

### Introducing Empiricism: John Locke & David Hume

The two main differences between **rationalism** and **empiricism** are that **rationalism** holds that all our knowledge of the external world comes through reason and innate ideas; reason, as it were, gives an order to our immediate experiences by rationalizing them. As such, on the **rationalist** account, all propositions can only ever be **a priori** or **synthetic a priori**. Rationalists cannot accept the possibility of **a posteriori** knowledge, as this means knowledge gained through experience (rationalists deny that this is possible). Unlike an **analytic proposition**, a **synthetic a priori** proposition is not true by definition, but neither is it true by virtue of experience. Rather, perceptual content is required - but we can only know what that content amounts to through reason that is independent of experience. In other words, the **synthetic** part equates to perception; how we understand it through reason (that is independent of experience) is the **a priori** part. Thus, for the **rationalist**, there are two kinds of proposition: 1. **analytic propositions** which are true by definition and, as such, a priori. 2. **a priori synthetic** propositions which, as just described, rely on perceptual content and reason.

**Empiricists** do not deny the possibility of **analytic propositions** but they are limited to those that are true or false by definition (e.g. "a triangle has three sides" or "a triangle has four sides"). All other propositions are **synthetic** since they are rendered true or false by appeal to experience.

John Locke was an **empiricist**. He argued that all the ideas we have come from sense-experience and that the mind is a tabula rasa at birth.<sup>1</sup> Locke believed that the rationalist arguments in relation to innate ideas would lead one "To suppose all our ideas of colours, sounds, taste, figure, etc. innate, than which there cannot be anything more opposite to reason and experience." (Locke. J. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. 1689).

Locke divided qualities to be found in physical objects into three types. The first are **primary qualities** such as solidity, extension, figure, motion, rest, bulk, number (of), texture and size. Such qualities are part of an object irrespective of whether we happen to perceive them (or so Locke argues). **Secondary qualities** are sometimes (confusingly) divided into two groups. The first group of **secondary qualities** are those which we perceive immediately such as colour, taste, sound and smell. The second group of **secondary qualities** are those that we do not grasp immediately. These can be said to be powers that affect physical objects such as the ability of the sun to bleach colour or fire to melt lead; both these processes occur over time and, as such, cannot be perceived immediately.

Now we have drawn the distinction between **primary and secondary qualities** I want, for a moment, to return to what Locke means by ideas, in order to clarify the relationship between them and **primary and secondary qualities**. An idea can be either concepts such as "red", "table", "sky" (and so on), or a thought such as, "I think I will go and water the garden plants." Thus we can see that "ideas" comprise of both **primary and secondary qualities**. We have ideas of **primary qualities** such as solidity, extension, figure, motion, rest, bulk and **secondary qualities** such as colour, smell, taste and sound. The question is how? What makes the difference between **primary and secondary qualities**? Locke remarks, "The ideas of primary qualities of bodies, are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves; but ideas, produced in us by these secondary qualities, have no resemblance of them at all." (Locke. J. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. 1689). In other words, **primary qualities** are present in the objects themselves. **Secondary qualities**, by contrast, are not present in the objects themselves but, rather, are the result of the way **primary qualities** affect our senses.

Locke also distinguishes between **simple** and **complex ideas**. **Primary** and **secondary qualities** are **simple ideas** from which more **complex ideas** such as "I think I will go and water the garden plants" can be derived. Thus, we can see that more **complex ideas** can be built out of simple ones. This is how we can build up a knowledge base. In other words, according to Locke, **simple ideas** are planted in the mind as a result of the effect that **primary qualities** have on the senses. From how **primary qualities** affect the senses we encounter **secondary qualities**; **secondary qualities**

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<sup>1</sup> Rationalists, by contrast, argue that we are born *with innate ideas*. These ideas just need to be triggered by the appropriate set of circumstances.

are also **simple ideas**. However, from there on we are able to construct more complex ideas out of these **simple ideas**. For example, we create the concept of “cat” out of multifarious simple ideas that we have put together. Whenever we encounter such **simple ideas** in a particular combination, we remember “cat” and have thus created a more **complex idea**. Obviously, when we think about a concept in the abstract – such as cat – we do not have a particular example in mind. How is this possible if we need to develop complex ideas from those that correspond with particular objects? Locke argues that we can form concepts through abstraction; in other words, we take those qualities that are common to all cats (and not, say, dogs) in our formation of concepts. Through this process, we are able to create more and more sophisticated ideas about the world and come to an understanding of its nature. There are two potential problems with Locke’s empiricist arguments. The first is the problem of fictitious objects – such as the ones we encounter in fairytales, Lord of The Rings or Harry Potter. How do we form concepts in relation to things that don’t actually exist? Where is the relation between them and **primary** and **secondary qualities**?

Fictitious objects don’t have any **primary qualities** so it follows that we cannot perceive secondary qualities either. One answer to this question is that all **simple ideas** are copies and impressions derived from **primary qualities**. We have experiences of Rhinoceros and Horses. With these ideas we can create a fictitious creature that has combinations of such properties such as a Unicorn (think of the various other creatures in Harry Potter, for instance).

Both Locke and Descartes agree on one thing however: one cannot create ideas out of nothing (think about Descartes’ argument relating to the things we dream about: somehow, they always relate at least in some way to things we have already encountered (see Meditation 1)). We combine and abstract after we have experienced simple ideas. No idea amounts to more than putting things together and/or abstracting them.

The second problem is slightly more serious and revolves around Locke’s argument that **secondary qualities** are nothing but a power to produce sensations in us. The objection is this: why does this argument mean that **secondary qualities** are not genuine properties of the objects that possess them? In other words, why does Locke not consider **secondary qualities** to be as objective as primary qualities? To be poisonous is simply to have a power (secondary quality) to produce a certain effect; but it is an objective matter whether an object is poisonous or not. Surely this makes being poisonous a property of the object in the same way as extension in space and time is a property of the object?

### Introducing David Hume

We have now covered Locke and his brand of **empiricism** and I hope you all now understand the difference between **primary** and **secondary qualities**, simple and complex ideas, and how we come to have such ideas in the first place.. Remember that Locke argues that our ideas are given to us by our perceptions. In other words, he suggests that through encountering repeat experiences (such as the colour red) we gradually form concepts relating to them and, as such, build up a bank of simple ideas upon which we can build more complex ones. This sounds eminently plausible but, if you think about it, the kind of experience that the colour red produces is quite different from the role the concept plays in our language; quite different from how we apply the concept in everyday life. In other words, when we see something red, we have a kind of perceptual experience (what philosophers call sense-experience). When we apply the concept, this is not experiencing the sensation of red. These two things are very different. Locke makes it seem that remembering the experience is enough to apply the concept. But, since the experience is not the concept, how can this be so?

David Hume (1711 – 1776) provided something of an answer to this difficulty, arguing that we could divide our experiences from the concepts. Locke believed that ideas stood for our perceptions but, as we have seen, this leaves the way open for the objection that remembering the experience is enough to apply the concept. Since experience and the application of a simple idea such as colour are very different things, this seems to be problematic. Hume tries to correct Locke’s position by arguing that in perception we are only aware of the sensation (not the concept of whatever it is we perceive). When we apply a concept – for instance, a simple idea such as “red” – we are, in fact, appealing to a faint copy of a simple impression, not a memory of the sensation. **Impressions** may be simple or complex; every **simple idea**, according to Hume, is derived from (and is a copy of), a **simple impression** (but not a memory of the experience as such). Every complex idea is derived from a **complex impression** which is a compound of **simple ideas** and **impressions**. Put another way: Hume tried to solve the problem of concept application by saying

that our **impressions** are copies of sense-experience which we then conceptualize rather than just remembering the experience itself. We remember the facsimile of the **impression** rather than the **impression** itself. This idea is at the heart of Hume's **empiricist** philosophy. Is this a satisfactory answer to the objection against Locke?

Consider this objection against Hume: "...if all simple ideas...are to be taken as copies of simple impressions, how does one distinguish between ideas of memory (which presumably repeat an original impression) and ideas of the imagination (which do not)?" (Hamlyn.D.W. 1990. p.190)

Both Locke and Hume divided ideas (or in Hume's language, impressions) into two categories: **sensational** and **reflective**. **Sensational impressions** are those such as "red" whilst **reflective impressions** are those such as "sadness". The reasons for this distinction are fairly clear. The former are given by the external world – they affect us in particular ways giving us sensations. The latter come from our own emotions. In each case however, Hume argues that when we conceptualize either (e.g. red or sadness), what we do is remember the copy of the impression rather than the impression itself. It is through this process that we can conceptualize both reflective and sensational perceptions.

### Hume on Causation

This is, perhaps, one of the more controversial areas of Hume's philosophy. Remember that, like Locke, Hume believed that all knowledge comes from experience. This leads to some interesting views on the nature of causation.

#### Causation: The Common-Sense Approach

- The hurricane caused the damage.
- HIV causes AIDS.
- Smoking causes lung cancer.

These are all examples of what we think of as cause and effect. But what is it for something to cause something else? What makes something a cause of another thing?

#### Causation and Regularity

We often think that there is a kind of necessity between cause and effect. E.g. HIV causes AIDS. In other words, we think that a cause necessitates its effects. Hume believed this to be an illusion and, instead, believed that we project ideas of necessity onto events. Why did he think this?

Causation (as such) cannot be observed through experience. All that can be seen is the regularity between two events. It is the human mind, Hume argues, that projects the idea of a necessary connection onto these two events; consequently, he believed that causal relations cannot be known a priori. We cannot know, by reason alone, that there is a necessary connection between two events and I do not receive an impression (from which I derive an idea) of necessity. All I actually observe is one event following another (known as **temporal succession**). In other words, our idea of causation comes from continually observing regularity between similar events. For example: all I actually observe is the movement of one ball followed by the movement of another ball. Hume suggests that the idea of causality comes from continually observing pairs of events – e.g. the above example, HIV followed by AIDS, flames producing heat and so on.

Thus, we come to expect these 'pairs' of events. (You should be able to see a link with induction here.)

How much scientific knowledge comes from induction? It is a habit of the mind developed through our experience of things that gives us our idea of cause and effect. Accordingly, 'every event has a cause' is ultimately derived from experience.

#### A Summary of Hume's Regularity Thesis

There are three things that Hume believed to be necessary for his Regularity Theory of causation:

- Constant Conjunction = Regularity between the occurrence of two events.

- Contiguity = Temporal Succession (i.e. events occurring regularly next to each other in time) and Time and Place.
- Resemblance = both cause and effect resemble each other.

#### Objections to Hume

- Thomas Reid: If causation is merely a matter of regularity, then we should say that day causes night (except that we know it doesn't!)
- Elizabeth Anscombe argued that we can still understand cause and effect having never seen the two events involved before. This is known as single case causation.
- What counts as similarity/resemblance for Hume?
- What criteria are there for saying that two events resemble one another? (Or anything resembling anything?)