

Handout 18: Locke's Empiricism

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
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RATIONALISM VS. EMPIRICISM

Traditionally, philosophy from Descartes through Kant is divided into three parts:

I.	II.	III.
<i>Rationalists</i>	<i>Empiricists</i>	<i>Kant</i>
Descartes	Locke	
Spinoza	Berkeley	
Leibniz	Hume	

This schema was first introduced by Hegel, a German philosopher in the nineteenth century. Though they overstate similarities and understates differences, the general categories of rationalism and empiricism are useful.

For anything you know, you can ask the question: on what basis do I know it? I know that my mother is in Los Angeles on the basis of having heard it from my father. I know that it's sunny outside on the basis of having seen it myself. I know that the Pythagorean Theorem is true on the basis of having proved it. And so on.

Some of your knowledge is based on *experience*. That seems to be the case with the examples above involving my mother's location and the sun's being out. And some of your knowledge appears to be based on some other source than experience — let's call that source *rational insight* or *understanding*. Arguably, that's what's going on in the case of the Pythagorean Theorem. My basis for knowing the Pythagorean Theorem doesn't involve examining triangles and measuring the areas of the squares of their sides. Instead, it involves a abstract reasoning, which I could accomplish from my armchair without looking at any actual triangles at all.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL RATIONALISM

A significant part of our knowledge is based on rational insight alone.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL EMPIRICISM

All, or nearly all, of our knowledge is at least partly based on experience.

Descartes appears to endorse epistemological rationalism when he writes in the second *Meditation* that his knowledge of the piece of wax, which he might have originally thought to come through his sense experience, in fact comes "through the mind alone." He is claiming that his knowledge of

the nature of the wax is based on rational insight, not experience. Or consider Spinoza's very bold metaphysical claims made on the basis of abstract definitions, axioms, and proofs. Or Leibniz's predicate containment principle, which implies that all truths are in some sense conceptual truths, knowable without experience by anyone with a rich enough understanding of the complete notion of a substance.

In addition to asking about what our knowledge is based on, we can ask about where our beliefs and concepts come from. Many seem to have been *acquired*. My belief about my mother's location, for example, came from my conversation with my father. My concept of redness resulted from my many visual experiences of red things. By contrast, some of our beliefs and concepts may be *innate*. An innate belief or concept is one that it is part of our nature to have, and is not acquired through experience. This distinction enables us to draw another contrast between rationalists and empiricists:

PSYCHOLOGICAL RATIONALISM

Many of our beliefs and concepts are innate.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPIRICISM

All, or nearly all, of our beliefs and concepts are acquired.

Descartes thought that his ideas of God and the infinite were innate; Spinoza agreed. Leibniz held that all of the perceptions and appetites you will ever have are already contained within your complete concept, so in a certain way seems to have thought that *all* of your beliefs and concepts are innate. By contrast, as we'll see, Locke and Hume both endorse a strong form of psychological empiricism according to which *none* of our concepts or beliefs are innate.

Both Locke and Hume appear to argue as if the following inference were valid:

THE EMPIRICIST FALLACY

If psychological empiricism is true, then epistemological empiricism is true.

As we'll see in a moment, Locke mounts a very forceful defense of psychological empiricism, and both he and Hume regard psychological empiricism as having very wide-ranging epistemological consequences. As my name for the inference indicates, however, we should be suspicious of this idea. Still, it is easy enough to see the *prima facie* appeal of the empiricist fallacy.

LOCKE'S EMPIRICIST PRINCIPLE

Locke will argue that all of our ideas are acquired through experience. But what does he mean by an "idea"? Here is one place where he attempts to explain himself:

Whatever the mind perceives in itself or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call *idea* (2.VIII.8).

So when you perceive something, think about something, or understand something, what you immediately perceive, think about, or understand is an *idea*. This is apt to be confusing, since it seems that I can perceive a tree, think about the Battle of Hastings, and understand the word 'snow', and yet it does not seem that trees, the Battle of Hastings, or the word 'snow' are *ideas*.

The key word here is *immediate*. Locke is assuming that when you perceive something, say, a tree, you are *immediately* aware of an idea in your own mind, by means of which you are aware of the tree outside of your mind. Or: you're *directly* aware of the idea of the tree (in this case, a certain visual sensation or mental image), and thus *indirectly* aware of the tree itself. Locke is saying that everything we're immediately or directly aware of is an idea in our own mind, but he is not saying that we can't be aware of trees, battles, and so on — just that we aren't ever aware of them directly, but only through the mediation of our ideas (sensations, beliefs, concepts, etc.).

Locke distinguishes between two kinds of experience: *sensation* and *reflection*. Sensation is experience that involves the senses. Reflection is experience that involves the “perception of the operations of our own mind” (2.I.4). Ideas that come to us from sensation include “yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet, and all those we call sensible qualities” (2.I.3). Ideas we acquire through reflection include “perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing, and all the different actings of our own minds” (2.I.4). Locke says that:

All ideas come from sensation or reflection (2.I.2).

This is a strong form of psychological empiricism. What exactly does Locke mean? Here's a strong reading of the claim:

LOCKE'S EMPIRICIST PRINCIPLE (strong version)

If *S* has an idea of *X*, then *S* has either sensed or reflectively experienced *X*.

But this is obviously false. I have an idea of a unicorn, but I have never sensed or reflectively experienced a unicorn. So Locke must mean something else instead.

In the course of arguing for his empiricist principle, Locke makes a distinction which will help. He says that anyone who has “taken a full survey of [his ideas]” will find that “he does not have any idea in his mind, but what one of these two [i.e., sensation and reflection] have imprinted, though perhaps with infinite variety compounded and enlarged by the understanding” (2.I.8). He later expands this thought into a distinction between *simple* and *complex* ideas. A simple idea “contains in it nothing but one uniform appearance, or conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different ideas” (2.II.1). Simple ideas serve as the ingredients out of which other ideas are made, and *they* must be acquired through sensation or reflection. Complex ideas are constructed by the mind out of simple ideas by the operations of the understanding. So armed with this distinction between simple and complex ideas, we can construct a weaker and more plausible version of Locke's principle:

LOCKE'S EMPIRICIST PRINCIPLE (weak version)

If *S* has an idea of *X*, then it is either simple or complex. If it is simple, then *S* acquired that idea by sensing or reflectively experiencing *X*. If it is complex, then it is composed of simple ideas.

What reasons does Locke have for this principle?

Locke gives two positive reasons. First, he invites us to take a “full survey” of our ideas. In doing so, he says, we'll find that all of them come from experience in the way indicated in the weak version of LEP. Second, he claims that wherever there is no experience, there are no corresponding simple ideas. For example, he writes:

I think, it will be granted easily that if a child were kept in a place where he never saw any other but black and white until he were a man, he would have no more ideas of scarlet or green than he who from his childhood never tasted an oyster or a pineapple has of those particular relishes (2.I.6, 324a).

Neither reason is terribly compelling. And they both put Locke in a vulnerable position. All his opponent needs is to find *one* simple idea that is not imprinted from sensation or reflection, and his positive reasons for his empiricist principle will collapse.

Could Locke instead defend a weaker version of the principle according to which *most of our* ideas are derived from experience? The problem with the weaker version is that it is not obvious that anyone would disagree with it. All but the staunchest rationalist will allow that the *most of our* ideas (and beliefs and concepts) are not innate. To take an interesting empiricist position, Locke needs a stronger claim than this.

THE ATTACK ON INNATE IDEAS

And indeed, Locke really does want to argue that *none* of our ideas (or beliefs or concepts) is innate. What reason could we have for thinking that there are innate ideas? Locke thinks that there is only one possible reason: that certain beliefs are “universally agreed upon by all mankind” (1.II.5). The argument Locke is imagining goes like this:

1. Some ideas are agreed upon by all mankind.
2. Therefore, some ideas are (probably) innate.

This argument is an instance of what’s usually called “inference to the best explanation”: an argument where the conclusion is thought to be the best explanation of the premise. The thought here is that the best explanation for universal agreement about *X* is that the idea of *X* is innate.

Locke’s first objection to the imagined argument is simply to say that innateness is *not* the best explanation of universal agreement. He thinks that there is another, equally good explanation for universal agreement: “[I]f it were true in matter of fact that there were certain truths in which all mankind agreed, it would not prove them innate, if there can be any other way shown how men may come to that universal agreement in the things they do consent in, which I presume may be done” (1.II.3). Locke doesn’t say here what that other explanation is, but it’s clear that he thinks it is *experience*. If all of us have similar experiences, then we will wind up with similar ideas. So the similarity of our experiences may explain any universal agreement we have about anything just as well as the claim that those ideas are innate.

However, Locke is more concerned to attack the premise itself. He denies that there is anything about which everyone agrees. His argumentative strategy is to pick some candidate ideas that are examples of universal agreement if *anything* is, and to claim that not even these ideas claim universal agreement. His initial candidates are:

“What is, is.”

“It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be [at the same time].”

But, Locke says, these ideas are not universally agreed to, as can be seen by the fact that they are “not known to children, idiots, etc.” (1.II.5).

Still, the proponent of innate ideas could respond that these ideas are agreed to by all who have acquired the use of reason, or to anyone who understands them properly. Locke considers both of these responses and gives the same sort of reply to each: if *that's* all it is for an idea to be innate, then many more of our ideas are innate than even a rationalist will want to admit. If any conclusion assented to by everyone who understands it is innate, then, Locke thinks, the following ideas must also be innate (1.II.18):

“Two bodies cannot be in the same place.”

“White is not black.”

“Sweetness is not bitterness.”

But, Locke assumes, it would be seriously implausible to regard these as innate.

Locke thus presents the defender of innate ideas with a dilemma. If innate ideas are just those that are “imprinted on the mind,” then since children are born without any ideas, none of our ideas is innate. If, on the other hand, everything which we have a “natural capacity for knowing” is innate, then since everything we know is something we have a natural capacity for knowing, *all* of our ideas are innate. Thus, Locke concludes, “[Our ideas] must be all innate or all adventitious; in vain shall a man go about to distinguish them” (1.2.5).

Leibniz wrote a long response to Locke's *Essay* in which he proposes the following analogy in response to Locke's dilemma:

For if the soul were like [an empty tablet], truths would be in us as the shape of Hercules is in a block of marble, when the marble is completely indifferent to receiving this shape or another. But if the stone had veins which marked out the shape of Hercules rather than other shapes, then that block would be more determined with respect to that shape and Hercules would be as though innate in it in some sense, even though some labor would be required for those veins to be exposed and polished into clarity by the removal of everything that prevents them from appearing. This is how ideas and truths are innate in us, as natural inclinations, dispositions, habits, or potentialities are.

Leibniz's thought is that we might have some ideas that are not “imprinted on the mind” from birth, but are nonetheless ‘in’ us in another sense: given enough experience of *any* kind, we'll come to have those ideas. This seems like an interesting category of ideas, and one apt to be called ‘innate’. And, moreover, it seems that none of Locke's arguments against innate ideas show that we do not have such ideas. Would the existence of such a category enable the rationalist to evade Locke's dilemma?