

The mind as a 'tabula rasa'¹

Do we acquire all our concepts from experience? Or are some of them innate? In this handout, we look at arguments for and against the empiricist claim that concepts are all derived from experience.

LOCKE'S TWO SOURCES OF CONCEPTS

In *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke argues that at birth - or more accurately, since there can be consciousness and thought before birth, prior to any experience - the mind is a 'tabula rasa'. 'Tabula rasa' is Latin for 'blank slate'. The phrase recalls the time when children would have slates (or tablets (tabula)), like small blackboards, to write on. Until the teacher told them to write something, the slates would be blank. The mind at birth, says Locke, contains no ideas - no thoughts or concepts. If you observe newborn babies, says Locke, you'll find no reason to disagree. All our ideas, then, derive from one of two sources:

1. Sensation: our experience of objects outside the mind, perceived through the senses. This gives us ideas of 'sensible qualities'.
2. Reflection: our experience of 'the internal operations of our minds', gained through introspection or an awareness of what the mind is doing. This provides the ideas of perception, thinking, willing, and so on. These ideas may well arrive later in childhood.

HUME ON IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

Locke uses the term 'idea' to cover sensations and concepts (and propositional thoughts!). This is very confusing. The sensation of yellow isn't the same thing as the concept YELLOW. When we see something yellow, this perceptual experience is quite different from the role YELLOW plays in the thought 'If it is yellow, it is coloured'. David Hume's terminology is a little clearer, though it still doesn't quite match everyday meanings.

According to Hume in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, what we are immediately and directly aware of are 'perceptions'. 'Perceptions' are divided into 'impressions' and 'ideas'. Although he doesn't say so explicitly here, Hume, following Locke, divides impressions into those of 'sensation' and those of 'reflection'. Impressions of sensation derive from our senses, impressions of reflection derive from our experience of our mind, including emotions.

Hume distinguishes between impressions and ideas on three grounds. First, there is a difference between the two marked by a difference of 'forcefulness' and

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 137-48

‘vivacity’ or ‘liveliness’; impressions relate roughly to ‘feeling’ (or ‘sensing’) and ideas to ‘thinking’. Think what it is like to see a scene or hear a tune; now, what it is like to imagine or remember that scene or tune. The latter is weaker, fainter. (Thinking, for Hume, works with ideas as images in the same way as imagination and memory.) However, Hume immediately qualifies this claim - disease or madness can make ideas as lively and forceful as impressions. So, second, Hume argues that ideas are ‘copies’ of impressions. Hume later provides a third distinction between ideas and impressions: we are liable to confuse and make mistakes about ideas, but this is more difficult with impressions.

Just as there are impressions of sensation and reflection, so there are ideas of sensation (e.g. RED) and ideas of reflection (e.g. THINKING). What Hume means by ‘idea’ here, we can refer to as concepts. So his theory of how we acquire ideas is a theory of how we acquire concepts. His claim is that we copy them from impressions.

So Locke and Hume have slightly different versions of how we first acquire ideas with which we can think (concepts). We start with sense experiences of the physical world and experiences of our own minds; for Locke, this gives us ideas; but this makes it sound as if the experiences themselves are the ideas with which we think. Hume corrects this: it is copies of sensory impressions that we use in thinking.

Why think that all ideas derive from impressions? Hume gives two arguments. First, without having a particular type of experience, a person lacks the ability to form an idea of that experience. Thus, a blind man does not know what colour is and a mild man cannot comprehend the motive of revenge. We’ll return to this claim below. Hume’s second argument relates to ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ ideas.

SIMPLE AND COMPLEX CONCEPTS

Locke argues that the basic building blocks of all thought are simple ideas, or more precisely, in Hume’s terminology, simple impressions - single colours, single shapes, single smells and so on. For each, there is a corresponding simple idea (for clarity, I shall talk, from now on, about concepts). A simple impression or simple concept ‘contains nothing but one uniform appearance or conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different ideas’. Of course, we experience many such simple impressions at once, e.g. we hold a toy car that is at once both cold and hard. But there is no confusing the sensation of cold with the sensation of hardness - they are quite distinct.

As the building blocks of thought, simple concepts can be used to construct complex concepts.

1. We can unite or combine the impressions of the qualities we perceive into the concept of a single object - we identify one and the same thing, a dog, say, as having a particular colour, shape, smell. So we can think of ‘that thing’, where the concept of ‘that thing’ is made up of many concepts of colour, shape, smell.
2. We can also form complex concepts by abstraction, e.g. the concept DOG

doesn't correspond to any one particular dog. When we abstract, we ignore certain specific features and concentrate on others; so to develop the concept DOG, we ignore the different colours and sizes of dogs and pick out features they have in common, such as four legs, tail, bark, hairy.

3. We can put together simple concepts in an original way. While many of us have seen a picture of a unicorn, someone had to invent the concept without seeing a picture. They did it by putting together concepts of HORSE and HORN and WHITENESS.

Hume agrees with Locke's claim that all concepts are either simple concepts or complex concepts that have been constructed out of simple concepts. He claims, like Locke, that all concepts can be analysed into simple concepts which each correspond to an impression. (This is his second argument for thinking that all concepts derive from impressions.) Therefore, all concepts ultimately derive from experience.

For example, in direct opposition to Descartes, Hume claims that the concept GOD, based on concepts of PERFECTION and INFINITY, is extrapolated from concepts of IMPERFECTION and FINITUDE: 'The idea of God - meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being - comes from extending beyond all limits the qualities of goodness and wisdom that we find in our own minds'.

ISSUES WITH THE EMPIRICIST THEORY OF CONCEPTS

Hume and Locke argue that no concept, no matter how abstract or complex, is more than a putting together, altering, or abstracting from simple concepts, and that all simple concepts derive from impressions. We can show that this theory is false if we can find a counterexample, either a concept that does not derive from an impression or a complex concept that cannot be analysed into simple concepts. We start with a possible example of a concept that does not derive from an impression.

Challenging the copy principle

Is it true that without a specific experience, we can't form the relevant concept? Hume notes that there is an exception to this claim. If you present someone with a spectrum of shades of blue with one shade missing, then using their imagination, they will be able to form an idea of that shade. This idea has not been copied from an impression. Hume dismisses the example as unimportant, but it is not. If it is possible that we can form an idea of a shade of blue without deriving it from an impression, is it possible that we could form other ideas without copying them from impressions?

The question is important because Hume uses his 'copy principle' repeatedly in his philosophy. For example, he says that in metaphysics, we become confused because the ideas we work with, e.g. SUBSTANCE, are 'faint and obscure', so we don't understand them well. Because ideas derive from impressions, we can solve metaphysical debates by asking, of the words used, 'From what impression is that supposed idea derived?' If we can't find the associated impression, we can conclude that the word is used without a proper meaning, and reject the debate.

However, if we can form ideas without copying them from impressions, then we can't use Hume's copy principle to cut through metaphysical debates as he suggests. So can the copy principle be defended against the counterexample of the missing shade of blue?

There are two possible solutions that allow for the case of the shade of blue while maintaining a strong link between ideas and impressions.

We can weaken the copy principle to say 'Any ideas that are not (ultimately) copied from impressions are only meaningful if they could be copied from impressions'. In other words, what the idea is an idea of is something we can encounter in experience. The missing shade of blue clearly meets this condition, but perhaps many metaphysical ideas will not.

We can keep the copy principle as it is - 'all ideas are (ultimately) copied from impressions' - but explain how and why the missing shade of blue is an 'exception'. The simple impressions of different shades of blue are related to each other, as they can be arranged according to how they resemble each other (from dark to light, say). From the arrangement, we can form the idea of the missing shade drawing on other similar impressions we already have. This only works when impressions are structured by resemblance like this. If we have no relevantly similar impressions which strongly resemble the missing impression, we cannot form the missing idea. This is the same reason that a blind man cannot form an idea of colour, and so it fits well with Hume's theory.

Leibniz on 'intellectual ideas'

In his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz gives a number of examples of concepts that he claims are not derived from experience as Locke and Hume claim, but are innate. He comments on Locke's division of concepts into those that originate in sensation and those that originate in reflection, which Leibniz calls 'intellectual ideas'. He comments, 'to reflect is simply to attend to what is within us, and something that we carry with us already is not something that came from the senses! So it can't be denied that there is a great deal that is innate in our minds'. Thus, he says the concepts of BEING, UNITY, SUBSTANCE, DURATION, CHANGE, ACTION, PERCEPTION and PLEASURE are all innate, because we are ourselves beings, unities, substances, that we endure through time, change, act, perceive and experience pleasure. In fact, all the concepts we acquire through reflection can be called 'innate'.

Locke can rightly respond that reflection upon what I am does not establish innate concepts. My existence and my ability to perceive are innate, but that doesn't mean that the concepts of SUBSTANCE and PERCEPTION are innate. Locke argues that we must first experience our own mind and its activities (in reflection) to develop the concepts - hence they are not innate. It is a confusion to argue that because we derive the concepts from our mental activities that we do not therefore derive them from experience.

The concept of substance

The response we gave on Locke's behalf is too quick. Locke allows that I am a substance, and of course my existence is innate, but this doesn't mean that the

concept SUBSTANCE is also innate. His position is that we gain the concept of substance from our experience - perhaps our experience of ourselves in reflection. A substance is something that continues to exist as one and the same thing through time, that possesses properties which can change even as it remains the same thing. But, even if we are substances, do we experience ourselves in reflection *as a substance*? To defend his claim that we acquire the concept SUBSTANCE from experience, Locke will need to show that we do. We have two particular concepts of substance, namely PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE (physical objects) and MENTAL SUBSTANCE (minds or selves). Do these concepts come from experience?

Berkeley on substance

In *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, George Berkeley, who was an empiricist, argues that the concept of MENTAL SUBSTANCE or MIND can be derived from our experience of ourselves, but that the concept of mind-independent PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE is incoherent. We start with the first. He claims that I am not only aware of my mental activities, but aware of my mind as that which is active in thinking, perceiving and willing. So I am aware that my mind is not reducible to the activities themselves. So, Berkeley argues, we can derive the concept of MENTAL SUBSTANCE from our own minds, but the concept is not innate, as it is derived from our experience of ourselves.

However, Berkeley argues that we can gain no idea of PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE from sense experience. We do not experience physical substance, only the primary and secondary qualities of physical objects, and both are mind-dependent. That anything exists beyond these changeable properties is not an idea that sense experience supports. But rather than conclude that the concept is innate, we should conclude that it is confused.

Berkeley's arguments illustrate the two ways empiricists can respond to proposed counterexamples to their theory of acquiring concepts. First, they can argue that the concept is, in fact, derived from experience. Second, they can argue that the concept is incoherent, the result of some kind of mental error. This would explain its origin as neither derived from experience nor innate.

Hume on substance

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume develops this last objection further, and adds a further argument to those of Berkeley against the concept of PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE.

The concept of a PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE is the concept of something independent of experience existing in three-dimensional space. But how can experience show us that something exists independently of experience? I see my desk; a few moments later, I see it again. If my two experiences are of one and the same desk, then the desk existed when I wasn't looking at it. But I don't experience the desk existing when I'm not looking at it. So how do I arrive at the idea that it is one and the same desk, which has persisted through time even when I wasn't experiencing it?

Hume's diagnosis is this. My experience only provides the information that my two experiences of the desk are very similar. The desk as I first experience it is very similar, perhaps exactly similar, to the desk as I experience it the second time. But

similarity, even exact similarity, is not quantitative identity. Being qualitatively identical is not the same as being numerically identical. (For example, two people can sit comfortably on identical chairs, but they can't sit comfortably on one and the same chair.) My sense experience can only provide the concept of a physical object that is numerically identical (with itself) while I am experiencing it. Hume applies the same argument to the concept of MENTAL SUBSTANCE.

He disagrees with Berkeley (and Descartes): we don't experience a continuing mental substance (self) over time, we only experience a continually changing array of thoughts and feelings. Even if we experienced thought as active, as Berkeley maintains, this experience doesn't support the claim that I am one and the same active substance, persisting through time and different thoughts.

So far, Hume has argued that we cannot derive the concepts of MENTAL or PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE from our experience. If he is right, then we could argue that both concepts must be innate. After all, we do have the concept of SUBSTANCE as something that persists through change, and we have the concepts of PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE and MENTAL SUBSTANCE. If we can't learn them from experience, they must be innate.

But Hume takes his argument to show that both concepts of SUBSTANCE are confused rather than innate. In coming up with the concept of a PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE that exists independently of my experiences, I have confused similarity with identity. How does this happen? Our perceptions of physical objects exhibit constancy: if I look at my desk and then shut my eyes and open them again, the desk looks exactly as it did before. On the basis of this similarity, the mind simply has a tendency to imagine that what I see after I opened my eyes is not just similar but identical to what I saw before I closed my eyes. The origin of the idea that the two experiences are of something identical - something that exists between and independent of perceptions - is the imagination. The imagination creates the idea of identity from similarity and unity (the idea of an individual thing, being 'one'), both of which we can derive from experience. But there is nothing in experience that matches the concept of PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE.

A similar story applies in the case of MENTAL SUBSTANCE. We've confused the similarity of our thoughts and feelings from one moment to the next with the identity of a 'thing' to which such mental states belong. The concept is not innate, it is confused.

We can object that Hume's theory makes our common-sense idea of the world wrong. If we are to avoid scepticism, we must either find a way to derive these concepts from experience or accept that they are innate.

DISCUSSION

We began our discussion of the empiricist theory of concepts by saying that we could show the theory to be false if we can find a counterexample - a simple concept that is either not copied from an impression or a complex concept that we cannot analyse into simple concepts that are copied from impressions. If the concept of SUBSTANCE isn't a genuine counterexample to empiricism, then

perhaps some other concept will be. For instance, we might argue that attempts to analyse philosophical concepts like KNOWLEDGE, TRUTH and BEAUTY into their simple constituents have all failed to produce agreement. A good explanation for this is that they don't have this structure, and Locke and Hume's theory of the origin of concepts is wrong.