

# Locke's Empiricism

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy  
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## RATIONALISM VS. EMPIRICISM

Traditionally, European 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 can be traced back to Hegel, a German philosopher in the nineteenth century. Though they overstate similarities and understates differences, the general categories of rationalism and empiricism are useful. Descartes's rationalism can be seen in his claim that we have an innate idea of God, his doctrine of clear and distinct perception, his idea that our knowledge of the nature of bodies comes from the mind alone, his privileging of knowledge based on logic and reason over anything that comes from the senses, and his reliance on conceivability as a guide to possibility in his argument for the distinction between mind and body. Spinoza's rationalism is even more thoroughgoing: from the very structure of the *Ethics*, modeled on Euclid's geometry, to his rigorous adherence to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, to his doctrine that the structure of thought mirrors precisely the structure of reality itself, Spinoza is rationalism's poster boy. With Locke, we turn towards philosophers who exemplify the empiricist outlook.

The contrast between rationalism and empiricism is not easy to distill in a set of explicit disagreements. But there are two important contrasts with the rationalist outlook that play central roles in the work of both Locke and Hume. The first concerns epistemology, and the second psychology.

For anything you know, you can ask the question: how do I know it? I know that my mother is in Los Angeles because I heard it from my father. I know that it's sunny outside because I can see so myself. I know that the Pythagorean Theorem is true because I have worked through a proof of it. And so on.

Much of your knowledge comes to you through *experience* and *observation*. That seems to be the case with the examples above involving my mother's location and the sun's being out. By contrast, some of your knowledge comes from *reason* and *understanding*. Arguably, that's what's going on in the case of the Pythagorean Theorem. My basis for knowing the Pythagorean Theorem isn't some

series of observations and measurements of triangles. Instead, it involves abstract reasoning based on my understanding of the mathematical nature of triangles, all of which I could accomplish from my armchair without examining at any actual triangles at all.

#### EPISTEMOLOGICAL RATIONALISM

The most significant part of our knowledge comes from reason or understanding alone.

#### EPISTEMOLOGICAL EMPIRICISM

All, or nearly all, of our important knowledge comes from experience and observation.

Descartes endorses epistemological rationalism, for example, when he claims that his knowledge of the wax's nature, which he might have originally thought to come through his senses, in fact comes through the mind alone. Or consider Spinoza's very bold metaphysical claims made on the basis of abstract definitions, axioms, and proofs: these claims rest on propositions proven from definitions, not from experiments and observations. As we shall see, both Locke and Hume allow that some of our knowledge comes from reason alone, but it occupies a much less privileged place in their philosophies than it does in those of Descartes or Spinoza. For them, experiential, experimental, observational knowledge plays a much more fundamental role.

In addition to asking about how we know things, we can ask why we have the beliefs, concepts, and ideas that we do. Where do our beliefs and concepts come from? Many have been *acquired* through experience. My belief about my mother's location, for example, came from my conversation with my father. My concept of redness is a product of my many visual experiences of red things; my idea of Paris comes from pictures I've seen and descriptions I've read. By contrast, some of our beliefs and concepts may be *innate*; i.e., somehow naturally built into our minds. An innate belief, concept, or idea is one that it is part of our nature to have, and is not acquired through experience. This distinction between acquired and innate ideas enables us to draw another contrast between rationalists and empiricists:

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL RATIONALISM

Many of our (most important) beliefs and concepts are innate.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPIRICISM

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

Descartes, for example, thought that his ideas of God and the infinite were innate; Spinoza agreed. Although we didn't read him, Leibniz thought that *all* of our ideas were in a certain important sense 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.

Is there a connection between epistemological and psychological rationalism? Locke and Hume often move back and forth between the two ideas with ease. They seem to presuppose the following:

Psychological empiricism leads to epistemological empiricism.

As we'll see in a moment, Locke mounts a very forceful defense of psychological empiricism, and both he and Hume appear to regard psychological empiricism as having very wide-ranging epistemological consequences. In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke's goal is to

develop an account of the “understanding”. By this he means both the human mind, and the extent of human knowledge. He plans first to “enquire into the Original of those Ideas ... which a Man observes ... and the ways whereby the Understanding comes to be furnished with them,” and then to “show, what Knowledge the Understanding hath by those Ideas, and the Certainty, Evidence, and Extent of it” (1.1.3). In other words, he is going to first explain the origin of our beliefs, concepts, and ideas (a psychological project) and then use that account to explain what we can and cannot know (his epistemological project). The end result of Locke’s empiricist psychology is an epistemology grounded almost entirely in experience.

Unlike Spinoza, who saw all of reality as intellectually explicable, Locke (and Hume) both offer a much humbler account of the prospects for human understanding:

If by this Enquiry into the Nature of the Understanding, I can discover the Powers thereof; how far they reach; to what things they are in any Degree proportionate; and where they fail us, I suppose 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 (1.1.4).

#### LOCKE’S ATTACK ON INNATE IDEAS

In Book I of the *Essay*, Locke defends a cornerstone of his empiricist psychology: that all of our ideas come from experience. Recall that Descartes thought that some of his ideas were innate; in particular, the idea of God, which enabled him to derive the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions. Locke, by contrast, holds that none of our ideas are innate. Before we look at his argument, let’s be clear about what Locke means by “idea”:

[*Idea*] being the term, which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks ... whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ’d about in thinking (1.1.8).

Whatsoever the Mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call *Idea* (2.8.8).

So when you perceive something, think about something, or understand something, an *idea* is whatever you immediately perceive, think about, or understand. 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* or *directly* aware of something in your own mind (a sort of mental image of the tree), by means of which you are *mediately* or *indirectly* aware of the tree itself. Locke is saying that everything we immediately or directly aware of is an idea, something 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 thinks that the only reason to think that there are innate ideas is if certain ideas are “universally agreed upon by all Mankind” (1.2.2). The argument Locke suggests is that:

1. Some principles are universally agreed upon by all mankind.
2. The only way there could be such universal agreement is if there were innate ideas.
3. Therefore, some ideas are innate.

Locke's first response to the argument is raise a doubt about premise 2: we may deny it "if there can be any other way shewn, how Men may come to that Universal Agreement, in the things they do consent in; which I presume may be done" (1.2.3). The other explanation he has in mind 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 premise 1. He does so by denying that there is anything about which everyone agrees. This denial takes up the rest of Book I. His argumentative strategy is to pick some principles that are often thought to be subject to universal agreement, and to argue that no, in fact they are not. His initial candidates are:

"Whatsoever 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 "all Children, and Idiots, have not the least Apprehension or Thought of them" (1.2.5).

Still, the proponent of innateness could respond that these principles are agreed to by all who have *acquired the use of reason* (1.2.6-16), or to *anyone who understands them properly* (1.2.17-23). Locke gives the same sort of reply to each: if *that's* all it is for an idea to be innate, then vastly more of our ideas are innate than even a rationalist will want to admit. For example, if any conclusion assented to by everyone who understands it is innate, then, Locke thinks, the following principles must also be innate (1.2.18):

"Two Bodies cannot be in the same place."

"White is not Black."

"Square is not a Circle."

"Yellowness is not Sweetness."

...and "a Million of other such Propositions"

But, Locke assumes, no one would think these principles are innate.

Locke thus presents the defender of innate ideas with a dilemma: his most characteristic form of argument. 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, they "must be all innate, or all adventitious [i.e., acquired]: in vain shall a Man go about to distinguish them" (1.2.5).

In the next chapter Locke considers the possibility that certain “practical principles,” i.e. moral principles, are innate. He is even less amenable to this suggestion than he is to the thought that “speculative principles” (such as “What is, is”) are innate. First, he points out, they all require “Reasoning and Discourse, and some Exercise of the Mind, to discover the certainty of their Truth” (1.3.1). And he is even more skeptical that there is any universal assent to be found when it comes to morality:

Whether there be any such moral Principles, wherein all Men do agree, I appeal to any, who have been but moderately conversant in the History of Mankind, and looked abroad beyond the Smoak of their own Chimneys. Where is that practical Truth, that is universally received without doubt or question, as it must be if innate? (1.3.2)

After a few more chapters, Locke concludes his attack, and turns to the question of where our ideas do come from, if they are not innate.

Leibniz wrote a long response to Locke’s *Essay* in which he proposes the following analogy in response to Locke’s argument against innateness:

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?

#### LOCKE’S EMPIRICIST PRINCIPLE

If our ideas are not innate, our mind is like “white Paper, void of all Characters” (2.1.2). So where do our ideas come from? Locke’s answer: *experience*. He 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” (2.1.4). Ideas that come to us from sensation include “yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet, and all those we call sensible qualities” (2.1.3). Ideas we acquire through reflection include “perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing, and all the different actings of our own minds” (2.1.4). Locke says that:

All Ideas come from Sensation or Reflection (2.1.2).

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. A *simple* idea "contains in it nothing but one uniform Appearance, or Conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different Ideas" (2.2.1). Simple ideas serve as the ingredients out of which other ideas are made, and *they* must be acquired through sensation or reflection. But we also have *complex* ideas, constructed by our understanding out of simple ingredients: once we have simple ideas, our understanding "has the Power to repeat, compare, and unite them even to an almost infinite Variety, and so can make at Pleasure new complex Ideas" (2.2.2). Armed with this distinction between simple and complex ideas, we can construct a 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 through an experience of *X*. If it is complex, then it is composed of simple ideas.

What reasons does Locke give 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:

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 will, upon taking a strict view, see, that he has not any Idea in his Mind, but what one of these two have imprinted (2.1.5).

Second, he claims that wherever there is no experience, there are no corresponding simple ideas. For example, he writes:

...if a Child were kept in a place, where he never saw any other but Black and White, till he were a Man, he would have no more Ideas of Scarlet or Green, than he that from his Childhood never tasted an Oyster, or a Pine-Apple, has of those particular Relishes (2.1.6).

Neither argument is terribly compelling. And both put Locke in a vulnerable argumentative position. All the defender of innate ideas needs is to find an example of *one* simple idea that is not imprinted from sensation or reflection. As we'll see in a few weeks, Hume, no less an empiricist than Locke, himself came up with an example of a simple idea not derived from experience, but dismissed it as inconsequential.

Could Locke 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 are not innate. To take an interesting empiricist position, Locke needs a stronger claim than this.