

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006  
Russell Marcus, Instructor  
email: [philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org](mailto:philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org)  
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>  
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, March 22

## I. Review Midterm

## II. Starting work on John Locke (1632-1704), from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Locke's work comes in large part as a response to Descartes.

We will read Locke as both an empiricist and a materialist, though this is actually wrong.

Locke is clearly a dualist, but we will not examine any elements of that dualism.

The terms 'empiricist' and 'rationalist' are normally predicated of Locke and Descartes, respectively.

There are problems about what the terms actually mean, and whether they apply exactly to Locke and Descartes.

We will ignore these worries, in this introductory class, and adopt the traditional reading.

We will start by looking at three criticisms of Descartes, by Locke.

These objections should make it clear why Locke is generally called an empiricist and Descartes is called a rationalist.

## III. Criticism #1: Descartes's standard for knowledge is too high.

For Descartes, our knowledge of everything except the cogito depends on God.

In contrast, we seem to be able to know about the world around us, without knowing about God.

Descartes is driven to his position by his claim that we must be certain of something beyond any doubt if we are to know it.

Unless we defeat the deceiver, we know almost nothing.

Maybe Descartes has too high a standard for knowledge.

Locke thinks that we can relax this a bit.

I mentioned earlier that knowledge does not seem to entail certainty.

It does require justification, and truth.

That is, if we know that p, p must be true, and we must have good reasons to believe that p.

But, it does not seem to follow that I must not be able to doubt that p.

So, Locke's criticism of Descartes is in line with this position.

Locke does not worry about defeating a deceiver.

He just worries about having good justifications for the beliefs he will count as knowledge.

## IV. Criticism #2: There are no innate ideas.

Descartes defended the new science of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and its method of experimentation.

Locke defends modern science as well.

The new science posits a world of material objects.

But what are these objects like?

We think of these objects through use of the imagination.

For Descartes, though, these images are confused.

They are subject to the errors of the resemblance hypothesis.

The only real properties are those we can understand by pure reason, through innate ideas.

See Meditation Five, pp 64-65.

For Descartes, Class III ideas (e.g. of the self, God, and mathematics) are innate.

Locke points out that we do not know some of the ideas which Descartes alleges are innate.

For example, children do not know lots of them, §I.I.5.

[Note on Locke references:

Our reading has selections from Book I, Chapter I; Book II, Chapter I; and Book II, Chapter VIII.

There are several sections in each chapter.

§I.I.5 means Book I, Chapter I, Section 5.

§II.VIII.15 means Book II, Chapter VIII, Section 15.]

Consider Goldbach's conjecture, that every even number can be written as the sum of two odd primes.

Even the best mathematicians do not know if Goldbach's conjecture is true.

Descartes says that we use reason to discover the truth or falsity of mathematical claims.

Today, we might say that a priori ideas are learned independently of experience.

Even our knowledge of the physical world is supposed to be innate, according to Descartes.

Recall the story of the wax, in Meditation Two.

Descartes says that the information we get from the senses is just not good enough to support clear and distinct judgments about the physical world.

We must rely on our reasoning.

Nobody questions whether experience is necessary for us to have knowledge.

The question is whether experience is sufficient to account for what we know.

Locke says that experience alone is sufficient: All knowledge derives from experience.

This is the definition of empiricism.

One problem for empiricists is how to explain the certainty of  $2+2=4$ .

No possible experience can support it.

2 schminkles + 2 schminkles = 4 schminkles, even if we never experience schminkles.

Sense experience seems insufficient to justify our knowledge of mathematics.

We know a lot about objects we could not possibly sense.

Locke's account of our knowledge, of the world and of mathematics, does not rely on innate ideas.

In fact, he thinks we can account for all of Descartes' Class III ideas on the basis of experience.

The mind begins as a blank slate, §II.I.2.

We learn particulars, first.

Then, we generalize, or abstract, to find universals, like those of mathematics.