John Locke on Ideas (1690)

John Locke is an empiricist. Empiricists believed that:

(1) There are no innate ideas. In other words, we are not born with any built-in concepts, ideas, or knowledge.
(2) Everything that we know is derived from experience.

Let's look at those two claims:

1. There are no innate ideas: Locke takes some measures to refute the common belief that there are certain principles that are “innate” (i.e., that every person is born with the knowledge of them). (Essay, 1.2)

a. Universal agreement: Some claim that the fact that certain truths are universally agreed upon demonstrates that those truths are innate.

Reply: Consider this likely candidate for an innately known principle: “It is impossible for the same thing to both be and not be.” This is known as the law of non-contradiction. But, Locke points out, children and the mentally disabled (and most normal adults) are clearly unaware of this principle. There is NOT universal agreement, then, for even the likeliest of candidates (1.2.3-5).

b. Immediate recognition: Others point out that certain truths are immediately recognized as being true the moment one is presented with them. Supposedly, this demonstrates that these truths are innate. For instance, even if someone doesn’t know it presently, if you were to ask them whether or not “White is not black” is true, they would immediately recognize that it IS TRUE.

Reply: First, if this were correct, it would imply that an INFINITE number of principles were innate (e.g., 1+1=2, 1+2=3, 1+3=4, etc.).

Furthermore, a statement cannot be known unless the COMPONENTS of that statement are ALSO known. Therefore, for instance, to claim that “blue is not red” is innately known entails that the ideas of “blue” and “red” are ALSO innately known. But, then, just about EVERYTHING would have to be known innately, from birth, prior to any experience. And that is absurd. (1.2.17-18)
2. **All knowledge is derived from experience:** Locke states that, since there is no innate knowledge, it must be the case that, when we are born, the mind is like a blank slate, or a “white paper, void of all characters”. Therefore, any knowledge we DO have must be obtained by experience. This happens in one of two ways: Via ideas caused by (a) Sensation or (b) Reflection. (2.1.2-5)

   a. **Sensation:** This is the method by which we receive ideas from the EXTERNAL (physical) world. These ideas arrive via the 5 senses. So, ideas gained by sensation are things like yellow, white, hot, cold, soft, hard, bitter, and sweet.

   b. **Reflection:** This is the method by which we receive ideas from the internal (mental) world. These ideas arrive via the perception of what happens within our own mind. So, ideas gained by reflection are things like thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, and willing.

Sensation and Reflection give rise to the “simple” ideas. And **all knowledge is constructed out of these.** In other words, there is nothing that we know that is not grounded in the simple ideas we get from Sensation and Reflection.

**Complex Ideas:** Not all knowledge consists of mere simple ideas. Locke explains that we are capable of building up more complex ideas out of the simple ones. (2.12.1-2) We do this in one of three ways:

1. **Combination:** We may take multiple simple ideas and combine them into more complex ones. E.g., the idea of a red circle is a combination of the two simple ideas “red” and “circle”. Also, “unicorn” = “horse” + “horn”.

2. **Comparison:** We may take two ideas and hold them in the mind side by side to compare them. E.g., the idea of the relation “bigger than” is a comparison of the ideas of two different sizes imagined or considered simultaneously.

3. **Abstraction:** We may take a whole set of ideas (simple or complex) and compare them all simultaneously, in order to detect some similarity that they all share. E.g., we can consider all of the objects we have ever seen and pick out a certain group and abstract the idea of “beautiful” from them.

So, simple ideas are derived from experience. Though complex ideas are not themselves derived from experience, they are derived from simple ideas, and THOSE are derived from experience.

The conclusion is that ALL knowledge is ultimately grounded in experience; specifically, the experience of simple ideas by either sensation or reflection.
Primary and Secondary Qualities

Contained within this section on simple and complex ideas is a very important discussion by Locke on qualities.

1. Two types of qualities: Qualities correspond to the ideas derived by Sensation. A quality is whatever it is in the external objects that produces ideas in us when we use Sensation to perceive them. In other words, ideas are the things that are IN US, while qualities are the corresponding things that are IN OBJECTS. Locke is careful to explain that these “qualities” may be divided into two fundamentally different categories: (2.8.9-10)

a. Primary qualities: The first sort of quality is the sort that every object necessarily has, no matter what. These are things like size, shape, and motion or rest.

b. Secondary qualities: The second sort of quality are the sort that can be added to or taken away from objects. These are things like colors, sounds, tastes, warmth, etc.

2. Defending the distinction: Locke provides several reasons for thinking that there is such a distinction. (2.8.9-10, 16-17, 19, 21)

a. Inseparability: No matter what you do to an object, you can’t take away its primary qualities. For instance, cut a grain of wheat in two, and it will still have size and shape, no matter how many times you divide it. On the other hand, turn off the lights and a jar WILL lose its color (but not its size and shape).

b. Non-resemblance: Things like size and shape DO seem to be in the objects themselves, but it is absurd to think, e.g., pain is IN a fire. Nothing at all in the fire resembles pain.

c. Relative to the perceiver: It seems that secondary qualities are relative to the perceiver. For, if there is a bucket of lukewarm water, one hand may perceive the water as cold, and the other perceive it as warm—for instance if the first hand is already warm, and the second hand is already cold. Primary qualities are not relative in this way.
3. **Some implications**: There are a couple of interesting implications of this distinction. (2.8.11-15, 20)

a. **Secondary qualities reduce to primary ones**: It seems as if the only thing that reaches our eyes are tiny particles. These stimulate some motion in our nerves and this motion produces ideas in the mind. But, then, COLORS do not reach our eyes, but only particles with particular sizes, shapes, and motions do. This means that all secondary qualities are really just the powers that objects have to produce certain sensory ideas in us via the sizes, shapes, and motions of their particles. This seems supported by the following: Pound an almond and its color and flavor will be altered, but it seems that all you have done to the almond is alter its texture. Therefore, color and flavor seem to be nothing more than something caused by the sizes and shapes of the parts of the almond.

b. **Secondary qualities do not at all resemble anything in objects**: It seems that the IDEAS produced by secondary qualities do not at all resemble the things in the objects themselves. For instance, the idea of heat is produced in us by the motion of an object’s particles, but heat does not at all resemble motion. (Recall Galileo, who said that “tickling” was not in the feather, but only certain shapes, sizes, and motions of its particles)

Primary qualities DO really exist in bodies, however. But note: Even our ideas of primary qualities are merely “resemblances” of those qualities.

**Skepticism?**: All we have access to are ideas. Our ideas of secondary qualities do not resemble anything in objects; i.e., the world doesn’t have anything like the sensation of colors, odors, pain, or warmth, etc. in it.

Furthermore, even our ideas of primary qualities merely RESEMBLE the actual primary qualities in objects. But, then, how do we know that these ideas really DO resemble those qualities? In order to know for sure, wouldn’t we have to compare the REAL qualities with our ideas of them? But, this seems impossible, even in principle. Consider the following argument. What do you think?

1. In order to know if A resembles B, one must be able to compare A and B with one another.
2. Locke claims that we can know that our ideas of primary qualities (A) resemble those qualities (B). Yet, all we have direct access to are our ideas; i.e. (A), we do not have direct access to the actual qualities in objects (B). Therefore, since we only perceive A, and we never perceive B, we cannot compare A with B.
3. Therefore, we cannot know that our ideas of primary qualities resemble the actual qualities in objects.