A History of Philosophy
41 John Locke
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Now, in talking about the Enlightenment, how are we going to characterize the Enlightenment in general and, accordingly, understand Locke as representative of the Enlightenment and, in many regards, the beginning of the philosophical Enlightenment, sometimes dated from 1691, which was the date of publication of his essay concerning human understanding. Sometimes that's taken to mark the beginning of the philosophical Enlightenment. Well, the term Enlightenment, of course, refers to the light of reason, which in that context means the light of scientific knowledge, the light of knowledge gained by those objective scientific methods, whether inductive or deductive, at least with the kind of objectivity that science claimed and the kind of conclusiveness which science then claimed.

You remember the lines of Tennyson, God said, let Newton be, and all was light. You say, why pick Newton if it's not the light of science? Now, the Enlightenment then, with its emphasis on reason, was skeptical of tradition, skeptical of authority, and frequently gave no place to revelation. Insofar as there were Christians participating in the Enlightenment and, therefore, talking about revelation, it's more of an add-on.

Something in addition to what we know by reason alone. Rather an add-on than an underlying perspective that helps us understand the rest. This was an age very much opposed to dogmatic systems, which is why the big system builders, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, are really 17th-century rather than 18th-century Enlightenment people.

Because those system builders claim a kind of systematic knowledge which could not be established by scientific means alone. Remember the problems that you seem to find even, no, I don't mean you even, but you seem to find even in Descartes, where his proofs didn't seem to be all that they were supposed to be. It's an age of criticism, criticizing the very possibility of such knowledge.

And so it's not surprising that the Enlightenment mind turned inward on itself. And Enlightenment thinkers started criticizing the claims of the Enlightenment. And of scientific knowledge.

So that when we get to David Hume, we'll find that he is really a philosophical skeptic. He's skeptical about that kind of Enlightenment knowledge, objective, with certainty. You see, he's skeptical about the very possibility of that.

And develops in its place an account of how belief arises and seems to be justified. It's distinct from that dogmatic kind of knowledge. David Hume was not alone in that.

He talked about figures like Voltaire, or a group in France known as the Philosophers, or as the French word, which still means the Philosophers, but I guess to distinguish it from other philosophers, they're usually spoken of in English by the French term. They philosoph. A group of philosophical skeptics about the possibility of knowledge.

Now, it's not only the age of the light of reason, but it's also the age of the rule of reason. That is to say, the rule of reason not only in our thinking, but in our living. The role of reason in our lives.

And so the idea is that when we're ruled by reason, we are freed from other causal conditions. If we act, that is to say, out of impulse, emotional impulse, we're not free. We're driven, like Avis.

Driven. But you missed that one. You know the Avis ad, don't you? We're driven.

Has Avis stopped advertising that way? Sorry, I'll have to change. Alright, if you act out of emotional compulsion, you're not acting freely; you're driven. It's only when you are able to detach yourself by standing back and thinking about what you do, detach yourself from the emotional compulsion, that you're really free.

You see? So freedom is possible under the rule of reason. As we say in political matters, it's possible that political freedom is possible under the rule of law. But not where there are no laws.

We must be detached from the compulsive in order to be free. And consequently, you find ethical theories developing that are concerned with knowing what is right. In the Middle Ages, the concern was the good.

That is to say, the ideal towards which we strive in seeking the highest good, God. But in the Enlightenment, the emphasis on ethics is more on principles and rules that enable us to know what the right thing to do is in this and every other case. After the same kind of detached objectivity and certainty in ethics as was claimed in science.

And it was the age, therefore, in which theories of individual rights developed. John Locke, with his emphasis on the rights to life, liberty and property. And other theories of rights that are the foundation of the French political heritage.

Of course, the American political heritage. Our political system is essentially a product of the Enlightenment. Very much so.

The rule of law governed by the constitution represents the rule of reason. So, this is the characteristic. And in the reaction against that skepticism about the light of reason, now the rejection of the rule of reason, yeah, that developed in Romanticism in the early 19th century.

Where Romanticism reverts to the freedom of emotion. The creative genius who idealizes what freedom is like. So that some commentators have pointed out that what you get beginning in the Renaissance, with the emphasis on political liberties, what you get gradually is an increased absolutization and idealization of the notion of individual freedom.

You see, individual rights in the Enlightenment, creative self-expression with the Romanticists, until you get that absolute freedom of some of the existentialists like Sartre, who absolutizes freedom. You see? In fact, it seems to me that there's something running through the American ethos that regards freedom as the highest of all values. It seems to me that's a very pagan idea.

From a Judeo-Christian standpoint, it's justice, not freedom, which is the highest of all social values. And freedom is just a subset of that. But the emphasis so often, and it's good politics, is to talk about freedom rather than justice.

Well, the age of Enlightenment, then, in those ways. Now, John Locke, I'm suggesting, fits very much into this spirit of the Enlightenment. At the same time, there are other influences, of course, in his thinking.

He's in the spirit of the Enlightenment, very much part of that scientific age, a personal friend of Isaac Newton, who picks up on the Newtonian model of particles of matter, and applies it to his theory of ideas, as we'll see, and to his social philosophy. The physical universe has indivisible particles of matter, atoms. Combined and moved according to fixed laws, equal simple ideas.

Combined according to fixed laws of association. In his social philosophy, he has social atoms, individuals, joined together according to the laws of a social contract. Yeah.

He has the same atomistic model as Newton had in his physics, he had in his psychology, his epistemology, and his social philosophy. Very much the same. Yet, at the same time, he has a Puritan heritage.

His father was one of the signatories of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the classic Presbyterian document of the Counter-Reformation, 17th century. And something of that comes through, so that if you look, for instance, just at the opening paragraphs of our Locke selections, how many of you have the book with you? Well, don't make that mistake next time. Okay, the Kaufman Anthology.

If you look at the outset of that, this is where he starts. He starts his essay on human understanding with this. An inquiry into the understanding is pleasant and useful.

Since it is understanding that sets man above the rest of sensory beings, conscious beings, and gives him all the advantage and dominion that he has over them, it's certainly a subject, even for its nobleness, worth our labor to inquire into. Now, what is it that distinguishes humankind? Well, you say rationality. The Greeks were saying that.

Yes, so is the Enlightenment, continuing that. But notice what else he says. It's this which gives him dominion over the rest of nature.

There's that Puritan Reformed emphasis on creation. That we saw in Bacon and again in Hobbes. Towards the end of that paragraph, he refers to all the light we can let in upon our own minds.

The light, interesting figure of speech again, the light of reason. And on 165, the top of the page, when he's talking about method, he talks about searching for the bounds between opinion and knowledge. Between opinion and knowledge.

Now that's an old Platonic distinction that he reshapes and introduces into the Enlightenment. Knowledge has to be objective, has to be certain, and has to be scientifically and logically guaranteed. Opinion, that's something different.

And it's by means of this that he says we ought to regulate our assent and moderate our persuasions. You can control what you assent to, you can control your beliefs, you see. We're completely free to assent or dissent, to believe or not believe, in accordance with reason.

You see. And then on 165, in the second column, he has a section labeled what idea, the term idea in quotes, stands for. And you notice halfway through that paragraph, he remarks that it stands for whatever is the object of understanding when a man thinks.

Okay, now what are you thinking about when you think? Ideas. Ideas. You see, this is Descartes' kind of starting point.

What you have is the mind directly aware of its own ideas. Okay, that's a starting point. And as it was for Descartes, so it is for Locke.

Granted, all we know are our ideas. The question is, can we infer anything further about external things like bodies, like other minds, like God? And these things,

outside of our own mind, have to be demonstrated, have to be proven. You want scientific-like proofs for that.

You see. Or if you can't get those proofs, then all that you have is not knowledge, but opinions, beliefs. And when David Hume becomes skeptical, he therefore raises questions about knowledge of bodies, knowledge of other minds, knowledge of God, and even knowledge of one's own mind.

So, Hume says that all we actually know are our own subjective ideas. Oh, he believes we have bodies. He's inclined to believe in God.

It's as far as he takes it. Okay. So, Locke, yes, at the beginning of this whole movement.

Then, one other preliminary observation on 166 in the first column. He is arguing that we have no innate knowledge. We have no innate knowledge, as Plato had thought.

Everything we have comes through our senses. Everything we know comes through our senses. Formulating sensory ideas.

Leading to ideas of our own reflections. Leading to more complex ideas. That we join together to form propositions and develop knowledge.

But all of it comes from sense experience. Now, one of his reasons for insisting on that, rather than innate knowledge, is in effect that it would be an affront to God who gave us our senses to suppose that we cannot rely on them to tell us where things are. So, just as Descartes appealed to the Creator who had given us the mind so that we could trust the mind, Locke appeals to the God who gave us our senses so we can trust our senses.

So that if the underlying assumption in Locke's empiricism is the trustworthiness of the senses, you see, he at least has an underlying theological justification for that. Well, that's purely introductory. You see Locke as the beginning of the Enlightenment, and what he does in these pages really sets it up for Berkeley to make radical changes and for Hume to ditch the whole thing.

Now, let me pause there for a comment. Yeah. Yeah.

Well, you remember Descartes tried to prove that he had a mind. I think I have ideas. Therefore, I exist.

A thinking thing. Now, to say I have a mind is to say I'm a thing. There is a thing there that thinks.

Remember Descartes' phrase was race cogitans. A thinking thing. Where race means a substantive entity.

Not physical. But an entity. Now, it's that entitative status, the notion of a mind substance, of a soul substance, that's in question.

Descartes thought he proved it. Locke agrees with Descartes. He thinks you, if you think, you must be a thinking thing.

But Hume says, why? Why? Well, all I know is that I'm a bundle of perceptions. An array of ideas interrelated that I'm conscious of. So all I know about the mind, if you want to be an empiricist, is that I'm a bundle of perceptions.

Now you say, but something must have that bundle of perceptions. Well, you're going to dogmatize and say what it is. You're simply going to confess you don't know.

Says Hume, I don't know. The alternatives, as he sees them, are dogmatism versus skepticism. The skeptic doesn't deny that there is such.

He says, I don't know and I don't know how to find out. Get it? So, this is up for grabs in Hume, along with other minds, along with bodies, and God. In other words, Hume is a skeptic about any metaphysical belief, or any metaphysical knowledge, I should say.

And Locke sets him up for it. Okay, let's take a stab at his theory of ideas, shall we? A stab at his theory of ideas. The first thing that he does... Now, let me back up there.

Notice the distinction between ideas and knowledge. Why is that? Well, he makes the point that knowledge consists of the addition or subtraction. Of ideas.

So that if I say, for instance, all humans are mortal. Okay. What I'm doing is making a judgment, affirming a proposition.

And all knowledge consists of propositions and judgments that have subject-predicate form. Now, the subject and the predicate are different ideas. So you have idea one and idea two.

The idea of humans. Yes, it's a generalized idea. Okay.

The idea of mortality. It's the idea of a certain contingent quality that there is to life. It's a qualitative idea.

But obviously, then, we only have knowledge if we have ideas. Knowledge refers to the judgments you make about your ideas. So he has to start with a theory of ideas.

Where do we get our ideas? The first question. And his response is twofold. First, there are no innate ideas.

And second, all ideas originate with the senses. Now, he has a lengthy section, and we've got a goodly part of it in the anthology, in which he argues against innate ideas. That theory about innate ideas, you remember from Plato.

And in another form of it, in Descartes, his emphasis on clear and distinct ideas that are intuitive, natural to us. It's not altogether clear which of these Locke is referring to. It's disgusting.

I'm inclined to think that the greatest likelihood is that he is referring to the Cambridge Platonists. The Cambridge Platonists. Now, a brief word there.

There was, in the Italian Renaissance, in the 14th, 15th century, 15th century particularly, the Italian Renaissance, a revival of Platonic philosophy. Platonism has been largely eclipsed by the Aristotelian influence for a number of years. Particularly in the Florentine Academy in Florence.

You get a man by the name of Ficino, who gets cited in all of the discussions, the principal influence coming out of the Italian Renaissance on the English Renaissance. In England, you have somebody like John Cullet in the 15th century who applied Platonism to religion and education, and others like Thomas More and Spencer applied it to politics. So you get a whole Platonic revival in the Renaissance.

Now, Cambridge Platonism was the 17th-century successor of that Renaissance revival. The principal figure in it, a man by the name of Richard Cudworth, who died in 1688, and as you see from that, was therefore a younger contemporary of John Locke. It was a movement primarily among Anglicans in opposition to two other kinds of alternatives, which they very much disliked.

One was the mechanistic view of nature, including human nature, in Thomas Hobbes and, for that matter, in Descartes' view of the physical world. Mechanistic science, generally, they were opposed to. And you'd expect that of a Platonist who was an idealist, and this was Platonism with the theory of emanations, therefore more Neoplatonic in some regards.

It was an idealist metaphysic which rejected the view that matter is real and has real causal powers. Therefore, rejected the view that causal stimuli to the senses can produce ideas. Therefore reverted to the theory of innate ideas.

In opposition to materialism and thence to Hobbes. Also reacting against the Calvinism of the Puritans, which they thought belittled human nature and just bred sectarian religious disputes. What they were saying, rather, is that by virtue of innate ideas, reason has power.

You see the rule of reason still. Reason has the power to know the existence of God, to know our moral responsibilities. The essence of Christianity is a moral life and the contemplation of God rather than all sorts of quibbles about theological orthodoxy.

And for that, they found Cambridge Platonism amply sufficient. Innate knowledge, innate moral knowledge. The Platonic ideal is a contemplative love of the good, which is God.

Now, it's in response to that I'm suggesting that John Locke, coming out of his Puritan background, argues against there being any innate ideas. No, our time has gone. Has it? No, it hasn't.

I'm still trying to get adjusted. No, we've got another ten minutes. Great.

John Locke argues against innate ideas. Okay, now how does he argue? Well, you'll find a whole array of different lines of thought woven into the material. Basically, his point is this.

If knowledge is innate, if ideas are innate, they would be known universally. But, modus tollens, there are no universal ideas. Therefore, the conclusion is that ideas are not innate.

Now, he doesn't spell it out in exactly that form. That's my logical construction of his argument. If ideas are going to be innate, they'll be universal.

There's no universal consensus about such ideas. Therefore, they're not innate. Oh, and he goes one step further.

Even if they were universal, that wouldn't prove they're innate. It would be a non-sequitur to think of this. Because you could explain universality by other means.

Common empirical factors, for instance. Well, what does he do to justify the claim that there are no universal ideas? Well, to begin with, the ideas that are supposed to be innate, ideas of God and moral ideas, are unknown to children and idiots. To children and idiots.

Those, in other words, are without the mental development to be able to think about those ideas. And, you know, he works with the question, what does it mean for an idea to be innate? It means it must be in the understanding. But how can it be in the

understanding if it's not understood? Can something be in the understanding that somebody doesn't understand? For something to be in the understanding is to be understood, isn't it? And young children, particularly, simply don't understand.

That's one line of thought. A second is to point out cultural diversity. Remember the age of discovery, the 16th century? Cultural diversity is evident in ethics, in regard to ideas of God.

So how can we claim, if there are no universal ideas there, that these crucial ideas, for the Cambridge Platonists at least, are innate? Now, at the same time, having said that, there's a passage on page 168 where he accounts for the idea of God, with all of its obscurity and diversity, in ways that his Puritan background had taught him. So he says at the very top of 168 that there is, let's see, Such an idea is deducible from every part of knowledge, the idea of God, for the visible marks of extraordinary wisdom and power appear so plainly in all the work of the creation, that a rational creature who will but seriously reflect on them cannot miss the discovery of a deity. That's simply a paraphrase of Romans 1. The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood, but the things that are made are the eternal power of God.

So it's simply a paraphrase of Romans 1, but no innate ideas. John Calvin, you may be aware, in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, says that in all people there is some sense of a deity, some sensus deitatis, vague, undefined, and it's that which is the seed of religion, the semen religionis. So that it looks to me like this is what John Locke is referring to at this juncture, this sense of a deity that arises simply from reflection on the things that are made.

Well then, no innate ideas, so how is he going to explain the origin of ideas with reference to the senses? Well, what he does is to offer a whole list of suggestions in spelling this out, and I will note them, and you can check them out in your reading by next time. First of all is the claim that the consciousness, the human mind at birth, is a blank tablet, like a blank piece of paper, tabula rasa, like a blank piece of paper on which experience leaves marks. Now, the notion of tabula rasa, you find as early as some of the Stoics, certainly in Aristotle, so that it's part of the growing empiricist tradition.

Second, something I've already pointed out, an idea is at best a mental representation. His is a representational theory of knowledge, our ideas are representations of properties and things external. Then he distinguishes between simple and complex ideas.

A simple idea would have to do with one property at a time, and a complex idea would be conjoining a number of simple ideas. So, as you look at me, you see a blue shirt; the idea of blue is a simple idea; blue, shirt-like, would be a complex idea, and

by the time you get the whole of me in the picture, it gets far more complex than that. Okay, simple, complex.

Simple ideas are, as I said before, atomistic ideas, indivisible units. We get ideas from both the internal and the external senses. You know about the five external senses.

The internal is simply a reflection of our own mental states. So I can reflect on my own ideas that I have, reflect on the blueness that I have as an afterimage in my mind. I can reflect on my own mental acts, like thinking, wishing, believing, the various other kinds of activities that Descartes put into his cogito.

So, internal and external senses. The characteristic of simple ideas is that they must be clear and distinct. Does that sound familiar? Clear and distinct.

But they're not innate. They're not intuitive. Clear and distinct.

And ideas can come from one sense only, or from various senses, so that the idea of space is an idea that we get from various of our senses. And in the ideas that we have, we have to distinguish ideas of primary qualities from ideas of secondary qualities. And he elaborates that on pages 178 to 181.

The secondary qualities are simply the qualities associated with our different sense organs. Smell, taste, color, sound, texture. As such, they are the qualities they are because of the way our sense organs operate.

They are produced in us, but have no objective reality. There are mental ways of representing physical things. Physical things which have primary qualities.

Primary qualities are the qualities of matter in Newtonian science. Size, shape, weight, density. And primary quality material bodies have the capacity to produce in us secondary quality sensations by cause-effect influence.

Now, that's the apparatus he's going to work with. And out of that theory of ideas, ideas thus described, he thinks all human knowledge and belief can be built.