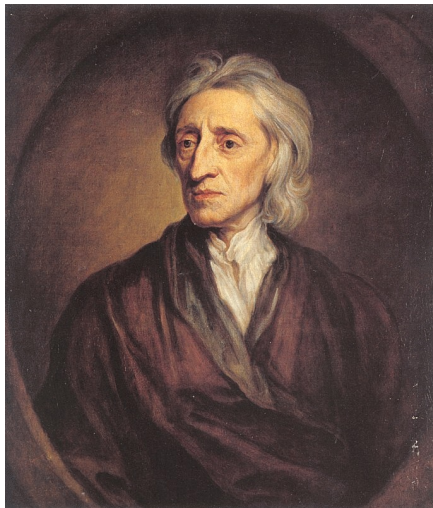


Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

Russell Marcus
Hamilton College
Spring 2010



Class 13 - Locke
Against Innate Ideas
and
The *Tabula Rasa*

Business

- Midterm
 - ▶ 10 of 14
- Descartes Day

Locke's *Essay*

- over-written
- long-winded
- insightful
- fecund
- your grandmother's attic



koinai ennoia

- Descartes had pure intuitions, and clear and distinct perceptions of innate ideas.
 - the self
 - God
 - mathematics
 - laws of physics
- Spinoza
 - rational and intuitive knowledge
 - Our minds are literally part of God.
- Leibniz
 - truths of reason
 - Against transeunt causation, monads are self-contained.
- Grand metaphysical systems which claimed that reality is much different from our ordinary interpretations of sense experience.

Locke's Goal

- limit the scope of the understanding
- 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).
- But, not skepticism
 - ▶ “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).
- Descartes's standard for knowledge is too high.
- The rationalists' epistemology is bloated.
 - ▶ “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).

Four Central Topics in Locke's Work

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

Against Innate Ideas

Against Innate Ideas

- We do not know some of the ideas which Descartes alleges are innate.
 - “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).
- Goldbach’s conjecture
- Every one doesn’t know some of their innate ideas.
- Some people don’t know any of them.

A Rationalist's Response

- Innate ideas require development.
- We have to reason to them, or unfold them from within.
- The information we get from the senses is not good enough to support clear and distinct judgments about the physical world.
- 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).
- 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.

Universal Assent

- Locke attributes a general principle of universal assent to the defender of innate ideas:
 - UA: If everyone agrees that p, then p is innate.
- 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).
- It is unlikely that any defender of innate ideas would have accepted UA.

The So-Called Innate Ideas

- 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.
- 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. Wwhen 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).

Empiricism and Mathematics

- 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 tht 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).

Two Lines of Attack

against the rationalists

1. Give up some of the general principles supposedly known innately.
2. Attempt to reclaim some of the knowledge that was formerly thought to rely on innate ideas.

Two tools

1. Sensation, and any ideas which can be attributed to our sense experience
2. Psychological capacities of our minds, including memory and the ability to reflect on our ideas.
 - Contemplation
 - Memory
 - Discerning
 - Comparison
 - Composition
 - Abstraction

The *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).

Sensation and Reflection

- Simple ideas of sensation come from individual sense experiences of particular objects.
 - ▶ We can hold those ideas in memory, and recall them.
 - ▶ Language primarily consists of names of our simple ideas.
- Using our naturally developing ability to reflect, we can go beyond the limits of particular sense experience, and memory of such experience.
 - ▶ “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).

Capacities and Intuitive Knowledge

Not Innate Ideas

- We can 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).
- We can recognize similarities and differences among our ideas.
- We have 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).
 - ▶ 1. Identity or diversity;
 - ▶ 2. Relation;
 - ▶ 3. Coexistence or necessary connection; and
 - ▶ 4. Real existence.
- “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).

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.
- Demonstrative knowledge grounds both mathematical and moral claims.
- In both cases, 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.).