

Locke's Empiricism I  
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In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke lays out the basis for his empiricist epistemology. His substantive critique of the rationalist philosophers is evident from the second chapter of Book I, where he denies the veracity of innate ideas. The two representative innate ideas that he acknowledges are possible are the *law of identity* (“Whatever is, is”) and the *law of non-contradiction* (“It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be”). He acknowledges several ways that one can understand the notion of innate ideas, the first of which is through universal assent (I.i.3-5). He argues that the very young and the mentally challenged cannot know these principles, so universal assent proves nothing. He also considers whether (2a) these innate principles are spontaneously known at the age of reason, or (2b) whether they are known at the age of reason through reason. In the latter two cases he argues that this is both empirically false (I.ii.12) and “frivolous” (I.ii.14) that they are known at the age of reason. Lastly, he considers (3) whether self-evidence is a proper ground for innateness (I.ii.17). In this case, he argues that all analytic truths might be considered innate, allowing for too wide a notion of innateness. If anything is innate on this ground, Locke argues, then everything is (I.ii.18). Throughout he relies upon the thesis that there is no such thing as knowledge of which we cannot be conscious. That is to say: for any proposition *p*, S knows *p* iff S knows that S knows *p*.

For Locke, the mind is initially a *tabula rasa*, or “white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas” (II.i.2). The mind initially garners ideas through the process of sensation—that is to say, it is only through experience that any idea can enter the memory. Once in the memory (“the storehouse of our ideas”) (II.x.2), we can operate on these simple ideas through the process of reflection, or “perception of the operations of our mind” (II.i.4). The primary purpose of reflection is to create complex ideas out of simple ideas. Simple ideas come into the mind “unmixed” (II.ii.i). It is the capacity of the mind to create new ideas out of the material of these simple ideas. Since there is no knowledge without experience, the mind is a “dark room,” which light enters only through the “windows” of sensation and reflection (II.xi.17).

*Primary and Secondary Qualities*

Locke has a causal theory of perception, whereby ideas are caused by material things in the world. Greatly influenced by Boyle's corpuscular natural philosophy, Locke acknowledges that there are tiny particles that constitute material things which create ideas by interacting with the sense organs. The bulk, figure and motion of these corpuscles creates the simple ideas that we can know. The qualities that are really in the things around us are what he calls *primary qualities*: solidity, extension, figure, number, motion and rest (II.viii.9). The secondary qualities colors, sounds, tastes, etc. are not in the things themselves, but are product of the bulk, figure and motion of the corpuscles on the sense organs. Objects resemble our ideas in terms of the primary qualities—but not the secondary qualities (II.viii.15).

*Complex Ideas*

It is the innate capacity of the mind to operate on simple ideas to create more complex ideas (II.xii.1). The main operations that the mind can perform on these simple ideas are to compare (e.g., the idea of blue is darker than the idea of yellow), compound (e.g., the idea of a unicorn, as a mix of the simple idea of horse and simple idea of horn combined), and abstract from these simple ideas (e.g., the idea of humanity as the abstract of the idea of particular humans). Thus he shows that the basis of every idea is the simple ideas taken from the senses.

There are two types of complex ideas for Locke, ideas of substances and ideas of modes. Substances do have independent subsistence, whereas modes do not have independent subsistence (II.xii.4). The latter includes mathematical and moral ideas. Modes also come in two types: simple and mixed.