Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

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Hamilton College
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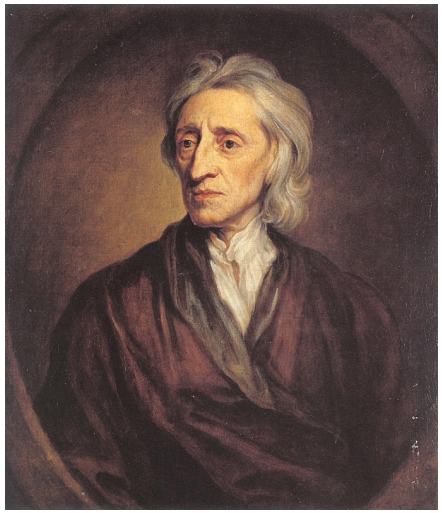


Class 15 - Locke
Identity and the Self
Abstract Ideas

Business

- Today
  - Finish Locke
  - Minds and self
  - Abstract ideas and language
- Review Sessions
  - This evening at 7pm here, with me
  - Tomorrow (Wednesday) at 7 with Emir in the philosophy building
- Thursday: Midterm
  - You may bring a laptop to type your exam.
  - You may write longhand.

Four Central Topics in Locke's Work

✔1. Arguments against innate ideas

✔2. The primary/secondary distinction

3. An account of personal identity, including Locke's approach to the mind/body problem

4. Locke's philosophy of language, including the doctrine of abstract ideas

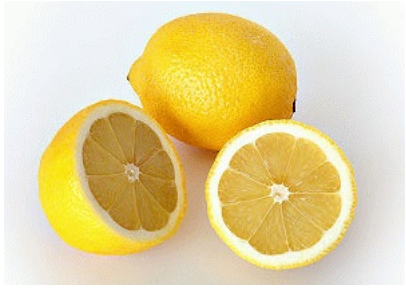
The Mind-Body Problem

- While Locke was suspected of Hobbesian materialism, he is clearly a dualist.
- So, Locke is saddled with a typical mind-body problem.
- Locke does not provide a Cartesian-style solution to the mind-body problem, despairing of any satisfactory account.
  - "Supposing the sensation or idea we name whiteness be produced in us by a certain number of globules, which, having a verticity about their own centres, strike upon the retina of the eye, with a certain degree of rotation, as well as progressive swiftness; it will hence easily follow, that the more the superficial parts of any body are so ordered as to reflect the greater number of globules of light, and to give them the proper rotation, which is fit to produce this sensation of white in us, the more white will that body appear, that from an equal space sends to the retina the greater number of such corpuscles, with that peculiar sort of motion... I cannot (and I would be glad any one would make intelligible that he did), conceive how bodies without us can any ways affect our senses, but by the immediate contact of the sensible bodies themselves, as in tasting and feeling, or the impulse of some sensible particles coming from them, as in seeing, hearing, and smelling; by the different impulse of which parts, caused by their different size, figure, and motion, the variety of sensations is produced in us" (IV.II.11).

Locke's Humility

- There are lawful correspondences between physical events and some mental states.
- Since these correspondences are actual and lawful, it seems possible for matter to think.
- It seems equally unlikely for whatever substance in which thought resides to be the seat of thought as for matter to be the seat of thought.
  - "We have the *ideas* of *matter* and *thinking*, but possibly shall never be able to know whether any mere material being thinks or not, it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own *ideas*, without revelation, to discover whether omnipotence has not given to some systems of matter fitly disposed a power to perceive and think, or else joined and fixed to matter so disposed a thinking immaterial substance - it being in respect of our notions not much more remote from our comprehension to conceive that God can, if he pleases, superadd to matter a faculty of thinking than that he should superadd to it another substance with a faculty of thinking, since we do not know in what thinking consists, nor to what sort of substances the Almighty has been pleased to give that power..." (IV.III.6, AW 393b).
  - "*The extent of our knowledge* comes not only short of the reality of things, but even of the extent of our own *ideas*"(IV.III.6, AW 393a).

The Hard Problem



- So, why do the lemons appear yellow?
- We lack an explanation of the connection between my quale and its cause.
- Why is it that such and such motions in the air cause me to hear a symphony?
- Why is it that certain wavelengths of light cause me to see blue?
  - "That the size, figure, and motion of one body should cause a change in the size, figure, and motion of another body is not beyond our conception. The separation of the parts of one body upon the intrusion of another and the change from rest to motion upon impulse, these and the like seem to have some *connection* one with another. And if we knew these primary qualities of bodies, we might have reason to hope we might be able to know a great deal more of these operations of them one upon another. But our minds not being able to discover any *connection* between these primary qualities of bodies and the sensations that are produced in us by them, we can never be able to establish certain and undoubted rules of the consequence or *coexistence* of any secondary qualities, though we could discover the size, figure, or motion of those invisible parts which immediately produce them. We are so far from knowing what figure, size, or motion of parts produce a yellow color, a sweet taste, or a sharp sound that we can by no means conceive how any *size, figure*, or *motion* of any particles can possibly produce in us the *idea* of any *color*, *taste*, or *sound* whatsoever; there is no conceivable *connection* between the one and the other" (IV.III.13).

Who Am I?

Identity of Objects is a General Problem

The Ship of Theseus

- We can replace every plank on the ship, one at a time.
- It changes its material composition completely, but remains the same ship.
- We can make a new ship with the old wood, and find ourselves completely confused about what to say.
- Is the ship that Theseus uses, with all new materials, his ship?
- Or, is the new ship made of the old wood his ship?

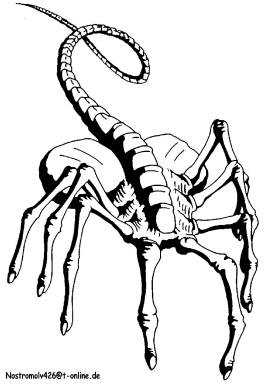
The Self

- We might make a distinction between artifacts and natural kinds.
  - Maybe there are no facts about the ship of Theseus.
  - Maybe the ship itself *is* constantly changing.
  - We have a merely practical problem of determining which ship belongs to Theseus.
- For our selves, we have a deeper problem.
  - We remain constant.
  - I have interests in the future of my self that I do not have for other people.
  - There seems to be an underlying haecceity.
- Descartes identified the self with the soul.
  - Reincarnation, Pre-existence, Eternality
- Hobbes identified the self with the body.
- Locke: the self is a moral (forensic) concept.
  - Used for practical purposes of ascribing responsibility

Relative Identity

- Identity is relative to a sortal, to a kind of thing
- A lump of plasticine can be the same lump, but a different statue.
- We can not know how to identify something unless we know what kind of thing it is.
- So, we can not know what our identity is until we know what kind of thing we are.

Against Biological Criteria



- Against the simple body theory
  - An animal is not merely its matter.
  - The matter remains after death while the animal does not.
  - Our bodies are constantly changing
  - Our selves underlie those changes.
- The refined body (or biological) theory
  - 'Man', or 'human being', is a type of animal whose identity is determined functionally.
  - "The identity of the same *man* consists...in nothing but a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body" (II.XXVII.6, AW 369a).
  - This sort, human being, can not serve as the sort of our selves.
  - A human is identified by the functional organization of the body; it is a biological thing.
- Still, a person is not a biological thing.
  - "[A person] is a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places, which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it..." (II.XXVII.9, AW 370a).
- Aliens and sentient machines could be persons without having our biology.

Against The Soul Theory

- "Souls [are], as far as we know anything of them, in their nature, indifferent to any parcel of matter..." (§II.XXVII.14, AW 372a).
- Imagine that a soul had two successive incarnations.
- We wouldn't say that there were only one person.
- "Suppose it to be the same soul that was in *Nestor* or *Thersites* at the siege of *Troy*...which it may have been, as well as it is now the soul of any other man. But he now having no consciousness of any of the actions of either of *Nestor* or *Thersites*, does or can he conceive himself the same person with either of them? Can he be concerned in either of their actions, attribute them to himself, or think them his own more than the actions of any other men that ever existed? Thus, this consciousness not reaching to any of the actions of either of those men, he is no more one self with either of them than if the soul or immaterial spirit that now informs him had been created and began to exist, when it began to inform his present body..." (II.XXVII.14, AW 372a).
- We don't identify ourselves with our past (or future) lives.

The Consciousness Theory of the Self

- Locke identifies the self with the thinking thing.
- “If the same consciousness...can be transferred from one thinking substance to another, it will be possible that two thinking substances may make but one person. For the same consciousness being preserved, whether in the same or different substances, the personal identity is preserved” (II.XXVII.13, AW 371b).
- For Locke, what makes the same person over time, is consciousness, and, especially, connection through memory, which Locke calls consciousness extending backwards.
- Thus, for example, the day and night man, who has divided consciousness, is two different persons in one body.
- Note: Locke’s solution is non-substantial.
  - The self is a conceptual construction.

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Empiricism and Mathematics

- The empiricist has difficulty explaining our knowledge of mathematics.
- It is difficult to see how experience can support universal claims about mathematical objects, which are not sensible.
- Locke's account of our knowledge of mathematics, like his account of our knowledge of God, does not rely on innate ideas.
- Instead, it relies on intuition and demonstration, starting with ideas of sensation, and then using reason to discover relations among them.
  - "I do not doubt but it will be easily granted tht the *knowledge* we have of *mathematical truths* is not only certain, but *real knowledge*, and not the bare empty vision of vain insignificant *chimeras* of the brain. And yet, if we will consider, we shall find that it is only of our own *ideas" (*IV.IV.6, AW 404b).
- We discussed the psychological capacities for reflection.
  - Among them, abstraction will provide an account of our knowledge of mathematics.
  - We start with an overview about how language works.

Locke's Philosophy of Language

- Words stand for ideas in our minds.
  - Controversial claim
  - We ordinarily take many words to stand for objects outside of our minds.
  - We normally take 'this table' to refer to the table, not to my idea of the table.
- A representational theory of mind
  - Ideas are like pictures in the mind
  - Terms stand for ideas, which correspond to objects, like chairs, people, or even circles.

Words Stand for Ideas

- Locke's argument:

  LL1. Society depends on our ability to communicate our ideas, so words must be able to stand for ideas.

  LL2. Since my ideas precede my communication, words must refer to my ideas before they could refer to anything else.

  LL3. If words refer both to my ideas and to something else (e.g. your idea, or an external object), then they would be ambiguous.

  LL4. But, words are not ordinarily ambiguous.

  LL5. So, words ordinarily do not stand for something other than my ideas.

  LLC. So, words stand for my ideas.

- "[It is] perverting the use of words, and bring[ing] unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own minds" (§III.II.5).

Words Do Not Stand for External Objects

"A child having taken notice of nothing in the metal he hears called gold, but the bright shining yellow colour, he applies the word gold only to his own idea of that colour, and nothing else; and therefore calls the same colour in a peacock's tail gold. Another that hath better observed, adds to shining yellow great weight: and then the sound gold, when he uses it, stands for a complex idea of a shining yellow and a very weighty substance. Another adds to those qualities fusibility: and then the word gold signifies to him a body, bright, yellow, fusible, and very heavy. Another adds malleability. Each of these uses equally the word gold, when they have occasion to express the idea which they have applied it to: but it is evident that each can apply it only to his own idea; nor can he make it stand as a sign of such a complex idea as he has not..." (Locke, *Essay* §III.II.3).

General Terms

- Particular terms correspond to simple ideas.
- There are too many particular things for them all to have particular names.
- We have to use general names.
  1. Human capacity is limited (III.IIII.2, AW 377a).
  2. You don't have names for my ideas and I don't have names for yours (III.IIII.3, AW 377a-b).
  3. Science depends on generality (III.IIII.4, AW 377b).
- We use general names for communication and for science.

Abstraction

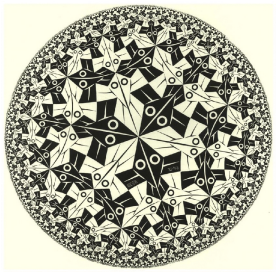
- sense experiences
- backs, seats, legs
- chair
- table
- furniture
- house
- apartment building
- domicile
- animal
- person
- extension
- motion
- substance

Abstraction and Science

- Ideas of bodies and motion are the foundations of physical science.
  - $v = \Delta s/\Delta t$
- We can abstract to the term, 'physical object'.
- General terms, and the abstract ideas to which they refer, apply to particular objects, but only to certain aspects of those objects.
  - "[A general] *idea* [of man] is made, not by any new addition, but only...by leaving out the shape, and some other properties signified by the name *man*, and retaining only a body, with life, sense, and spontaneous motion, comprehended under the name *animal*"(III.IIII.8, AW 378a).
- A progression of abstraction leads us from terms for particular sensations to terms for bodies.
- So, the term 'bodies', which we have constructed to stand for an abstract idea, refers to bodies, which are physical objects.

Abstraction and Mathematics

- General names are the foundation for formal sciences like mathematics and logic as well.
- We get knowledge of mathematical objects, which we do not experience, by a process of abstraction.
- Doughnuts and frisbees, and circles
- We leave out other properties, form an abstract idea, and coin a general term to stand for it.
  - We experience extended things, but not extension itself.



General Terms and Proofs

- Both the use of general terms and our ability to remember the distinct parts of a proof are essential to mathematics.
- “If...the perception that the same *ideas* will eternally have the same habitudes and relations is not a sufficient ground of knowledge, there could be no knowledge of general propositions in mathematics, for no mathematical demonstration would be any other than particular” (IV.I.9, AW 388b).
- The abstract generality of mathematical claims supports their certainty.
- “[The mathematician] is certain all his knowledge concerning such *ideas* is real knowledge, because intending things no further than they agree with his *ideas*, he is sure what he knows concerning those figures, when they have barely an *ideal existence* in his mind, will hold true of them also when they have real existence in matter, his consideration being barely of those figures which are the same, wherever or however they exist” (IV.IV.6, AW 404b).

Ethics, Too

For certainty being but the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our *ideas*; and demonstration nothing but the perception of such agreement, by the intervention of other *ideas* or mediums, our moral *ideas*, as well as mathematical, being archetypes themselves, and so adequate and complete *ideas*; all the agreement or disagreement which we shall find in them will produce real knowledge, as well as in mathematical figures (IV.IV.7, AW 404b).

Nominalism

some words are merely names and do not denote real objects or properties

- We are all nominalists about fictional objects, like the Easter Bunny.
- Some people are nominalists about numbers.
- Locke is a nominalist about color, and other secondary properties.
- Locke is also a nominalist about the referents of abstract ideas.
  - "Universality does not belong to things themselves, which are all of them particular in their existence, even those words and *ideas* which in their signification are general. When therefore we quit particulars, the generals that rest are only creatures of our own making, their general nature being nothing but the capacity they are put into by the understanding of signifying or representing many particulars. For the signification they have is nothing but a relation that, by the mind of man, is added to them" (III.IIII.11, AW 379a).

Essences

- Locke does not have much to say, positively, about essences.
- Since we do not have sense experience of the essence of an object, there is little to be said.
  - "The real internal, but generally, in substances, unknown constitution of things on which their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their *essence*" (III.III.15, AW 380a).
- To arrive at an idea of essence, we must generalize from particular sensation, and form an abstract idea.
- But, strictly speaking, essences, being abstract ideas, are not real, either.
  - "That which is *essential* belongs to it as a condition, by which it is of this or that sort; but take away the consideration of its being ranked under the name of some abstract *idea*, and then there is nothing necessary to it, nothing inseparable from it" (III.VI.6, AW 383b).
- Again, Locke is a nominalist about essences.

Objectivity without Objects

- For all his nominalism, we are not supposed to think that Locke denigrates mathematical or moral knowledge.
  - "All the discourses of the mathematicians about the squaring of a circle, conic sections, or any other part of mathematics, *do not concern* the *existence* of any of those figures, but their demonstrations, which depend on their *ideas*, are the same, whether there is any square or circle existing in the world or not. In the same manner the truth and certainty of *moral* discourses abstract from the lives of men and the existence of those virtues in the world of which they treat" (IV.IV.8, AW 405a).
- Our knowledge of the external world, the causes of our sensations and the laws that govern physical interactions, contains deep mysteries, inexplicable absent something like a rationalist's principle of sufficient reason.
  - "I think not only that it becomes the modesty of philosophy not to pronounce magisterially where we want that evidence that can produce knowledge, but also that it is of use to us to discern how far our knowledge does reach, for the state we are at present in, not being that of vision, we must in many things content ourselves with faith and probability" (IV.III.6, AW 394a).