

## VI. Locke

John Locke (1632 – 1704) was the founder of the school of **British Empiricism** as well as an important political philosopher, whom we will meet again in Module 3, Part 1 (personhood) and in Module 2 (ethics).

Locke's most important work in our context is *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, which he wrote for the purpose of "enquiring into the origin[...], certainty, and extent of human knowledge; together, with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent." In other words, he too was concerned with the questions – what can we know, and how can we reach certainty?

His theory, in brief, is that all human knowledge is of *ideas* and the relations between them. Words can only point to ideas and not to things in the world. Our ideas all come to us, ultimately, through the senses, and thus Locke is an empiricist because he thinks the origin of all knowledge is the senses.

This, however, does not mean Locke had full faith in the senses. Our knowledge is not certain because, as Locke was aware, we are hidden behind a **veil of ideas**. That is to say, we cannot be certain that our ideas correspond to what is out there, in the external world. Locke's epistemology in fact would play an important role in **the linguistic turn** of philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

In brief, Locke was not very optimistic about the certainty of our knowledge, although he was satisfied with its extent. He concluded that we know enough to live good lives on Earth, in the sense of a comfortable, pleasant and a moral life.

### Theory of knowledge as relations between ideas

Locke thinks that knowledge is a matter of discerning the relations between ideas, specifically of recognizing "agreement and connection" or "disagreement and repulsion" between different ideas. Thus we see a dog and recognize it as 'my dog' – the ideas of this dog and my dog are connected. Similarly we understand that the ideas of '3+4' and of '8' are not related by equality.

Locke distinguished between three degrees of knowledge:

1. **Intuitive knowledge** is gained when we directly perceive the relation between ideas. For example, we immediately know that 3+4 is not equal to 8. Intuitive knowledge involves immediately recognizing the "agreement and connections" or the "disagreement and repugnance" between ideas, and because we perceive this directly, we can be completely certain about this knowledge.
2. Through **demonstrative knowledge** we can also perceive agreement or disagreement between ideas, but this time, only indirectly, via further ideas. For example, we can demonstrate the truth of the idea "this is Peter's dog" by connecting the idea of the dog with the idea of Peter, through the idea of Peter's address on the dog's collar.

Such knowledge *might* be certain, but since it involves a chain of reasoning, the degree of certainty depends on the strength of the weakest claim.

3. **Sensitive knowledge** involves the relation between our ideas and the external world. Locke thought that it is certain that if I can see a green desk in front of me, there must be *something* in the world which is causing me to have this experience. However, we cannot be certain that this **external cause** of my sensations really is the way it appears to me. The table itself might be completely different, in reality, to my idea of it, i.e. the way it appears to me.

Locke was certain that there must be something 'out there' which causes my sensations and ideas. Still, when I perceive a table, it is not the table itself as an external object I perceive. I have no **epistemic access** to the world, but only to the way it appears to me. All sensation happens in the mind, and therefore, what I perceive is the idea of a table. Thus, one problem with Locke's philosophy is that, under this account, we seem to be trapped behind a "**veil of ideas**".

This would become an important discussion for the empiricists. Locke as we have seen, was reasonably satisfied with the certainty and extent of our knowledge. Hume would be more sceptical and Berkeley claimed that there is no external world, and that nothing exists apart from ideas. Both of these philosophers were also British Empiricists.

### **Simple and Complex Ideas**

Locke distinguishes between two types of ideas. The most basic are **simple ideas** - the flash of green, its rectangular shape, the sound it makes when I put my books down, the way it feels to me and so on. Together these make up **complex ideas**, in this case, the table.

In a similar argument to Descartes's explanation of how the mind creates fantastic monsters in dreams (*Meditations* I, 6-7), through the distinction between simple and complex ideas, Locke could explain how it is that we can have ideas, such as that of a unicorn, that are false, and which correspond to no external object.

Importantly, for both Descartes and Locke, simple objects or ideas are **ontologically basic** in that their existence is more certain and more fundamental than the complex objects which are made up of them. This is a fundamental principle of **atomism** and the **analytic approach**.

### **All knowledge comes through experience**

The key point of Locke's theory of knowledge is that all ideas come to us, ultimately, through **sensation**. In other words, sensitive knowledge is primary; intuitive and demonstrative knowledge, which we attain through **reflection**, operate upon the ideas that are provided by the senses.

To put it another way, all knowledge comes from **experience** which can be broken into two types; sensation and reflection. Knowledge about the external world comes from sensation, which provides simple and complex ideas, and is never certain. This is because we can only be sure of the way things appear to us, and not of how they really are. Thus we can never sense substances, for instance, nor can we sense necessity, causal connections and so on.

Reflection is more certain, because we can directly perceive or indirectly infer the connections between ideas. However, these ideas can only have come to us through the senses in the first place.

‘The Senses at first let in particular *Ideas*, and furnish the yet empty Cabinet: And the Mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the Memory, and Names got to them. Afterwards the Mind, proceeding farther, abstracts them, and by Degrees learns the use of general Names. In this manner the Mind comes to be furnish’d with *Ideas* and Language, the materials about which to exercise its discursive Faculty.’ (Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding* 1.II.15)

### **Against Nativism (Tabula Rasa)**

Locke’s criticism of the notion that some ideas might be innate shows his anti-dogmatic approach. Traditionally, certain concepts, like that of GOD, or propositions such as “what is, is”, have been taken as given, innate ideas. The suggestion that they are present in the mind as necessary truths prevents disagreement, or discussion. Thus Locke’s critique of nativism was intended to promote scientific understanding, anti-dogmatism and democracy.

Locke understands the nativist claim to be that there are some ideas which are not given through experience; that is, they are not given to us through the senses or through reflection. A common belief at the time was that they are ‘God given’. It is not clear whose theory Locke was criticising, although it is likely he had Descartes in mind.

Locke’s first claim against nativism is that if such ideas or propositions were innate then all people should have them. Yet these allegedly innate ideas are not universal. For example, there are many peoples who negate the idea of God, or else who conceive of him or her in a very different way from European Christians. Thus the idea of God as a benevolent and omnipotent being cannot be innate, because not everybody has this idea. Similarly, children or people with severe learning disabilities could never know that “what is, is” unless they learn the meanings of these words first, through experience.

One reply we have already met is that for an idea to be innate does not mean that everyone is consciously aware of it. Innate ideas are not as ideas which babies already understand – clearly there are none – but rather as those ideas which any child *could* understand, given the right circumstances (recall Plato’s *Meno*). In particular, we need certain experiences – such as a capable teacher asking the right questions – in order to ‘trigger’ this understanding.

Nativists who make this reply seem to recognize the importance of experience and particularly sensation. Locke interprets this to mean that their positions are not different from his own. Moreover, he replies that, in that case, all true propositions must be innate, since given the right circumstances we could understand them. This type of argument, known as ***reductio ad absurdum***, criticizes a position (in this case, nativism) by drawing absurd consequences that are unacceptable even to its those who subscribe to it (in this case, the absurd consequence is that all true ideas are innate).