

John Locke's Epistemology

Part 1

Empiricism and the Nature of Knowledge

Who was John Locke?

English philosopher and physician (August 29, 1632 – October 28, 1704).

Main areas: epistemology and political philosophy.

Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690)

Two Treatises on Government (1689)

A Letter Concerning Toleration (1689)

Political philosophy (particular the contract theory) influenced Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison, and other Founding Fathers.

Locke's Goal and Starting Point

- “Essay Concerning Human Understanding”
- An inquiry into the origin, certainty, and extent of human *knowledge*
- Also into the grounds and justification of belief, opinion, and assent
- Locke's “Common Sense” disposition

Motivation for *Essay*

- Locke was an Anglican (the Anglican church began in 1534, Protestant Reformation began in 1517).
- Protestant emphasis: no need for intermediary between God and humans; people can interpret Scripture for themselves (Gutenberg Bible printed in 1455).
- “Enthusiasts”: people who believe they receive direct revelation from God.
- Locke thought that enthusiasm was irrational and theologically dangerous.
- Main motivation for writing the *Essay*: to show why Enthusiasm was wrong by showing the limits of human cognition.

Locke's Method

- “It is therefore worth while to search out the bounds between opinion and knowledge; and examine by what measures, in things whereof we have no certain knowledge, we ought to regulate our assent and moderate our persuasion. In order whereunto I shall pursue this following method:-”
- “First, I shall inquire into the original of those ideas, notions, or whatever else you please to call them, which a man observes, and is conscious to himself he has in his mind; and the ways whereby the understanding comes to be furnished with them.
- “Secondly, I shall endeavour to show what knowledge the understanding hath by those ideas; and the certainty, evidence, and extent of it.
- “Thirdly, I shall make some inquiry into the nature and grounds of faith or opinion: whereby I mean that assent which we give to any proposition as true, of whose truth yet we have no certain knowledge. And here we shall have occasion to examine the reasons and degrees of assent.”

The Argument for Innate Principles

- An innate principle or idea is “stamped on the mind of man, which the soul receives in its very first being and brings with it into the world.”
- Principles v. ideas or notions
- Examples: “Whatsoever is, is” and “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be.”
- Now the “Argument from Universal Assent”:
 - P1: There are principles that receive universal assent.
 - P2. The only explanation for universal assent is innateness.
 - C. Therefore, there are innate principles.

Locke's Objections to the Argument

- 1. P2 is false: there are explanations for how there could be universal assent other than innateness.
- 2. More importantly, P1 is false: there are no universally agreed upon principles. There are two groups of people who do not accept even “Whatsoever is, is” and “Nothing can both be and not be.”
 - A. Children
 - B. The Severely Mentally Challenged.

Replies to objections and replies to replies

- Maybe these principles are imprinted on the minds of children and mentally disabled, but they just aren't aware of it.
- Locke's reply: That's impossible. Here's why:
- “For to imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible. If therefore children and [the mentally disabled] have souls, have minds, with those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths...”

Locke on Innate Principles Cont.

- Reply to Locke: Innateness = capacity to know
- Locke's reply to the reply: That would make everything we could ever know innate. Here's why:
- “For if any one may, then, by the same reason, all propositions that are true, and the mind is capable ever of assenting to, may be said to be in the mind, and to be imprinted: since, if any one can be said to be in the mind, which it never yet knew, it must be only because it is capable of knowing it; and so the mind is of all truths it ever shall know. Nay, thus truths may be imprinted on the mind which it never did, nor ever shall know; for a man may live long, and die at last in ignorance of many truths which his mind was capable of knowing, and that with certainty.”

Empiricism v. Rationalism

- Empiricism (Locke): all of our knowledge and all of our ideas come from experience.
- Rationalism (Descartes): there is a source of knowledge that is independent of experience.
 - So defined, rationalism is just the denial of empiricism.
 - This source is usually designated as “reason” or “rational intuition.”

Descartes' "Piece of Wax" Example as an Argument Against Empiricism

- Descartes is a rationalist and he gives us the following example which thinks shows that empiricism is wrong
- "Let us consider the things that people ordinarily think they understand best of all, namely the bodies that we touch and see. I don't mean bodies in general—for our general thoughts are apt to be confused—but one particular body: this piece of wax, for example. It has just been taken from the honeycomb; it still tastes of honey and has the scent of the flowers from which the honey was gathered; its colour, shape and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold and can be handled easily; if you rap it with your knuckle it makes a sound."

Descartes' Wax Example (cont.)

- “In short, it has everything that seems to be needed for a body to be known perfectly clearly. But as I speak these words I hold the wax near to the fire, and look! The taste and smell vanish, the colour changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; the wax becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and it no longer makes a sound when you strike it. But is it still the same wax?”
- “Of course it is; no-one denies this. So what was it about the wax that I understood so clearly? Evidently it was not any of the features that the senses told me of; for all of them—brought to me through taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing—have now altered, yet it is still the same wax.”

Descartes' Conclusion about the Wax

- “I am forced to conclude that the nature of this piece of wax isn't revealed by my imagination [or sense perception], but is perceived by the mind alone... This wax that is perceived by the mind alone is, of course, the same wax that I see, touch, and picture in my imagination—in short the same wax I thought it to be from the start. But although my perception of it *seemed* to be a case of vision and touch and imagination, it isn't so and it never was. Rather, it is purely a scrutiny by the mind alone—formerly an imperfect and confused one, but now vivid and clear because I am now concentrating carefully on what the wax consists in.”

Descartes' Wax Example (continued)

- Before the wax melts it:
 - has a particular color, shape, and size
 - is sweet
 - is fragrant
 - is hard
 - is cold
 - is easily-handled
 - emits a noise when struck
- After the wax melts it:
 - has a different color, shape, and size
 - is tasteless
 - is odorless
 - is soft
 - is hot
 - is not easily handled
 - emits no noise when struck

Descartes' Wax Example (continued)

- Every quality that we can know via sense perception is different after the wax melts.

- The argument:

P1. If empiricism were correct, then we couldn't know that the soft, odorless object is the same object as the hard, fragrant object that we started with (since the latter shares no sensible quality with the former).

P2. But we do know that it the same piece of wax.

C. Therefore empiricism is false.

Overall conclusion: empiricism can't even account for our knowledge of physical objects.

We know even the continued existence of physical objects by a non-sensory perception of the mind.

Locke on Ideas, the *Tabula Rosa* and Empiricism

- What is an “idea”? Locke’s examples:
 - Whiteness
 - Hardness
 - Sweetness
 - Thinking
 - Motion
 - Army
 - Elephant
 - Drunkenness
 - Man
- An idea is that with which the mind thinks. Thoughts come from stringing ideas together.
- The Big Question: where do our ideas come from?

Ideas, the *Tabula Rosa* and Empiricism (continued)

- At the beginning of Book II, Chapter I of the *Essay*, Locke writes:
- “Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:-
- “How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge?
- “To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself.”
- Empiricism (again):
 - (i) All of our knowledge is derived from experience.
 - (ii) All of our ideas are derived from experience.

The Sources of Our Ideas

- “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 whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.
- “First, our Senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them. And thus we come by those ideas we have of yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet, and all those which we call sensible qualities; which when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean, they from external objects convey into the mind what produces there those perceptions. This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call SENSATION.”

The Sources of Our Ideas (continued)

- “Secondly, the other fountain from which experience furnisheth 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 got;- 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.

The Sources of our Ideas (continued)

- “This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself; and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called internal sense. But as I call the other SENSATION, so I Call this REFLECTION, the ideas it affords being such only as the mind gets by reflecting on its own operations within itself.”

The Sources of Our Ideas (continued)

- So Locke thinks that all of our knowledge and ideas are derived from experience.
- What is *experience*? Experience is what we get in sensation and reflection.
- Regarding sensation: it is the experience of the five senses.
- Regarding reflection: it is the experience we have of the operation of our own minds.
- Locke's empiricism entails that there is nothing that we know or even have an idea of that we haven't derived from the sensation or reflection.

The Sources of Our Ideas (continued)

- “The understanding seems to me not to have the least glimmering of any ideas which it doth not receive from one of these two.
- “These, when we have taken a full survey of them, and their several modes, combinations, and relations, we shall find to contain all our whole stock of ideas; and that we have nothing in our minds which did not come in one of these two ways. Let any one examine his own thoughts, and thoroughly search into his understanding; and then let him tell me, whether all the original ideas he has there, are any other than of the objects of his senses, or of the operations of his mind, considered as objects of his reflection.
- “He that attentively considers the state of a child, at his first coming into the world, will have little reason to think him stored with plenty of ideas, that are to be the matter of his future knowledge. It is by degrees he comes to be furnished with them.”

Conclusion Regarding Ideas

- There are no innate ideas or principles.
- When we are born our minds are blank slates.
- All of our ideas come from experience.
- There are two fundamentally different sources of experience: sensation and reflection.

Locke's Account of Knowledge

- What is it to know something in contrast to merely believing it?
- Locke distinguishes between three types or grades of knowledge.
- Locke's definition: *Knowledge is nothing other than the perceived agreement or disagreement of ideas.*
- The first, highest, more pure type of knowledge is *intuitive knowledge*.
 - Examples
 - “A triangle is a three-sided geometric figure.”
 - “The red object has a color.”
- The second best variety of knowledge is *demonstrative* knowledge. This is the knowledge you get from obviously valid inferences. For example:
 - P1. All red objects have a color.
 - P2. No colored objects are invisible.
 - Therefore, no red objects are invisible.

Locke's Account of Knowledge (continued)

- The third and weakest variety of knowledge according to Locke is *sensitive* knowledge.
- Sensitive knowledge is knowledge had via one or more of the five senses.
- Example: When I have a clear visual experience of an apple in a fruit bowl ,then I know there is an apple there.
- Sensitive knowledge is had only while the one is in the act of perceiving the object.
- Locke recognizes that this kind of knowledge is considerably different from, and inferior to, the other types in its fallibility.

Concluding thoughts about Locke's Empiricism and Account of Knowledge

- Empiricism and the Problem of Abstract Ideas
 - Concrete ideas: particular instances of qualities and objects.
 - Abstract Ideas: universal ideas that have concrete instances.
My idea of John may contain lots of concrete ideas derived from experience of John. But where does my idea of a “human” come from?