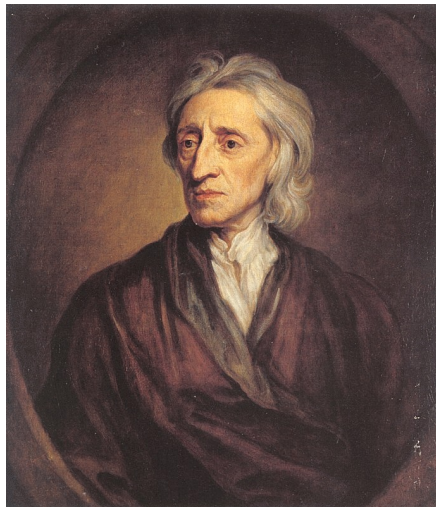


Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

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Hamilton College
Spring 2014



Class #15 - Locke
Identity and the Self
Abstract Ideas

Business

- Today
 - Finish Locke
 - Abstract ideas and language
- Review Session
 - Tomorrow (Wednesday) at 7 with Sean 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

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.III.2, AW 377a).
 2. You don't have names for my ideas and I don't have names for yours (III.III.3, AW 377a-b).
 3. Science depends on generality (III.III.4, AW 377b).
- We use general names for communication and for science.

Abstraction

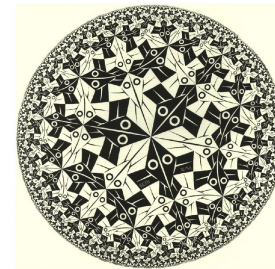
- sense experiences
- backs, seats, legs
- chair
- table
- furniture
- house
- apartment building
- domicile
- animal
- person
- extension
- motion
- substance

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.III.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.III.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).