

## 1. Locke's Goal

Locke's goal in the *Essay* is to investigate the nature and extent of human understanding and knowledge, or, put simply, of human cognition. We would be well served to understand the limits of human understanding. If we understand the limits, then we will not waste energy on ill conceived intellectual projects. If we cannot fathom, say, the nature of the link between body and mind, why attempt to discover it? And why pay attention to any charlatan who claims to have solved the mind/body problem?

## 2. Ideas

The concept of *ideas* features centrally in Locke's *Essay*. Ideas are the immediate objects of our understanding, thought, and experience. When you have an experience, you are most immediately experiencing an idea; likewise with understanding. Says Locke, "Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call *idea*." Locke thinks this is unproblematic: "I presume it will be easily granted me, that there are such *ideas* in men's minds; everyone is conscious of them in himself, and men's words and actions will satisfy him, that they are in others."

Ideas come in two main types: concepts and percepts. **Concepts** are the units of thought and speech by which we *classify* things; e.g. the concept DOG picks out and classifies all (and only the) dogs. **Percepts** are the qualitative features of sensory and introspective experience. Normally, if I were to smack my hand with a hammer, I would be aware of a particularly unpleasant experiential quality, what we call "pain." Percepts characterize "what it's like" to have a conscious experience. But they do not classify things.

One main part of Locke's project is to demonstrate that all our concepts could, and indeed do, originate in the percepts of sensory experience. Call this **pure empiricism about concepts**.

## 3. Against nativism

**Nativism** is the view that we are born with beliefs. Locke aims to undermine the case for nativism, and establish that nativism is false. One popular argument Locke encountered for nativism was **the Argument from General Consent**. In what follows, 'PNC' is short for "principle

of non-contradiction. PNC says: it is impossible for something to be both true and false (i.e. for Q and not-Q to both be true). Locke considers this to be the most plausible candidate for an innate belief.

1. For any claim Q, if all humans believe that Q, then the belief that Q is innate to the human mind.
2. All humans believe PNC.
3. So the belief in PNC is innate to the human mind. (From 1, 2)

Locke denies each premise of the argument. He denies premise 1, saying that universal agreement doesn't prove the belief innate, because there are alternative possible explanations for the universal agreement (e.g. indoctrination, the lessons of experience). He denies premise 2, saying that there is "a great part of mankind" that doesn't accept PNC – for example, "children and idiots" don't believe PNC. Indeed, they lack "the least apprehension or thought" of the principle.

Locke offers the following **Anti-Nativist Argument**:

1. For any claim Q, if the belief that Q is innate to the human mind, then all humans believe that Q.
2. There is no Q such that all humans believe that Q.
3. So there is no belief innate to the human mind. (From 1 and 2)

Nativists might deny premise 2, on the following grounds. Locke points to children and idiots to support it. But children and idiots do believe PNC, even though they're either unable (in the case of children) or unwilling (in the case of idiots) to articulate their belief. Still, we can know that they share this belief, because it manifests itself in many ways, including the way they conduct themselves.

Premise 1 of the argument is dubious. Umbilical cords are innate to humans – all humans are born with one – but not all humans have umbilical cords! Female humans are born with two X chromosomes, so X chromosomes are innate to a little more than half the population. But not all humans have two X chromosomes. So at least some innate characteristics are not universally distributed throughout the population. Why should we expect beliefs to be any different?

Locke's best argument against nativism: **No Innate Ideas or Principles**:

1. For any claim Q, a belief that Q is innate to the human mind only if all the concepts constitutive of Q are innate to the

- human mind. (Premise)
2. A belief in PNC is innate to the human mind only if all the concepts constitutive of PNC are innate to the human mind. (From 1)
  3. Not all the concepts constitutive of PNC are innate to the human mind. (Premise)
  4. So the belief in PNC is not innate to the human mind. (From 2, 3)
  5. If PNC is not innate to the human mind, then no principle is innate to the human mind. (Premise)
  6. so no principle is innate to the human mind. (From 4, 5)

Consider some responses. Reject 3. Infants have the concept of possibility – they recognize that some things are possibly true. And they have the concept of negation (i.e. what we express by *not*). And there's nothing more to the concept of impossibility than the simple negation of possibility. Reject 5. Perhaps nativists could get by with this general claim: no contradiction is ever actually true. Call this **weak PNC**. Weak PNC doesn't feature modal concepts, so Locke's critique won't apply to it.

#### 4. Is our idea of God innate?

Locke remarks, "If nature took care to provide us any *ideas*, we might well expect it should be such, as by our own faculties we cannot procure to ourselves." In a similar vein, in Meditation Three Descartes wrote: "All that remains for me is to ask how I received this idea of God. For I did not draw it from the senses; it never came upon me unexpectedly, as is usually the case with the ideas of sensible things when these things present themselves (or seem to present themselves) to the external sense organs. Nor was it made by me, for I plainly can neither subtract anything from it nor add anything to it. Thus the only option remaining is that this idea is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me."

This sort of argument has come to be known as a "**poverty of the stimulus**" argument, meaning that experience either could not or has not "stimulated" you enough to provide you with the relevant concepts, beliefs, evidence, or knowledge, so it must have been there all along. (Noam Chomsky is the most famous modern proponent of such an argument. He uses it to argue that humans must be born with knowledge

of an underlying universal grammar, common to all natural human languages, despite their superficial dissimilarities.) We can reconstruct Descartes's argument as follows: **Idea of God Innate:**

1. If we have an idea of God, then if nothing within ourselves or our experience could provide us with such an idea, then our idea of God must be innate. (Premise)
2. We have an idea of God. (Premise)
3. So if nothing within ourselves or our experience could provide us with such an idea, then our idea of God must be innate. (From 1, 2)
4. Nothing within ourselves or our experience could provide us with such an idea. (Premise)
5. So our idea of God must be innate. (From 3, 4)

Locke rejects premise 4. He says that we can get the idea of something finite from any portion of space or time within our experience. We "repeat that idea" of a finite length or period. We recognize that there need be no end to this process, and that, no matter how long we go on, we are not "one jot nearer to the end of such addition" than we were in the first place. This gives us our idea of an infinite length or period. We then combine this idea of the infinite with the idea of power, knowledge, goodness, and we get the idea of God. And all this requires nothing more than the materials provided us by experience, along with our ability to add or multiply. So why not think, as Locke suggests, that we get the idea of an infinite substance this way?

Descartes anticipated this objection and has a response. Descartes said that his idea of God contained a **positive** idea of infinity, not merely a negative one, as Locke supposes. If correct, this would undercut Locke's objection. The problem is that we don't well enough understand what *positive* and *negative* ideas are to properly assess the debate.