

History of Philosophy

42 John Locke's Theory of Ideas

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Abstract:

This lecture explores **John Locke's theory of ideas**, which posits that human knowledge consists of mental **representations** rather than direct awareness of the physical world. Locke categorizes thoughts into **simple ideas** derived from external sensation or internal reflection, and **complex ideas** formed by the mind's voluntary compounding of these basic elements. A critical distinction is made between **primary qualities**, which objectively exist in matter, and **secondary qualities** like color or smell that are purely subjective. Because we only perceive these mental copies, the lecture notes that Locke's **copy theory of knowledge** leads to questions regarding the certainty of the external world. Ultimately, Locke is presented as an **evidentialist** who believes we must proportion our beliefs to available evidence, categorizing most sensory knowledge as **probability** rather than absolute certainty.

Briefing Document:

Analysis of John Locke's Theory of Ideas

Executive Summary

John Locke's epistemology is defined by a representational theory of knowledge, asserting that the immediate objects of human awareness are not external things themselves, but rather mental representations called "ideas." By rejecting innate ideas, Locke argues that all knowledge is derived from experience, categorized into simple ideas (sensation and reflection), complex ideas (voluntary mental constructs), and abstract ideas (conceptualism).

Locke establishes a hierarchy of knowledge: intuition (immediate certainty), demonstration (logical proof), and sensation (probability). His "evidentialist"

stance—the principle that one should proportion their assent to the available evidence—remains a cornerstone of modern scientific and philosophical debate. However, his framework also created significant philosophical vulnerabilities, particularly regarding the ability to prove the existence of an external world, the nature of causal power, and the validity of "substance." These gaps set the stage for later developments in empiricism, most notably the skepticism of David Hume and the "basic belief" theories of Scottish Realism.

The Nature of Knowledge as Representation

Locke, similar to Descartes, subscribes to a **representational theory of knowledge**. In this framework:

- **Ideas as Intermediaries:** Knowledge is the mind's observation of its own ideas rather than direct contact with reality.
 - **Inferential Reality:** The mind observes mental representations and infers the existence of the external world (bodies, other minds, God, and moral obligations).
 - **The Appearance-Reality Gap:** By focusing on appearances (phenomena) rather than reality in itself, Locke opens the door to debates regarding realism versus anti-realism.
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Categorization of Ideas

Locke identifies three distinct types of ideas that form the constituents of human thought.

1. Simple Ideas

Simple ideas are "atomistic" or indivisible constituents of thought. They originate from two sources:

- **Sensation (Outer Sense):** Derived from the five physical senses (e.g., a particular sensation of blueness or loudness).

- **Reflection (Inner Sense):** Derived from the mind's introspective awareness of its own operations (e.g., thinking, doubting, wishing, or feeling).

Quality Type	Definition	Examples	Status
Primary Qualities	Objective properties inherent in material bodies.	Shape, size, density, spatial occupancy.	Copy: Ideas represent reality as it is.
Secondary Qualities	Subjective effects produced in the mind by sense organs.	Color, sound, smell, taste, touch.	Non-Copy: Exist only in consciousness; no objective counterpart.

2. Complex Ideas

Complex ideas are "mental constructs" formed by the voluntary activity of the mind compounding and combining simple ideas.

- **Power (Causal Connection):** Derived from reflecting on the relationship between mental states (e.g., willing an action and the action occurring). Locke acknowledges that we see *conjunction* (correlation) but assumes a *connection* (causal power).
- **Substance:** The idea of "something I know not what" that possesses certain qualities. Locke distinguishes between material substance (holding primary qualities) and spiritual substance (mind or soul).
- **Infinity:** Developed through the process of "endless extrapolation" of points in space or periods of time.

3. Abstract Ideas (Conceptualism)

Locke is a **conceptualist** regarding universals. He argues that the mind has the power of abstraction—stripping away particulars (time, place, specific shapes) to retain only what is common to a class.

- **Genera and Species:** These are not real metaphysical entities (as in Plato or Aristotle) but "the workmanship of the understanding."

- **Example:** The general idea of "animal" is formed by leaving out the specific differences between humans and horses, retaining only "a body with life and spontaneous motion."

The Hierarchy of Knowledge and Belief

Locke distinguishes between knowledge (certainty) and opinion (belief/probability) through three degrees:

1. **Intuition:** Immediate awareness of self-evident truths, such as the laws of logic ($A=A$).
2. **Demonstration:** Knowledge reached through logical proof where each step has intuitive certainty (e.g., mathematical theorems).
3. **Sensation:** Knowledge of the external world. This is not certain but based on **probability**.

The Role of Probability

Probability in Locke's system is supported by:

- **Consistency:** The coherence of a belief with one's overall experience.
- **Testimony:** The reports of others, which are essential for expanding knowledge beyond the narrow scope of individual experience.

Evidentialism and its Philosophic Legacy

Locke is the paradigm case of an **evidentialist**. His central maxim is: "*You should proportion your assent to the evidence.*"

Challenges to Locke's Framework

- **The Causal Gap:** Since we only know ideas (effects), we cannot prove the external world (cause) unless we can prove a necessary causal connection. Later skeptics like David Hume argued that we only observe "constant conjunction," never actual "causal power."

- **The Problem of Substance:** By defining substance as "something I know not what," Locke provided a target for nominalists like Hume and Berkeley to reject the concepts of matter and immaterial mind entirely.
- **Voluntary Assent:** Locke assumes that belief is voluntary. Critics in the **Scottish Realism** tradition (such as Thomas Reid) argue that humans possess "belief-forming mechanisms" that produce spontaneous, natural beliefs (e.g., the existence of material bodies) which do not require a voluntary weighing of evidence.

Impact on Apologetics and Theology

- **Anglican Tradition:** Influenced by Locke's probabilistic approach, 18th-century apologists like Joseph Butler used evidence and analogy to argue for the truth of religion.
- **Reformed Epistemology:** Modern philosophers like Alvin Plantinga reject Locke's evidentialism, suggesting that belief in God may be a "basic belief" arising from naturally functioning cognitive mechanisms rather than a proportioned response to evidence.

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to John Locke's Theory of Ideas

This study guide examines the philosophical framework of John Locke as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on Locke's representational theory of knowledge, his categorization of ideas, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, and his epistemological views on the degrees of knowledge and evidence.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. What is the "representational theory of knowledge" as defined by Locke?
 2. How does Locke distinguish between "simple ideas of sensation" and "simple ideas of reflection"?
 3. Define Locke's "primary qualities" and list the properties they include.
 4. According to the text, why are "secondary qualities" considered purely subjective?
 5. What is the "copy theory of knowledge," and to which qualities does it apply?
 6. How are "complex ideas" formed within the mind?
 7. Describe Locke's specific definition of "substance."
 8. What is "intuitive knowledge" according to Locke's three degrees of knowledge?
 9. Explain the role of "abstraction" in Locke's conceptualism.
 10. What is the central tenet of Locke's "evidentialism"?
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Part II: Quiz Answer Key

1. **The Representational Theory of Knowledge:** Locke argues that knowledge is primarily of our own ideas, which serve as the immediate objects of our awareness. The mind observes these mental representations and then infers the nature of the external world from them.
2. **Sensation vs. Reflection:** Simple ideas of sensation are derived from the five physical "outer senses," such as color, sound, and touch. Simple ideas of reflection come from "inner sense," or the mind's introspective awareness of its own states and activities, like thinking, doubting, and wishing.
3. **Primary Qualities:** Primary qualities are objective properties that material bodies possess regardless of whether they are perceived. In the Newtonian science of Locke's time, these include spatial occupancy properties such as shape, size, and density.

4. **Secondary Qualities:** Secondary qualities like color, smell, and taste are subjective because they have no objective counterpart in the material body itself. They are merely effects produced in our consciousness by the interaction of material bodies with our sense organs.
 5. **Copy Theory of Knowledge:** This theory suggests that our mental ideas are representations or "copies" of the way things truly are in the external world. Locke applies this only to primary qualities; secondary qualities are not considered copies of objective reality.
 6. **Complex Ideas:** Complex ideas are mental constructs resulting from the mind's voluntary activity of compounding and combining various simple ideas. Because they are constructed by the mind and often include subjective secondary qualities, they lack a built-in guarantee of exact objective reference.
 7. **Substance:** Locke defines substance—whether material or spiritual—as "something I know not what." He argues that while we have ideas of various qualities, substance is merely the underlying "something" we suppose has those qualities.
 8. **Intuitive Knowledge:** Intuitive knowledge is the first and most certain degree of knowledge, characterized by immediate awareness without the need for representations. Examples include self-evident truths like the laws of logic ($A = A$) or the immediate awareness of a current sensation.
 9. **Abstraction:** Abstraction is the process by which the mind makes particular ideas general by separating them from specific circumstances like time and place. This allows the mind to create general representations and names, such as the concept of "animal," by retaining only what is essential to a class of things.
 10. **Evidentialism:** Locke's evidentialism is the principle that an individual should always proportion their assent to a proposition according to the available evidence. He views assent as a voluntary act that can be meted out in degrees as evidence accrues.
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Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Crisis of Realism:** Analyze how Locke's representational theory of knowledge opens the door to skepticism regarding the existence of the external world, other minds, and God.
2. **Scientific Worldviews and the Romantic Reaction:** Discuss the distinction between primary and secondary qualities and explain why poets like Tennyson and Wordsworth found the "Newtonian" universe of John Locke to be cold or "dead."
3. **The Mechanics of Causality:** Explain Locke's view of "causal power" as a complex idea and evaluate how his distinction between "conjunction" and "connection" prepared the way for David Hume's skepticism.
4. **Locke as a Conceptualist:** Compare Locke's theory of universals and "abstract ideas" with the nominalism of Hobbes and Bacon, focusing on how Locke uses the powers of the mind to account for general terms.
5. **The Ethics of Belief:** Contrast Locke's evidentialist approach to belief with the "belief-forming mechanism" theory of the Scottish realists. How does Locke's insistence on "evidence" differ from the view that certain beliefs are spontaneous or natural?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Abstract Ideas	General concepts formed by the mind's power to separate particular ideas from their specific existence in time, place, and circumstance.
Assent	The voluntary act of accepting or denying a proposition; Locke argued this should be proportioned to evidence.

Conceptualism	The view that universals or abstract ideas exist as mental constructs in the mind, rather than as transcendent or physical entities.
Demonstration	The second degree of knowledge involving logical proof; it requires each step of a deduction to possess intuitive certainty.
Evidentialism	The epistemological stance that belief or assent must be justified by and proportioned to the available evidence.
Ideas	Mental representations and the immediate objects of human awareness; the constituents of all knowledge.
Inner Sense	The mind's introspective awareness of its own mental states and acts, such as thinking, feeling, or doubting.
Nominalism	The philosophical view that only particulars exist and that general terms are merely names without corresponding abstract ideas.
Primary Qualities	Objective properties of material bodies (size, shape, density) that exist independently of a perceiver.
Representationalism	The theory that the mind does not perceive external objects directly, but only through the medium of mental ideas that represent those objects.
Secondary Qualities	Subjective qualities (color, sound, taste) produced in the mind by the external cause of material bodies acting on sense organs.
Sensitive Knowledge	The third degree of knowledge, based on sensation; it deals with the external world and is characterized by probability rather than certainty.
Simple Ideas	The indivisible, atomistic constituents of thought, derived from either sensation (outer sense) or reflection (inner sense).

Substance

The supposed underlying support for qualities; described by Locke as "something I know not what."

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