

## Purpose of the *Essay*

To inquire into what Descartes had taken too much for granted:

The nature of “clear and distinct perception” or, more simply, knowledge

What entitles us to claim that we clearly and distinctly perceive or know something?

How can we be sure that we really are perceiving clearly and distinctly and not simply assenting to juvenile preconceptions or natural impulses?

## Occasion of the *Essay*

The difficulty of resolving disputes in morality and revealed religion

Locke's questions:

Can the answers to questions on these matters even possibly be resolved?

Are they matters of knowledge or of faith & opinion?

What are the bounds of knowledge and of faith & opinion?

Under what conditions are people entitled to their own opinions?

## Method of the *Essay*

To inquire into the “original” (i.e., origin) of human knowledge

To determine how it is built up from this origin.

Thereby to discover the limits of knowledge, faith, and opinion

An initial, startling claim:  
*Essay I.i.*

“I shall not at present meddle with the Physical Consideration of the Mind; or trouble myself to examine, wherein its Essence consists, or by what Motions of our Spirits, or Alterations of our Bodies, we come to have any Sensation by our Organs, or any *Ideas* in our Understandings; and whether those *Ideas* do in their Formation, any, or all of them, depend on Matter or no.”

“It shall suffice to my present Purpose, to consider the discerning Faculties of a Man, as they are employ’d about the Objects, which they have to do with ...

“I shall imagine I have not wholly misemploy’d my self ... if in this Historical, plain Method, I can give any Account of the Ways, whereby our Understandings come to Attain the Notions of the Things we have ...”

Locke was trained as a physician.

He had a good sense of what prospects 18<sup>th</sup> century researchers had of determining how knowledge arises by attempting to study brain processes.

He also did not think it is necessary for his project, which can instead be undertaken by the “Historical, plain Method”

## Elements of the “Historical, plain Method”

An anatomy of the understanding (the human cognitive faculties) as they reveal themselves to us in introspection,

Rather than an anatomy of the brain as revealed to the eyes of outside observers

A study of how the elements observable to us in introspection interact to produce cognition

Rather than a study of how particles move around in the brain

## Anticipated outcomes

A discovery of what sorts of things lie beyond our powers of knowledge

and therefore are not a legitimate matter for dispute or contestation

but that must instead be left to unmolested individual opinion

## Locke's Questions

- What are the materials for knowledge? (Book II)
- How are these materials transformed into knowledge? (Books III-IV)
- What can be accepted on faith even though it cannot be known? (Book IV)



The materials for knowledge are “ideas” understood as “what we are employed about in thinking”

Knowledge consists in the assertion or denial of relations between ideas

The main project is to

- undertake a survey of what sorts of “ideas” we have
- determine what allows us to “perceive” relations between ideas

## Locke's ambiguous use of "Idea"

*Essay* I.i.8: "Whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks"

Does this mean that thinking is one thing and that whatever it is we think about is our ideas?

But then external objects are ideas, since we often think about external objects

Or does it mean that what we think about is not outside of us but in or before the understanding?

Are ideas part of the act of thinking (or identical with it) or are they the object thought about?

if the latter is that object an external object or an internal "thought"?

## Some possibilities

Ideas are mental images

they may or may not resemble external objects

Ideas are things thought about

perhaps mental images, perhaps external objects

Ideas are “thoughts about something”

most notably, to have the idea that I can remember things is to be directly aware of performing the operation of remembering, not to experience an image

but ideas of colours could not involve a direct awareness of an external object (since colours don't exist outside us) or of ourselves (since I don't think I am coloured) but would seem to have to be mental images or direct awareness of mental images

## Original Sources of Ideas

- Sensation
- Reflection

## Derivative Source of Ideas

Imagination, as it works through such operations as

- compounding
- dividing
- comparing
- abstracting
- naming

## How sensation is understood

An original source of ideas grounded in the operations of the external senses.

The external sense organs are supposed to “convey something to the brain” (the mind’s “presence room”) that there produces those ideas we get from sensation.

What they “convey” is an effect that external material objects have on the organ

This effect is most likely a motion of some sort

So the sense organs don’t convey “ideas.”

Ideas are instead produced in the mind as a consequence of something else.

## Noteworthy aspects of Locke's account of sensation

Locke simply assumed, right from the outset, that we have bodies and sense organs, and that there are external, material objects that affect our sense organs

By itself, there is nothing wrong with this

Even Descartes thought it is true and only raised "methodical" doubts about it that he considered to be answerable.

And a case can be made that such knowledge as we are able to obtain is not certain and demonstrable beyond any doubt

but probabilistic and ultimately based on experience

and experience does teach us these things.

But ...

## Noteworthy aspects of Locke's account of sensation, cont.'d

There is a sense in which all ideas are innate.

They don't actually come to us from the outside.

They are simply caused in us as a consequence of something else coming into us from the outside.

We need to be innately disposed to react to sensory affects in the brain by producing certain ideas.

(And claiming that we are "passive" in this process does nothing to mask the fact that we are not getting these ideas from outside, but producing them ourselves.)

You can't accept all this and not pose sceptical worries about how we know that there is an external world or that we have bodies or that any of our ideas result from external objects acting on our bodies

## Locke's answer

We can't produce the ideas on our own, independently of being affected in the right way by external objects.

Arguments for this:

- Appeal to observation of children
- Appeal to the knowledge of those who lack the use of specific sense organs
- Appeal to the knowledge of those who have never had certain experiences

So whatever it might be that is ultimately responsible for what we call experience

(external objects acting on a physical body, an evil genius imposing ideas on us in the absence of a material world, our own capacity to dream)

There is a distinction to be drawn between what we can only learn from this "experience" and what we discover by "reflection"



## Other Anti-Cartesian aspects of Locke's preliminary account

- all ideas are “positive,” even those that may be supposed to come from “privative” causes

So Descartes's doctrine of the “material falsity” of ideas is mistaken

Indeed, there may not even be any such thing as a privative cause, so there could hardly be any privative ideas

- the mind is not “essentially” a thinking thing and could continue to exist even when not thinking
- body is not essentially extended, though it is extended

In addition to being extended, bodies need to resist penetration (this is something that is taught to us by experience and generalized to all cases)

- space can exist apart from body

Space is “penetrable, indivisible, immobile extension”

Body is “impenetrable, divisible, movable extension”

## Reflection

(the other original source of ideas)

On the occasion of sensory stimulation, the mind is roused to perform various operations

some “passive” (perception of ideas)

others increasingly active (recollection, imagination, comparison, abstraction, naming, reasoning, desiring, fearing, willing)

It cannot perform these actions without acquiring some idea of what it is doing.

However, it can fail to attend to or discriminate the ideas it receives in this way.

When it does attend, it obtains ideas of its own operations.

## Types of ideas

### Simple ideas

these give “one uniform appearance”

e.g., colours, tastes

### Complex ideas

While simple ideas are readily discerned from one another

(nothing is supposed to be clearer than that each is what it is and is not any of the others)

they are given in combination in sensory experience

(Imagination also has the power to make its own combinations of simple ideas)

## Multi-source ideas

Some ideas originate from more than one sense

e.g., space and its modes

Others originate from both sensation and reflection

e.g., pleasure, pain, power, existence, unity

## Locke's conflicted account of solidity

It is an idea obtained from one sense, that of touch, that is too simple to be defined.

But he does define it,

and according to the definition it is something complex that does not involve just one sense

Moreover, it is not so much an "idea" as an essential characteristic of body.

Solidity considered as a simple idea of sense is the feeling of pressure.

(the feeling you get when something presses on you)

Solidity considered as an essential characteristic of body is the property of resisting penetration

(the power of preventing anything else from occupying the space that you are occupying)

Unlike the feeling, it is far from “simple”

it involves the ideas of space, motion, and perhaps also resistance and force

Solidity considered as a simple idea of sense is a feeling (so a kind of idea in us).

Solidity considered as an essential characteristic of bodies is a disposition or power.

They may go together in our experience, but they are different

Locke ran them together and treated them as one “simple” thing.

This is not the only instance where he did this. A number of other nominally simple ideas involve “powers” that Locke did not carefully analyze