Lecture 7 – The Way of Ideas

- We can recognise a sequence of ‘British empiricists’, of whom the most important are Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753) and David Hume (1711-1776). What all of them have in common is some version of the claim that our *ideas* are at bottom always *empirical*, that is, based in sensation. Today, we will attempt to understand the various forms that this claim takes, as well as the problems that are associated with it.
- Hobbes, in *Leviathan*: “there is no conception in a man’s mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of Sense”. We will need to think this through in many ways, but let’s already take notice of the phrase “totally, or by parts”. Clearly, we can have the idea of a unicorn or a centaur, even though we have never perceived one. Hobbes – and his successors – will have no trouble with this, since such fancies can be constructed out of parts that we *have* seen.
- But not every idea can be so constructed. Or rather, every idea can be so constructed, and if something cannot be so constructed, it is not an idea: it is perhaps merely a meaningless word, or something-we-know-not-what. There lies in empiricism the possibility of a radical critique of metaphysics, and the empiricists – up to the present! – have often taken advantage of this.
- We can already see this in Hobbes. Let’s check out, in our anthology, his criticism of Descartes’ proof of the existence of god. Let us read the *Meditations, Third Set of Objections, Against Meditation III, Objection V.* (Anthology page 79.) “It therefore seems there is no idea of God in us.” Hobbes still tells us that we ought to believe in God, as an otherwise inconceivable first cause… but we may wonder whether this makes sense.
- In Hume, we will see that empiricism can also be used to attack the notion of causation. In fact, empiricism will turn out to be a road towards scepticism, as I have already suggested. It is certainly going to be haunted by questions about its own status as a philosophical theory. After all, is the claim that all ideas are at bottom empirical itself an empirical idea, that could have been shown false? Perhaps real clarity about these questions is not gotten until the 20th century, if then.
- Now the mind of man does not contain only perceptions, and so Hobbes will have to explain to us the nature of *imagination* and *thought*. Imagination, Hobbes says, is nothing but decaying sense. (Hume, some 100 years later, will make the same point in terms of “force” and “vivacity”: to see a table is to have a more forceful or lively idea than to merely think of a table.) Hobbes tells us that Memory is our name for Imagination when it faithfully reproduces something we have sensed. Thinking consists in having ‘trains of thought’, which can be unguided – when we are daydreaming, merely associating – or guided by fear or desire, in which case there is more constancy, and we keep thinking until we reach some practical conclusion.
- All of this raises a lot of questions, but let’s move on to the more worked out theory of Locke before we try to tackle them.

- Locke is most famous – at least outside of political philosophy – for his book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In this book, he develops the empiricist ideas in much more detail than Hobbes did. He defines Idea, perhaps not too clearly, as "whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks". What is clear is that, just as in Descartes and Hobbes, the term 'idea' is supposed to cover a lot of ground.
- Locke starts his *Essay* by arguing forcefully against the existence of *innate ideas*; by this he means both that we do not know any innate principles, and that we have no innate singular ideas.
    - Locke considers the argument from universal consent. Against it, he argues that there is no universal consent about any principles: young children, for instance, do not assent to the laws of logic; and people in Turkey do not assent to our laws of morality. Even if there were universal consent, consent does not imply knowledge. And even if there were universal consent, this might be explained by other causes than that we are born with these principles.
    - The same arguments can be used to show that there are no innate singular ideas. Young children don't have the idea of a horse, or of purple, before they see such a thing; and there are peoples in distant places who do not have the idea of God.
    - Locke and Plato. Plato's doctrine of *anamnesis*. Locke's critique of understanding 'innate' as 'having the capacity to learn'. But what gives Plato's idea plausibility? Suppose I come across an example of virtue. If I can recognise it *as* an example of virtue, then it seems I already know what virtue is. If I cannot recognise it as such, than it seems that my observation cannot teach me anything about virtue. The same holds for more clearly empirical concepts, like 'cow'.
    - What Plato's doctrine solves, or at least attempts to solve, is the problem of the relation between experience and concepts. It is not clear how we will ever get from singular sense experience to the possession of general concepts – this is clearly a problem that the empiricists will have to face!
    - There is a sense in which the debate about innateness is not too interesting when taken literally, since it is hard to distinguish the different positions. What *is* interesting is the empiricist project of building up all our mental contents from those of empirical sensation. This is clearly something that distinguishes them from, say, Descartes or Leibniz; and something that gives their metaphysics its own vibe.
- Locke's positive account of how the mind works starts with a distinction between sensation and reflection. All ideas come from either sensation, which is the experience we have when we perceive the world, or from reflection, which is the experience we have when we perceive the operations of our own mind. (Clearly, this Lockean thesis is hard to square with its own claim, for could experience teach us that all knowledge comes from experience?)
- Experience for Locke is both a necessary and sufficient condition for having an idea and knowing the meaning of the associated word (if I've learned this particular language). I have the idea of blue and know what the word "blue" means, if and only if I have experienced blue. This makes some sense! Can a blind colour scientist really know what "blue" means?

- But it also underestimates how much language and thought rely on social conventions, on rules. Sellars and the example of Jones in the tie shop. Is there a blue tie which looks green in the yellow light, or is there a green tie which becomes blue when you walk outside? Even something as basic as our colour words are tied into networks of rules.
- Simple and complex ideas. Simple ideas are not composed of other ideas; we can only acquire them through acquaintance, not through thinking or imagination. The imagination can combine ideas we have into new, complex ideas – recall the unicorn of the beginning, but also, say, your image of a future plan.
    - This is a good point to discuss a famous suggestion of Hume, known as the *missing shade of blue*. Suppose you have gone to the Gamma and taken one of these fold-out booklets with shades of blue paint. But one of them is missing. Would it be possible, given that you have experienced the others, to form an idea of what the missing shade looks like? Locke seemingly has to say no. But is that plausible? Hume says yes, but then more or less ignores it, holding on to the claim that all ideas come from sensation.
- Locke distinguishes between different sources for our ideas (sensation and reflection) and now goes on to develop a fourfold typology of origins for simple ideas:
    - from one sense only: blue, loud, sweet
    - from multiple senses: motion, size, shape
    - from reflection: thought, will
    - from sense and reflection: pleasure, pain, existence, power
- More ideas can be generated by three mental acts. The first is *combination*, which we have already seen, and which creates complex ideas. There is also a sort of *juxtaposition*, in which we view to ideas of once without combining them into one, and this leads to the ideas of relation. For instance, the idea “larger than” must be generated by mentally comparing an idea of a smaller and a larger object, but it is clearly not the same thing as the idea of a smaller and a larger object together, which is what combination would give us.
- Finally, and very important for our purposes, there is *abstraction*. Locke does not give us too much detail about it, but the idea seems to be that we consider, say, a lot of ideas of men – some are tall, some are short, some are white, some are black, some are stupid, some are smart, and so on. By abstraction we now take whatever all these men *have in common*, and this is the abstract idea of man.
    - One thing to note is that this does not seem to address the Platonic question at all, the question which is: how do we know that *these* particular impressions are all of *men*, and hence should be used as the basis for a process of abstraction? Doesn’t the Lockean procedure already assume that we have the idea of man?
        - Perhaps Locke believes that all we need is a primitive notion of resemblance: we recognise that men resemble each other, and now we perform abstraction to generate the idea of this particular resemblance – that is, that they resemble each other in virtue of all being men. But it is not obvious that this actually solves the problem.

    - Many other puzzles could be formulated. Think, for instance, about the ideas of *existence* and *non-existence*. I can have an idea of an apple. But can I have an idea of a existing apple and an idea of a non-existing apple? Is it possible to think of these as ideas that we arrive at through abstraction? Locke claims that they are in fact simple ideas, with which we are immediately acquainted, but does that make sense? They *seem* to be general concepts.
    - Locke's own example of a idea arrived at through abstraction is also somewhat surprising: whiteness. But if even *that* has to be arrived at through abstraction, then which ideas are not abstract? How could the empiricist programme ever get started?

- Perhaps unsurprisingly, Locke's account of abstract ideas was forcefully attacked by Berkeley and Hume. Berkeley takes the example of a triangle. Triangles can be equilateral (gelijkzijdig), isosceles (gelijkbenig) or scalene (ongelijkbenig). What is the abstract idea of a triangle? It has to be the idea, Berkeley says, of something that has three angles, three straight sides, but which is *not* equilateral, isosceles or scalene. But that makes no sense!
- Berkeley also doesn't believe that we *need* abstract ideas. Rather, our word 'man' brings to mind some man or another, it doesn't matter which, and this is all we need. Hume will elaborate on this a bit, arguing that a single word gets associated to many different ideas, and that as we think and speak, these associations will allow the necessary ideas to come about as needed. "All dogs are brown." Perhaps the first dog that comes to mind is brown, but in this context I won't stop there, will associate on, and quickly come to the idea of a non-brown dog.
- Clearly, this account once again presupposes that our mind has the ability to sort things into resemblance classes; that it will associate dogs and only dogs with the term "dog". Clearly, this ability to recognise resemblances, to classify experiences, lies at the basis of concept formation, and it is doubtful that the empiricists can tell a good story about it.
- Indeed, this will be a sticking point for Kant, who identifies *concepts* with *rules* – no experience can be a rule, because it's just something that happens and has no normative content. If the mind has in-built rules for classifying experiences, then in what sense does it not have in-built concepts? Kant is going to tell us that there are indeed such in-built concepts, although he will do this in a way that also undercuts rationalism by *siding* with the empiricist claims that concepts are contentless if they are not linked to (possible) experience. (For the empiricists, they have to be linked to *actual* experience.)
- A final Lockean distinction that will be useful to discuss is that between primary and secondary qualities, which we already read about in Kenny. Primary qualities are *utterly inseparable from the body*, they are what a body by itself has and must have, and our ideas of primary qualities resemble the bodies. The primary qualities are solidity, extension, figure, motion and number.
- The secondary qualities are merely powers of the body to generate certain sensations in us by virtue of their primary qualities; they do not resemble the body itself, but are dependent on our specific senses. These are colours, sounds, tastes, smells, and so on. They are discoverable by a single sense only, unlike the primary qualities.

- This distinction of course reminds us of Descartes and his piece of wax. It is an essential ingredient in the Scientific Revolution and its mechanical world view; and it leads to an idea, totally alien to earlier epochs, that what is most real is what is mind-independent.
- But is it a coherent idea within empiricism? Berkeley certainly doesn't think so. Here is a quotation from the *Principle of Human Knowledge*:
    - They who assert that figure, motion, and the rest of the primary or original qualities do exist without the mind in unthinking substances, do at the same time acknowledge that colors, sounds, heat cold, and suchlike secondary qualities, do not—which they tell us are sensations existing in the mind alone, that depend on and are occasioned by the different size, texture, and motion of the minute particles of matter. This they take for an undoubted truth, which they can demonstrate beyond all exception. Now, if it be certain that those original [primary] qualities are inseparably united with the other sensible [secondary] qualities, and not, even in thought, capable of being abstracted from them, it plainly follows that they exist only in the mind. But I desire any one to reflect and try whether he can, by any abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body without all other sensible qualities. For my own part, I see evidently that it is not in my power to frame an idea of a body extended and moving, but I must withal give it some colour or other sensible quality which is acknowledged to exist only in the mind.
- One could go on to wonder how Locke *knows* that some qualities belong to the bodies themselves and others only to our perception of them; and how he can even claim to know such a thing, given his commitment to empiricism. There's something weird about an empiricist who claims to know that certain things are only in experience, and other things are also outside of experience.
- Berkeley goes on to argue that Locke's claim that primary qualities do and secondary qualities do no resemble the objects, makes no sense. An idea, Berkeley says, can only resemble another idea. If the objects are ideas, we would expect resemblance of both primary and secondary qualities. If they are not ideas, resemblance makes no sense.
- Clearly, Berkeley is moving towards what he believes to be a logical consequence of empiricism: the claim that objects just *are* ideas. If I claim that a table is more than an idea, or rather, more than a collection of ideas, I am assigning some property to it that necessarily escapes observation. But as an empiricist, I don't even think that that makes any sense! So a table just is a collection of ideas, and the claim that there are material objects distinct from ideas is a metaphysical mistake. *Esse est percipii*.
- There is something to be said for this approach! But is a table really just a collection of ideas? If it is just the collection of ideas that *I* have of the table, it's a weirdly disjointed thing, quite unlike what we would normally think a table to be. (Furthermore, we could not invoke the table to *explain* our sensations.) This is true even if we add everyone's ideas of the table. If we think of the table as the collection of all possible perceptions of it, it has transformed into something that does not seem to be an idea any longer, but rather a power to create ideas – which fits uneasily in Berkeley's metaphysics. One move that Berkeley makes is to say that the table is a collection of ideas had by God, who after all is always perceiving everything! Primarily, the table exists as God's thinking. When I perceive it, I am thinking God's thoughts. You too are thinking God's thoughts, and He makes it so that our

thoughts are of a coherent material universe. This is a strangely Spinozistic and Leibnizian place for empiricism to end up! And of course it requires Berkeley to come up with a proof of the existence of God that would fit his empiricism, which is a tough call.

- We will talk more about Hume next week. But perhaps an appetiser, if we have time this week. Hume is famous for claiming that there only two classes of truths: relations of ideas, which can be known *a priori* but do no extend our knowledge at all; and *matters of fact*, which can only be known through experience. There can be no a priori proof of a matter of fact, no a priori proof that extend our knowledge at all.
- Hume is the first philosopher in our sequence to state this clearly and apply it to his own philosophising, which also means that unlike Locke and Berkeley, Hume does not have a proof of the existence of God. After all, we cannot prove God empirically; and hence we cannot prove His existence at all. Hume will radicalise empiricism in the sense that he tries to smash up much of metaphysics, writing (in)famously:
    - If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.