

JOHN LOCKE AN ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING (1660)

Epistemology

Book I: Chs. 1 and 2: "The Senses as the Basis of Knowledge" (pp. 26-32 in Cottingham)

Book II: Ch. 8 "Qualities and Ideas" (pp. 80-85 in Cottingham)

Locke's goal in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding is to understand the origin, certainty and extent of human knowledge in an effort to understand ultimately that faculty, the understanding or consciousness, which separates man from beast. He begins by agreeing that men have in their minds several ideas (233) such as those expressed by the words whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, elephant, army, drunkenness, and others (233). He defines *ideas* as the object of the understanding when a man thinks (227) and whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking (227), that is, what it is that we think about when we are thinking. However, he is most concerned to understand how humans come by the ideas that they have in their minds: [w]hence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? (233), he asks. In other words, his major concern is with the source or origin of our ideas.

Gesturing towards the rationalist views of Plato and, later, Descartes, Locke's thesis is that it is a widespread but false view that

there are in the understanding certain *innate principles*; some primary notions, characters, as it were stamped upon the mind of man, which the soul receives in its very first being, and brings into the world with it. (227)

In much of what follows, Locke's target as an *empiricist* (i.e. someone who believes that knowledge is primarily *acquired* via the senses) is *rationalism*, in particular the view that knowledge is innate or pre-given, that is, the belief that we are born equipped with certain foundational concepts already in our minds arguably via our incorporeal soul that transcends (i.e. it both precedes and postdates) physical existence. In other words, Locke's ultimate goal is to debunk the idea popularised by Plato, the Church, and Descartes that humans possess an essential, pre-given, and transcendental self that both precedes life and survives the death of the physical body and which is the source of all our knowledge about reality (and beyond).

Locke begins by debunking certain commonly held assumptions in this regard. He points out that it is commonly assumed that ideas, for example, of colours must be innate in a creature to whom God hath given sight, and a power to receive them by the eyes from external objects (228). It is widely assumed, too, that there are

certain *principles*, both *speculative* and *practical*. . . universally agreed upon by all mankind: which therefore . . . must needs be the constant impressions which the souls of men receive in their first beings, and which they bring into the world with them. (228)

Locke hastens to point out that this argument of universal consent (228) is disproved by the fact that there is none to which all mankind gives an universal assent (228). In other words, there is no single idea which all humans everywhere agree upon. Moreover, he argues powerfully that if some or all ideas are really innate, even children and idiots (228) must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths (229). For, as Locke points out, to say a notion is imprinted on the mind, and yet at the same time to say, that the mind is ignorant of it, and never yet took notice of it, is to make this impression nothing (229). In other words, if ideas are innate in humans beings, even the mentally enfeebled must be able to conceive these ideas. If not, why?

Locke then turns to one important response to the objections which he raises: to be precise, that all men know and assent to them *when they come to the use of reason* (229). In other words, humans come to recognise the ideas which are innately lodged in their consciousness only when their capacity to reason has been developed. This argument takes two forms: either as soon as men come to the use of reason these supposed native inscriptions come to be known and observed by them (230) or the use and exercise of men's reason assists them in the discovery of these principles (230). However, as Locke points out, there is a crucial contradiction at the heart of such an argument:

how can these men think the use of reason necessary to discover principles that are supposed innate, when reason (if we may believe them) is nothing else but the faculty of

deducing unknown truths from principles of propositions that are already known? That certainty can never be thought innate which we have need of reason to discover. . . . [T]o make reason discover those truths thus imprinted is to say that the use of reason discovers to a man what he knew before: and if men have those innate impressed truths originally, and before the use of reason, and yet are ignorant of them till they come to the use of reason, it is in effect to say that men know and know them not at the same time. (230)

Moreover, as Locke points out, how can it be that what was imprinted by nature, as the foundation and guide of our reason, should need the use of reason to discover it? (231).

Locke agrees that there are many ideas upon which many humans can agree upon (even though all humans do not agree upon all ideas). He agrees, too, that there is no knowledge of these general and self-evident maxims, till it comes to the exercise of reason (232), that is, ideas are never known nor taken notice of (231) before one is able to use one's reason. However, he argues that the ready assent of the mind to some truths depends not either on native inscription [i.e. certain ideas being innate] or the use of reason, but on a faculty of mind quite distinct from both of them (231). For Locke, the ability to assent to certain universal truths is the product of discoveries made and verities introduced and *brought into* the mind (my emphasis; 231) from outside. To put this another way, ideas are acquired from without, imprinted by external things (232).

Locke describes the precise process by which humans acquire knowledge about the world around them and learn to use language to label things in this way. Initially, the child absorbs what Locke terms *simple ideas* about particular things via his / her senses: the senses at first let in *particular* ideas, and furnish the yet *empty cabinet* (my emphasis; 232). The mind is analogous to a white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas (233) until experience (233) comes to furnish it with all the materials of reason and knowledge (233). In that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself (233). We are born, Locke says, with the physiological capacity to think (the function of the physical organ that we call the brain) but with initially empty minds (he uses the Latin term *tabula rasa* or blank slate elsewhere to denote this empty state of consciousness). The ideas which we have in our minds about such things as whiteness or hardness, Locke contends, are the product entirely of our experiences. Physical sensations lead to direct knowledge of specific things in the external world around the child as a result of which (s)he knows as certainly as it can speak the difference between the ideas of sweet and bitter (i.e. that sweet is not bitter) (233). In short, Locke is of the view that the knowledge of some truths . . . is very early in the mind; but in a way that shows them not to be innate (232). These ideas are acquired--it being about those first, which are imprinted about external things, with which infants have earliest to do, and which make the most frequent impressions on their senses (232).

Later, as the use of reason is developed, what Locke terms *complex ideas* of a more abstract nature are formulated with the aid of language. Indeed, both memory and language are involved in the next step by which knowledge is acquired: the

mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them [i.e. ideas based on sensations], they are lodged in the memory, and names go to them. Afterwards, the mind proceeding further, abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names. (232)

To put the foregoing another way, physical sensations inspired by specific objects produce simple ideas in the mind about those things. These ideas are lodged in our memory. Later, words are applied to these ideas about things (humans use *signs* to name or label *referents*). Even later, the mind comes to sort and classify particular objects as belonging to certain types or classes. In other words, with experience, the child learns to generalise, that is, to recognise that all particular examples of a certain kind of creature with four legs belong to the general category or species which we call horse in English, as opposed to other examples of four-legged creatures which belong to the category or species we call cat. It is in this manner that the mind comes to be furnished with ideas and language, the *materials* about which to exercise its discursive faculty (232).

Philosophy of Mind

Book II: Ch. 27: "The Self and Consciousness" (pp. 187-192 in Cottingham)

Locke is of the view, in short, that knowledge is primarily derived from our intercourse with external sensible objects (233): our [s]enses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to the various ways wherein those objects do affect them (233). This effect which external objects has upon us is derived from the sensible qualities (233) of the objects in question: their colour, size, shape, texture, etc. Locke calls the ultimate source of such knowledge physical sensation (234). It ought to be clear, therefore, that the mind (our consciousness) in Locke's view is not innate (a given) but something that is fashioned by our experiences. Initially, we possess only a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. Our identity is fashioned from without (or to use Locke's metaphor, the slate is written on), however, in the course of our life experiences which fill out, as it were, our identity.

However, Locke argues, there is also another fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas (234), a source that is internal to humans (but not something innate): what Locke terms the perception of the operations of our minds within us (233). Locke argues that when the soul comes to reflect on and consider (234) the workings of the mind, this furnishes 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. This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself. (234) This form of knowledge is, in short, that notice which the mind takes of its own operations (234). Locke calls this process reflection (234) and the object thereof internal sense (234), i.e. sense having nothing to do with external objects (234).

From this point of view, Locke is of the view that self-consciousness (i.e. a sense of self or who we are) is something derived from reflecting upon the contents of our consciousness. Our identity is entirely commensurate with the sense or idea of self which we can assemble by using our memory, principally, to recount our sensed experiences, to reflect upon our actions and sensations, and to assemble thereby a coherent narrative of who we are. The important thing is the consciousness we have of ourselves as enduring subjects, a consciousness that depends upon the memories that link who we now are with who we were in the past. This is why Locke feels that to understand wherein personal identity consists (187), one must seek to understand what *person* stands for (187). A person is, he says, a

thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places. Which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and it seems to me essential to it. It being impossible for anyone to perceive, without perceiving that he does perceive. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. . . . For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that that makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists personal identity, i.e., the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that the action was done. . . . Nothing but consciousness can unite remote existences into the same person. . . . [W]ithout consciousness there is no person. (106)

As Locke puts it, it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and actions that it is *self to itself* now, and so will be the same *self* as far as the same consciousness can extend to actions past or to come (188).

For Locke, the self is a blank slate until our experiences inscribe themselves upon it. Our self is not a given. It is, rather, socially constructed. We thus have a self only in so far as we are able to reflect upon our previous experiences and to try to make sense of them in some coherent fashion. This is, evidently, a far cry from Descartes's conception of the self as something essential, unique, autonomous, and free-standing. Moreover, unlike Descartes, Locke does not dare to speculate that there is a pre-given, immaterial, thinking self that is to be distinguished from the physical body and which transcends earthly existence. For Locke, to be sure, we possess a self that thinks. But in what exactly it consists is

another matter: self, he writes, is that conscious thinking thing (whatever substance made up of, whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not) which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery; and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends (190). For Locke, like Descartes, the self is a thinking or conscious self, but, unlike Descartes, he does not believe that the self consists of a different non-material substance from that of the body. As we have seen, however, he has his doubts whether these thoughts are innate.