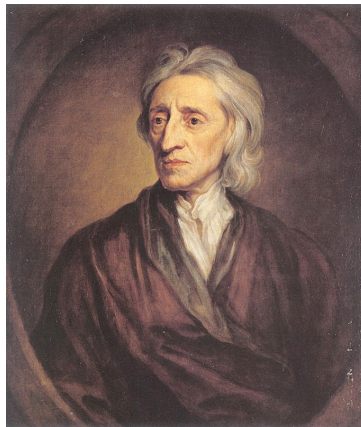


Locke

Empiricism



Suppose....

- Suppose you were created just moments ago. Suppose you were created with all the mental capacities of a normal adult. But, since you are newly created you have basically no experience with the world.
- Across the room is a roaring fire. Do you have any idea that the fire will cause severe pain if you stick your hand in it?
- Your host just brought you a beverage. Just by looking at it do you have any idea that the things floating in the glass are cold to the touch? Do you have any idea what the beverage will taste like?

Empiricism

- Empiricism is the claim that sense experience is the sole source of our knowledge about the world
- We start life as blank tablets, *tabula rasa*, and experience fills that tablet with information
- There is no genuine *a priori* knowledge about the nature of reality

Three Claims of Empiricism

1. The only source of genuine knowledge is sense experience
2. Reason is an unreliable and inadequate guide to knowledge unless it is grounded in sense experience
3. There is no evidence of innate ideas in the mind

1. The Only Source of Genuine Knowledge Is Sense Experience

- Empiricists think of the mind as a blank tablet upon which experience writes
- Experience provides knowledge of the world and the ability to conceive of qualities such as colors, odors, textures, sounds and tastes.
 - Do you have any idea what red would be like if you had not seen it with your own eyes?

Knowledge and Certainty

- Because experience provides knowledge of the world, the empiricist thinks we must be satisfied with evidence for the world that is as close to certainty as is possible
- Sense experience is not capable of providing absolute certainty about the world that rationalists demand
 - Reasoning based on sense experience takes the form of inductive arguments
 - Inductive arguments are arguments in which it is thought that the premises provide reasons supporting the probable truth of the conclusion
- Is there any reason we cannot be content with knowledge which is probable and allows us to successfully navigate the external world?

2. Reason Is an Unreliable and Inadequate Guide to Knowledge Unless It Is Grounded in Sense Experience

- The empiricist thinks the rationalist is playing silly mind games when the latter tries to access reality apart from experience
- Empiricism thinks that every idea, concept, or term must be traced back to experience in which it was hatched
- Meanings of terms and the believability of one's beliefs are subject to an empirical test
 - Without testing one's beliefs against reality, it is possible to have a consistent system of beliefs that is false
 - For example, the Harry Potter stories create a consistent world interwoven with the world as we know it, but it does not describe anything real

Empiricism and Reason

- Despite their critical analysis of rationalism and the emphasis on reason, the empiricists recognize that reason plays an important role in making experience intelligible
- The role of reason in gaining knowledge of the world is to organize information from sensory experience and draw conclusions from it
- But, contrary to the rationalists, reason without experience has nothing to process or reason about

3. There Is No Evidence of Innate Ideas in the Mind

- Unlike the rationalists, empiricists do not think there are innate ideas in the mind
 - If there are innate ideas in the mind, then everyone should possess these self-evident truths
 - Evidence in developmental psychology shows that babies and young children do not have ideas about causality, object permanence, or quantitative relationships
 - Some facts about reality have to be learned through experience
 - Even if there are universal truths, empiricists think they can explain these things without appealing to innate ideas

Where Do Universal Truths Come From?

- Empiricists think universal truths do not come from innate ideas but are
 - i) expressions of the relations of ideas, or
 - ii) generalizations from experience

Two General Solutions to Universal Truths

- Solution (i) admits of logical, mathematical or metaphysical statements that arise from definitions or linguistic conventions. These truths can be derived apart from experience but do not tell us about the world.
 - E.g., we know *a priori* that a bachelor is an unmarried man – this is known simply by the definition of words
- Solution (ii) says that the rationalists' universal truths are highly probable generalizations from experience
 - E.g., “every event has a cause” is not due to some innate ideas but from experience which tells us that events have causes
 - An empiricist would say that experience tells us that this phrase is very likely to be true in every case or that this phrase captures a methodology of experience (whenever there is an effect, look for a cause)

Locke on Knowledge

- Locke thinks it is obvious that experience provides us with knowledge of the world
- To understand knowledge requires that we analyze the contents of our minds and how they relate to the world
- Ideas: ideas are the basic elements of all knowledge
 - An idea is anything that is “the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding”
 - Ideas are the kinds of things expressed by the words “whiteness,” “sweetness,” “thinking,” “motion,” “human,” “army,” etc.

Simple Ideas

- Locke breaks down the basic units of knowledge
 - Simple ideas are the basic elements of thought
 - Simple ideas are known through experience
 - Simple ideas cannot be created by the mind independent of experience

Two Kinds of Simple Ideas

- Ideas of Sensation: these are ideas of qualities like hot, cold, soft, hard, stinky
- Ideas of Reflection: these are ideas gained from one's experience of thinking and are akin to introspection
 - These ideas include ideas of thinking, perception, doubting, knowing, willing, and other emotional and psychological states

Complex Ideas

- The mind records simple ideas received through the senses
- But, we have many ideas which are not simply single properties like color, sound, taste etc.
- How do we get the ideas of books, laptops, and philosophy teachers?
 - The mind processes simple ideas into complex ideas; complex ideas are the names given to the combinations of simple ideas that are taken to be unified objects
- Complex ideas are divided into the processes which produce them: compounding, relating, and abstracting

Compounded and Related Ideas

- **Compounding ideas** is the process of uniting similar or different simple ideas into complex ideas of objects or things
 - E.g., an apple is the united ideas of red, roundish, sweet, etc.
 - Astronomical space is the uniting of simple ideas from our limited experience of space
- **Relating ideas** is the process of relating one idea to another to come up with the complex idea of relationships
 - E.g., taller than, shorter than, brother and sister, cause and effect

Abstracted Ideas

- **Abstracting ideas** is the process of extracting from a series of particular experiences some more general idea
 - E.g., humanity, personhood, family of dogs, and buildings are examples of complex ideas created by abstracting from particular items of experience and forming the general idea of these things

What Is the Origin of Our Ideas?

- The ideas of bicycles and lollipops come from experience
- But, what about the ideas of perfection and goodness? Where did these ideas come from?
- Where does Descartes think the idea of perfection came from?
 - Locke thinks the idea of perfection comes from our experiences of imperfect things. We remove or abstract these imperfections from things and arrive at an idea of perfection.

How Would Locke Explain These Ideas?

- Locke thinks that from our experience we can reason about things we have not experienced
- How would Locke give an empirical explanation of these ideas
 - i. Infinity
 - ii. God
 - iii. Moral good and evil

What Is Our Connection to the External World?

- Does Locke think our knowledge represents the world as it really is?
- Locke thinks knowledge does represent reality but some parts of experience objectively represent reality and some parts subjectively represent reality
- Some properties are constant regardless of who perceives them
- Other properties appear to vary depending on who perceives them

Objective and Subjective Properties

- Primary Qualities: objective properties of things that are independent of any perceiver
 - These properties can be mathematically expressed and scientifically examined
 - Properties of solidity, extension, shape, size, motion, rest, number
- Secondary Qualities: subjective properties of things that depend upon a perceiving mind
 - These properties are the effects the object has on sense organs and whose appearance differs from the objects producing them
 - Properties of colors, sound, taste, smell, and texture

Primary Qualities and Knowledge

- Experiences of primary qualities give us knowledge of things as they really are
- Experiences of secondary qualities tell us how the world effects our senses but not about the reality of those things
- The reason it is easy to agree on the number of students in the class is because this is a primary quality
- But, we might disagree on the color of my shirt
- The external world and reality is the world science examines

What Do You Think?

- Locke thinks that experience tells us about reality.
- But, how can we know if Locke's claim is true since we cannot escape our experiences to compare them with reality?
- Will Locke's empiricism ultimately lead us back to skepticism?