

Remote Learning Module for 8 April 2020

Lecture Notes: John Locke – *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Last time we took examined Locke’s life and times along with the main elements of his political thought. Today we will turn to his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which is often considered to mark the birth of modern empiricism. As a rough and ready range finder, this consideration is fair enough, but as well see today, it can be misleading because, despite his resistance to Descartes’ recourse to innate ideas as requisite for reliable knowledge, Locke is quite content to accept the Cartesian and Galilean distinction between the physical and sensory qualities of material things.

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— Epistemology —

(1) There are No Innate Ideas.

The central thesis developed in Book II of the *Essay* is that the causes of all our ideas can be traced either to an original sensory stimulation, or to what Locke calls an “act of reflection.” He begins by defining an *idea*. Let’s note that this definition proceeds from one of these acts of reflection (attending to the operation of our own minds by way of introspection). An idea, he asserts is “whatsoever is an object of the understanding when a man thinks.” Ideas, in other words, are the objects of our conscious awareness. Let’s also note that while this definition may appear consonant with Hobbes’ epistemic warrant for nominalism (words refer primarily to sensations and only secondarily, by way of human agreement, to the occupants of the external world), Locke proposes to fashion an account whereby the real properties of bodies in motion can indeed be known directly.

Locke begins his critique of the innateness hypothesis by associating it with the likes of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and their rationalist followers, who, he supposes, needed innate ideas to have been “placed” in our minds by God. Locke’s critical strategy is to deploy Ockham’s Razor (or the principle of parsimony) against the notion that we possess ideas that we could not have acquired from experience alone. If we can show that all human knowledge can be explained without reference to innate ideas, then the latter are unnecessary, and therefore dispensable; the simpler, more parsimonious, theory wins.

In pursuit of this explanation, Locke provided a fertile metaphor: at birth the mind is like a *tabula rasa*—literally, a “scraped tablet.” The sorts of tablets he had in mind were thin trays filled with wax into which a stylus might be inserted in order to draw geometrical figures or write words; after being scored and scoured with words or images or both, the wax would be scraped (erased) for reuse. On Locke’s metaphor, the sensory apparatus of a percipient being works like a stylus, marking up the *tabula* of the mind. These marks are what we call experiences. Sensory stimuli, then, provide the *originals* of all our subsequent ideas, including those acquired by way of mental *acts of reflection*, that is, either attending to the operations of

the mind directly, or by using our faculties of memory or imagination to compound or divide the originals.

Locke’s argument proceeds by offering three objections to the rationalist contention that some ideas are innate (that is, not acquired by way of experience).

<i>Classical Arguments</i>	<i>Locke’s Objections</i>
(a) People generally agree that some ideas are innate.	(a) This reasoning commits the fallacy of <i>argumentum ad populum</i> ; moreover, there is no principle or assertion to which <i>all</i> people assent.
(b) All people will know and assent to certain truths when they come to the age of reason.	(b) But all people will also come to know truths that are clearly not innate.
(c) Plato’s argument: the senses cannot furnish us with most of our abstract ideas.	(c) Yes, they can: abstraction is a mental operation (an act of reflection), not a category of ideas.

(2) Leibniz’s Rejoinder.

In his *New Essays on the Understanding*, Leibniz contends that Locke’s arguments confuse the *order of discovery* with the *order of justification*. Of course, we don’t “learn” or discover the Law of Contradiction, the Principle of Sufficient Reason, or the idea of absolute equality without experience; but neither can these ideas be justified by experience. Descartes, says Leibniz, was ambiguous on this point: we use geometry to regulate physics, not the other way around. Plato, however, got the matter exactly right:

—With the *logic of discovery* we learn about right triangles by looking at various particular instances.

—With the *logic of justification* we prove that all right triangles obey the Pythagorean Theorem, and proofs are analytic and *apriori*.

Now, both Locke and Leibniz suppose that truth consists in a correspondence with reality. Their disagreement, then, concerns the nature of this correspondence. For Locke, true propositions correspond to brute facts about experience (our experience explains our analyses). For Leibniz, true propositions correspond to the rational order of things (analysis explains our experiences). For Locke, the test of truth is observation and experiment; for Leibniz the test of truth is reasoning from axioms. Both thinkers tend to collapse distinctions between explanation and justification.

(3) From Epistemology to Metaphysics.

As we noted at the outset, Locke's *Essay* contains elements derived from both Hobbes and Descartes. On the one hand, with Hobbes, Locke holds that *all* knowledge comes from experience; what we know are our ideas. On the other hand, Locke agrees with Descartes that truth consists in a correspondence between signs and the things that signs signify. There is a tension in this distinction that Berkeley will exploit to dramatic effect in his critique of Locke: we do not *experience* the correspondence. Before we turn to Berkeley's critique next period, however, let's take further stock of the two distinctions that leave Locke with one foot in Cartesian rationalism, and the other foot in Hobbesian empiricism.

Locke's empiricism divides ideas into two categories: simple and complex. Simple ideas originate in sensation; they cannot be broken down into simpler perceptual events. In other words, you can't derive the meanings of terms like "yellow," "sharp," "cold," "sweet," "smooth," "wet," etc. from simpler experiences. These sorts of words require operational definitions. Locke adduces that to learn the meaning of the word, "solid," one might put a football between one's hands and try to join them—can't do it? Well, that's what it means to encounter a solid object. Complex ideas are combinations of simples: the idea of an apple, for instance, combines the simple ideas we have of red, spherical, and sweet as co-present in the experience of a particular thing.

Locke's rationalism emerges from a distinction he shares with Descartes and Galileo between the physical and sensory properties of things—what Locke calls the *primary* and *secondary* qualities of the objects of our experience. It is this rationalist instinct that leads Locke to part metaphysical company with Hobbes.

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— **Metaphysics** —

(1) Two Flavors of Realism.

Both Descartes and Galileo held that the real qualities of things in the world can be distinguished from the qualities we ascribe to them because of how they affect our senses (recall Galileo's feather); and the tool we use to divide qualities into these two categories—*physical* and *sensory*—is mathematical physics. Let's call this view, *Inferential Realism*, because it asserts that we must transcend the limits of our experience by way of logical inferences in order to come to know the real properties of things. Think here of how Galileo reasoned his way to the Law of Inertia.

Locke opts for a different account. On his view, every idea, whether simple or complex, contains two sorts of qualities: ones that are caused by and perfectly resemble things in the world (these are the primary qualities), and ones that are mediated by our sensory apparatus, and are thus caused by the operation of our sensory receptors (these are the secondary qualities, and they do not resemble things in the world). Let's call this view *Representational Realism*, because it asserts that we have direct access to real physical properties thanks to representation by resemblance.

Here's a more up-to-date illustration of Locke's distinction. Let's think of our visual systems as operating like cameras. Note that the first "cameras" were whole darkened rooms in Locke's day, with a small apertures that allowed pinpricks of light to enter; thus, an object positioned so that an image of it would be formed by the light, would appear just as images appear on the retinas of our eyes. Now consider a photographic image of three people standing six feet away from each other on the steps of the JUB printed onto a glossy sheet of paper. On the one hand, this photograph would re-present a number of primary qualities: there really are three people, having two eyes each, and the proportional distance between them is faithfully reproduced in the photograph. On the other hand, there would be several secondary qualities present in the photograph as well: real people are not glossy; they are not two-dimensional; and they were not surrounded by a white border when the photograph was taken. These secondary qualities were caused by the sensory receptors and reproductive technology of the camera and the printer.

Locke's realism amounts to the assertion that our ideas of primary qualities resemble the qualities of things in the world: solidity, extension in space, figure, mobility—these qualities are, in a word, real.

(2) Substance.

But *what* has these primary qualities? Substances, of course, just as Aristotle articulated with his distinction between grammatical and metaphysical subjects of attribution. Locke has no objection to this familiar logical maneuver, but his explication of the idea of substance takes a skeptical (if not outright embarrassing) turn. To see why, let's recall Descartes' wax example. Descartes said the idea of substance must be innate; substances must be apprehended *sola mente percipere* (by the mind alone). We know that wax is "extended mutable stuff," by way of inferential realism—we draw inferences from our understanding, not the perceptual qualities of the wax either before or after the candle melts. But Locke will have no truck with innateness, and so he holds that in fact we have *no ideas* of substances (all of our ideas are experiential); rather what we have is an enormous question-mark. What actually possesses the primary qualities of a real thing is, as he says, an "I-don't-know-what." We know that there are real substances, but we do not, nor cannot, know their essences. Note, in consequence, that unlike Descartes and Spinoza, Locke does not adopt a plenum physics; rather he follows Newton's vacuum physics.

(3) Language.

Book III of the *Essay* offers up a philosophy of language. Definitions: one and all definitions are descriptive, that is, contrivances for avoiding long lists of simple ideas. Names on the other hand are not definable; they simply label simple ideas. Propositions encode our knowledge into communicable form. Knowledge amounts to perceptions of connections and agreements (or repugnancies and disagreements) among any of our ideas. These agreements and disagreements are the stuff of propositions.

(4) God.

Locke holds to a very simple version of what Kant will later call the “Cosmological Argument,” an argument that appears in Aristotle’s *Physics*, and that Descartes reproduced in the *Meditations*: (i) I am certain of my existence; but (ii) I am not adequate to produce my own existence; so, (iii) something must be the adequate cause of my existence.

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On Friday, we’ll turn our attention to George Berkeley, whose critique of both Cartesian rationalism and Locke’s empiricism led him down an argumentative path to a species of metaphysical phenomenalism which he called *immaterialism* (and which Kant would later identify as *subjective idealism*). Be well everyone, and, although you have probably tired by now of my saying so, let’s remember: social distancing saves lives, which is presumably why we are still not in JUB 202 presently.