

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006
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Lecture Notes, March 27

I. Quiz: Describe one of Locke's criticisms of Descartes.

Ib. Discussion of Paper assignment, which is available on line.

II. Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas

Locke presents the doctrine of abstract ideas in order to account for what Descartes called innate ideas. For Locke, all knowledge begins with experience.

We get knowledge of mathematical objects, which we do not experience, by a process of abstraction.

We see doughnuts and frisbees, for examples, and focus only on their common shape to arrive at the idea of a circle.

Abstraction is required in other areas, as well.

Consider extension, which Descartes believed to be one of the few real properties of physical objects.

We experience extended things, but not extension itself.

Any ideas of extension, size, or shape must arise from abstraction.

Let us consider this process of abstraction in a bit more detail.

We start with our sense experiences, of several chairs, for example.

We notice that they have common properties: backs, seats, legs.

We give a name to whatever has these common properties.

This name, 'chair', is abstract, in the sense that it doesn't refer to a particular chair.

Instead, it is a general term, which applies to any chair.

The same process yields 'table'.

Now, we can consider the commonalities among tables and chairs, and sofas and desks.

This yields an even more general term, 'furniture'.

We have abstracted again.

The same process which yields 'chair' gives us other terms like 'house' and 'apartment building'.

We can abstract again to get 'domicile'.

Similarly, we arrive at names like 'animal', and 'person'.

All of the objects we have considered are extended.

We can abstract again, and arrive at a term, 'extension'.

Similarly, we get the term, 'motion'.

These ideas of bodies and motion are the foundations of physical science.

A scientist uses 'motion', for example, when he asserts ' $v = \Delta s / \Delta t$ ', that velocity is equal to the change in displacement over time.

Lastly, we can abstract to the term, 'physical object'.

A progression of abstraction leads us from terms for particular sensations to terms for bodies.

Terms are supposed, by both Locke and Descartes, to stand for ideas.

Descartes and Locke both hold what we can call the representational theory, on which ideas are like pictures in the mind.

The resemblance hypothesis says that the ideas in my mind are a fair representation of reality. Ideas correspond to external objects, like chairs, people, or even circles.

In sum, we have a term 'bodies'.

The term stands for an abstract idea, 'bodies'.

An idea is a representation of an external object.

So, the term 'bodies', which we have constructed to stand for an abstract idea, refers to bodies, which are physical objects.

To account for mathematics, we abstract as well.

See Locke, §I.1.15.

We abstract the triangularity of triangular-shaped drawings from their specific properties: the chalk, the slight curve in one side, the location on the board.

We ignore some properties and focus on others, like the triangularity.

Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas provides an account which avoids Descartes's claim that the senses are irrelevant to knowledge, and that we know about the world through the mind alone.

Locke thinks that we can trace all of our uses of general terms, including mathematical ones, to our original sense experiences.

This account also takes care of a third worry about Descartes's methods.

III. Locke's Criticism of Descartes #3: We need our senses in order to start reasoning.

It seems that our ideas begin with sensation, §II.I.23.

Then, we can start reasoning, or reflecting, §II.I.4.

Recall how Descartes rejected the resemblance hypothesis, and any sensory information.

Locke claims that we do use the senses to get knowledge.

Consider §II.VIII.21: the water temperature experiment.

What properties do objects really have?

Descartes says we can not trust the senses.

Locke thinks that Descartes underestimates the role that the senses play.