain as any demonstration in *Euclid* (IV.III.18, AW 397b-398a.).

We have seen that Locke criticizes innate ideas, and argues that we have psychological capacities for attaining reflective knowledge.
Further, he criticized Descartes's demand for indubitable certainty.
Still, if he is not to beg the question of whether knowledge is possible, he has to explain, in greater detail, how sense experience leads to veridical beliefs.
Can Locke account for the errors which motivated Descartes, the false beliefs that he had taken as true in his youth, and demonstrate ways to avoid such errors without relying on innate ideas?