

# Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

## Book I: Locke vs. Leibniz on Innate Ideas (Ariew & Watkins, pp. 316-322, 422-425a)

### Before doing the reading:

1. Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz all make use of “innate ideas.” Before reading Locke, recollect a few ideas that one or more of these thinkers describe as innate.
  - a. What does it *mean* to consider them innate?
  - b. What difference does it make for their philosophy as a whole to think of these ideas as innate?
  - c. What justification is there for thinking of them as innate?
2. Do you think that there are any innate ideas? Why or why not?

### While reading:

1. Locke and Leibniz both talk about innate ideas.
  - a. What does Locke *mean* by an “innate idea”?
  - b. What does Leibniz mean by an “innate idea”? (Focus particularly on his marble metaphor.)
2. For your first read through both Locke and Leibniz, find as many distinct arguments against and for innate ideas as you can. (For Leibniz, one of the most important is the argument on 423a-b, starting “Although the senses are necessary...”)

### While rereading:

1. Before rereading, think for yourself of an idea that, if any is innate, is particularly likely to be innate. Why is this one particularly likely to be innate? Now think of the idea that, given Leibniz's reasons for innate ideas, *he* would consider particularly likely to be innate.
2. As you reread Locke, keep these ideas in mind. Are Locke's arguments sufficient to show that these particular ideas are not innate? Why or why not?
3. As you reread both Locke and Leibniz, try to put together a view that reconciles the two philosophers. Is there a way of distinguishing between two different sorts of innateness,  $\text{innate}_{\text{Locke}}$  and  $\text{innate}_{\text{Leibniz}}$ , such that both Locke and Leibniz could *agree* that no ideas are  $\text{innate}_{\text{Locke}}$  but some ideas are  $\text{innate}_{\text{Leibniz}}$ ?

### After rereading:

1. Why does it matter whether ideas are innate?
2. What's the single best argument *for* innate ideas?
3. What's the single best argument *against* innate ideas?
4. Are ideas innate?
5. If no ideas are innate, where do our ideas of \_\_\_\_\_ [insert your answer from rereading #1], substance, unity, perfection, God, causation, yellow, truth, and justice come from? (Pick the one that seems hardest to explain and explain its origin.)

## Book II, Chapters 1-2, 5-12: Of Ideas

### Before doing the reading:

1. Consider doing the Locke Group Project, even if you are just an individual. Go to your bookshelf, or to the web, or to your memory, and pull out a favorite poem. As you read through Locke, keep this poem by your side.
2. Before reading Locke, read through the poem. Which words in the poem correspond to ideas that non-Lockeans might consider innate? Which ideas in (or sparked by) the poem seem particularly hard to account for? Where did you get the ideas that you think of when you read the poem?
3. More generally, if ideas aren't innate, where do they come from? Be as specific as possible here. For instance, "from experience" is too general. From what experiences, and how? Likewise "from education" is insufficient. How does "education" give new ideas? And where do those ideas *initially* come from (in the first teacher)?
4. You might also spend some time thinking about what difference it would make for various philosophical questions (e.g. God's existence, the relation of mind and body, the nature of substance, and/or whatever you are writing your final paper on) if all of our ideas come from experience. Briefly read through Locke's account of the "occasion of this essay" (I.i.7, p. 318). Does his prioritizing of epistemology ("human understanding") over metaphysics seem like a sensible approach to philosophy? If our ideas all come from experience, what kinds of philosophical questions might it be "beyond our capacities" (318a)?

### While reading:

1. A warning: As with many other philosophers, you need to pay attention to how Locke is using his key terms, not merely assume that they mean in Locke what they mean to you. Thus, for example, "reflection" for Locke has a very specific (and often misunderstood) meaning. Pay close attention on your initial reading to what Locke means (and does mean) by his terms in general, and by "reflection" in particular.
2. What are the ultimate origins of our ideas? \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. What do these terms mean? What's an example of idea we get through the first? \_\_\_\_\_. An example of an idea we get through the second? \_\_\_\_\_. [These should all be easy questions.]
3. To an even greater extent than many of the philosophers we've read thus far, Locke's *Essay* repeats his key points and offers tangential discussions in the midst of more general claims. As you read through Book II, here are some of the tangential discussions you might want to engage with (or might not):
  - a. Locke's objection to the (Cartesian) claim that thinking is essential to the soul (Book II.Chapter 1. §§9-19, pp. 325-7). Try to lay out Locke's arguments against Descartes's view, and think of how Descartes (and/or Spinoza, and/or Leibniz) might respond. In the end, do you think a compelling case can be made that thinking is essential to your soul/mind?
  - b. Locke's specific examples of simple ideas (BkII.Ch.3-7, pp. 329-332a). Our main focus in Locke will be on the general distinctions between simple and complex ideas and between ideas of reflection and those of sensation. But you might look at specific ideas discussed in

these sections in more detail. Is it plausible, for instance, that there can be simple ideas without names (II.3.§2)? Or that space is a simple idea of sensation (II.4.§3)? Or that we can get simple ideas from multiple senses (II.5)? (If we can do this, are they the same simple ideas (see (d))? Is the idea of “existence” really a simple idea (II.7.§7)? In what sense?

- c. Locke’s critique of Descartes’s conception of material falsity of ideas. See Descartes, Meditation Three (p. 50b-51a) and Locke II.8.§1 (p. 332a). What is the issue here? How does Locke object to Descartes? Why would this be of broader importance?
  - d. The “Molyneux problem” (II.9.§8, p. 338) is an extremely famous philosophical-psychological problem, on which new research continues to come out at periodic intervals (and with ever-changing answers). What is Molyneux’s question? What is Locke’s answer? Do you think this is the best answer for Locke to give, given the rest of his system? Do you think he’s correct? How would you argue for your answer (and/or, what would you do to test it)?
4. (A minor question.) When Locke talks about “simple ideas of both sensation and reflection,” what does he mean by this? Are these ideas that one needs both sensation and reflection to get, or that one can get from either sensation or reflection?
  5. Choose one of the ideas discussed in chapters 3-7 and really think about what Locke is saying. Where does this idea come from? How do we get it from there?
6. Chapter 8 (p. 332-333) introduces two very important distinctions.
    - a. Ideas vs. Qualities. What is the difference between an idea and a quality?
    - b. Primary vs. Secondary Qualities. What is the difference between a primary and a secondary quality? With respect to this distinction, note that Locke gives at least two different accounts of the distinction.
      - i. In §§ 9-14, how are primary and secondary qualities distinguished?
      - ii. In §15 (and following, up to §22), how are they distinguished?
      - iii. Which is the better explanation of the distinction? Are the two distinctions the same?
      - iv. List a few examples of primary and secondary qualities.
7. Chapters 11 and especially 12 (pp. 339-42) turn from *passive* sources of *simple* ideas to *active* operations of the mind that can give rise to new *complex* ideas.
    - a. First, does the possibility of active powers of the mind undermine the claim that all our ideas come from experience?
    - b. What are the chief “acts of the mind” that can give rise to new ideas (see especially chapter 12, §1)? (For each, give an example or two of an idea that might arise from this act of mind.)
      - i. \_\_\_\_\_
      - ii. \_\_\_\_\_
      - iii. \_\_\_\_\_

- c. Are there any other acts of mind that you think Locke left out?
- d. What sorts of complex ideas can be formed from these acts of mind (see especially chapter 12, §3)? (Again, give an example of each.)
  - i. \_\_\_\_\_
  - ii. \_\_\_\_\_
  - iii. \_\_\_\_\_

### While rereading:

1. You might, when rereading, keep an eye out for ways that Locke's philosophy reflects the epistemic humility/pragmatism from his Introduction, Book I. As you reread this Introduction (pp. 316-318), ask yourself what Locke thinks the *point* of human knowledge is, and what implications he thinks this has for what we should expect in terms of our own capacities. Then keep an eye out for ways in which this purpose for knowledge creeps up throughout Locke's account of the origin of our ideas.
2. Locke issues challenges at the start and end of this day's reading.
  - a. "Let anyone examine his own thoughts ... and then let him tell me whether all the original ideas he has there are any other than the objects of his *senses* or the operations of his mind considered as objects of *reflection*" (323b).
  - b. "[I]f we warily observe the origins of our notions..., even *the most abstruse* ideas, however remote they may seem from sense or any operation of our own minds, are yet such as the understanding frames for itself, by repeating and joining together ideas that it had either from objects of sense or from its own operations" (341-342).
  - c. Can you think of any ideas that don't fit into Locke's framework? What are they?
3. As you reread, list examples (from your poem, or just in general) of ideas that fit each key Lockean category (Try to come up with your own examples in addition to giving some of Locke's, and **for complex ideas, include at least some examples from each of the three ways that we form complex ideas and from each kind of complex idea**, noting in each case how the complex idea is formed.):
  - a. Ideas of sensation
    - i. Simple:
    - ii. Complex:
  - b. Ideas of reflection
    - i. Simple:
    - ii. Complex:
  - c. Ideas of both sensation and reflection
    - i. Simple:
    - ii. Complex:
  - d. Ideas arising from primary qualities:
  - e. Ideas arising from secondary qualities:
4. Go to your poem or to question two above. Are there any ideas that you still think Locke's framework can't make sense of?



## Locke's *Essay*, Book II, Chapters 21, 23: Power, Free Will, and Substance

### Before reading:

The readings for today deal with four different topics.

Two topics are related in both being fundamentally about Locke addressing what might seem to be particularly difficult ideas to acquire through experience, the idea of “power” and the idea of “substance.” We haven’t focused much on the first, but the second was an extremely prominent idea with Descartes, Spinoza, Conway, and Leibniz. Power is, roughly speaking, the idea of one thing being able to change another thing (or to be changed by another thing). Before reading, ask yourself,

1. Where do I get my idea of power? Is it a simple idea or a complex one? If simple, is it an idea of sensation, reflection, or both? If complex, by means of what active operations do we generate the idea? Ultimately, how is the idea of power acquired through experience?
2. Where do I get my idea of “substance”? What *is* a substance? Is the idea of substance simple or complex? If simple, is it an idea of sensation, reflection, or both? If complex, by means of what active operations do we generate the idea? Ultimately, how is the idea of power acquired through experience?
3. Go back to Spinoza’s definition of substance in *Ethics* Definition 1. Can we get *that* idea of substance from experience (and the various operations of mind)? If so, how? If not, what are the implications of that inability?
4. Let’s think about substance just a bit more, starting with the idea of a particular substance, say, an apple (or choose one from your poem).
  - a. What is involved in your idea of an apple? (This might be easier if you focus on a particular apple.) Where do you get the various ideas that make up the idea of that apple? Try to break down your ideas of an apple as much as possible into adjectives corresponding to simple ideas. My apple is red, sweet but also a tiny bit sour, etc. (Get at least four or five words.) What *kinds* of ideas are these (sensation, reflection, etc.)?
  - b. Now ask, what difference is there between the mere collection of adjectives and the apple (a noun) that those adjectives describe. What is added when one says that this apple is a red *thing* or a sweet *thing*? What kind of idea is the idea of “thing”?
  - c. Is the idea of a “thing” an innate idea? An idea of sensation? Reflection? What do we *experience* that gives us this idea?

These reflections on the nature and origin of our ideas of “power” and “substance” are consistent with the general theme of Locke’s epistemological approach to philosophy and his empiricist rejection of innate ideas. But chapters 21 and 23 also provide an excellent illustrations of how

this empiricist epistemology can be used to deal with classic philosophical (metaphysical) problems, those of “free will” and the nature of “mind” and “body.”

Before reading chapter 21, think about your own view of free will.

5. Do you think you have a free will? If not, why not? If so, why?
6. What does the term “free will” *mean* in question 5? What is a “will”? Where does this idea come from? What kind of idea is it (simple or complex, idea of sensation or reflection, etc.)? What is “freedom” or “liberty”? Where does this idea come from? What kind of idea is it (simple or complex, idea of sensation or reflection, etc.)?
7. Do your answers to question(s) 6 affect your answer to question 5? That is, (how) does thinking more carefully about the origin of your ideas of “free” and “will” affect how you think about the metaphysical question of whether or not you have free will?

Before reading chapter 23, think about your own view about the nature of the mind.

8. Is the mind a substance? Is there literally “a” mind, or is “mind” just a particular sort of body (the brain) or a particular way that bodies (parts of the brain) are arranged?
9. What would it *mean* to say that there “is” a mind?
10. Is it possible that there is literally “thinking” matter (as, e.g., Conway suggests)? What would this mean?

### While reading On Power:

1. For Locke, where do I get my idea of power? Is it a simple idea or a complex one? If simple, is it an idea of sensation, reflection, or both? If complex, by means of what active operations do we generate the idea? Ultimately, how is the idea of power acquired through experience?
2. What is the difference between active and passive power? Why does Locke consider both to be forms of “power”?
3. Why does Locke think that “the clearest idea of active power [is] had from spirit”? What is wrong with our experiences through sensation that precludes us from getting a clear idea of power from them? What is special about reflection that gives us a clear idea of active power?
4. As you read, lay out, for each of these terms, Locke’s definition of the term. Also briefly indicate whether the idea is simple or complex, of sensation or reflection or both, and if complex, arrived at through which operation(s):
  - a. Understanding:
  - b. Will:
  - c. Liberty/free:
  - d. Necessity:
  - e. Voluntary:



- f. Involuntary:
  - i. What is an example of a case where one acts voluntarily but without liberty?
  - ii. If you had to choose between sacrificing your liberty/freedom or sacrificing your volition/voluntariness, which would you choose? Why?
  - iii. Read Locke's claim that "a waking man is not at liberty to think or not think" (§12) carefully. With respect to thinking, what liberty does a waking man *lack*? What liberty does he (generally) *have*? In particular, can I (in general) freely decide what to think about?
5. Given the definitions above, what is a "free will"? Go back to your prereading questions 5, 6, and 7. How would Locke answer these questions? Is he correct? Is Locke's claim that the question "whether a man is at liberty to will which of two [options] he pleases ... carries its absurdity so manifestly". Is this an absurd question? Why?
6. When you get to §23 (and §24), pause again for a bit and think carefully about Locke's claim that "a man in respect of willing ... cannot be free." What precisely is he saying here. What are we *not* free in respect of? What *are* we still free in respect of? If you invite me out to lunch, am I free to refuse? Am I free to accept? Is there anything I am *not* free to do?
7. §§31-52 adds two important details to Locke's account of the will.
  - a. First, he offers an uneasiness theory of the will, thereby rejecting a traditional (and even his earlier) view of the will as motivated by the good. Parse out the difference between Locke's uneasiness theory and what have come to be called "guise of the good" theories of motivation. Which do you think is correct? Why?
  - b. Second, particularly in §§42, 52, Locke explains "the source of ... that which is (...improperly) called free will." Is this account of free will consistent with Locke's earlier rejection of the notion of free will as absurd? Is it a sufficient account of free will? Is there any stronger or different sense of free will that *you* think Locke is missing?

### While reading On Substance:

1. First, note that Locke explains the origin of two different sorts of ideas, our idea of substances, and our idea of substance *as such*.
  - a. Choose one or two examples of particular substances (e.g. from your poem) and lay out Locke's account of what goes into those ideas. Are they simple or complex? Of sensation or reflection or both? If complex, how are they made?
  - b. Now look at Locke's account of the concept of substance in general. What is the origin of this idea? What is its nature? Is it simple or complex? Of sensation or reflection or both? If complex, how made?
  - c. Is Locke's account of substance sufficient to explain its origin? (If not, does that imply that the idea of substance is an "innate idea"?)
  - d. Compare Locke's account of substance to your conjectures in response to the pre-reading questions. Did you have insights Locke missed? Did Locke have insights you missed?

2. And go back, again, to Spinoza's definition of substance in *Ethics* Definition 1. Does Locke's account of substance show how we could get *that* idea of substance from experience (and the various operations of mind)? If so, how? What does Locke's account of substance imply about the possibility of Spinozist metaphysics?
3. Locke claims that the "ideas of spiritual substances [are] as clear as of bodily substances"? Note that this view is at odds with both Descartes's *Meditations* (which sees ideas of spiritual substance as *clearer*) and with common sense (which sees ideas of bodily substance as clearer). Does Locke adequately support his claim? What are the implications of this claim?
4. §28 addresses Elizabeth's question about the influence of soul on body (and vice versa). How does Locke address her question? Is this a good answer? (The best answer?)
5. God makes a cameo in §33. Does Locke adequately explain the origin of our idea of God?

### While rereading:

1. Choose one issue – free will or the relationship between mind and body – and thoughtfully lay out your own view on this issue. Develop some key objections to Locke's treatment of the issue. (Even if you mostly agree with Locke, try to think of objections to him.) Reread the relevant chapter of Locke closely, defending your view in the light of Locke's claims and looking for his possible responses to your objections and possible criticisms of your view. (If you have time, do the same for the other issue.)
2. Identify in your poem all of the power and substance terms, and use these chapters to isolate the sources of these ideas. Particularly look for terms referring to spiritual substances...are there any? Does Locke adequately explain the origin of the ideas of those substances? In the light of your poem, does his claim that we know spiritual substance as well as bodily ring true?

### After rereading:

1. Step back a bit and ask yourself whether Locke's overall framework is the best way to approach philosophical problems. Recall page 318, §8, "The occasion of this essay." Do Locke's discussions of free will and substance vindicate his claim that "the first step towards satisfying several inquiries the mind of man was very apt to run into [i]s to take a survey of our own understandings, examine our powers, and see to what things they were adapted"?
  - a. Lay out, as concisely as you can, a general Lockean method for dealing with tough philosophical questions.
2. Now apply Locke's method to some other philosophical issue of particular interest to you. (This should be really fun philosophical work, not merely exposition of Locke.)

## Locke's *Essay*, Book IV

### Before reading:

First, a quick note about what we are skipping. Locke's *Essay* is a massive tome, and we are reading only selections from it. The complete book (and table of contents) is available at [http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke1/Essay\\_contents.html](http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke1/Essay_contents.html) (accessed October, 2014). If you have particular issues that you are particularly interested in, peruse the table of contents for each book of the *Essay*, and/or ask me about where to find information about particular topics. (As we've seen in chapters 21 and 23, often important discussions are hidden in chapters that don't obviously point to them.) Crucially, we skip an entire Book (III) that is focused "on words." As you may recall, Francis Bacon (in his *New Organon*) included words as one of the most important "idols", the "idol of the marketplace." Locke took the danger of words very seriously, and devoted a whole Book of his *Essay* to them. Those of you particularly interested in the role of words in philosophy, and particularly on the relationships (or not) between words and ideas, may want to skim the selections from Book III that are included in Ariew and Watkins (pp. 377-386). We also skip an important discussion of personal identity, to what extent you count as "the same person" as that young boy or girl who started high school so many years ago. This discussion is philosophically important in its own right, and it continues the theme of continuity of individuals that we started discussing while reading Conway.

1. Thus far, Locke's whole philosophy has focused on the origin of *ideas*. What's the difference between an "idea" and "knowledge"?
2. Before reading, write down some things that you would say that you "know." You needn't employ a philosophically loaded concept of knowledge, just an ordinary common sense one.

### While reading:

1. Right off the bat, Locke reduces all forms of knowledge to four sorts. What are these?
  - i. \_\_\_\_\_
  - ii. \_\_\_\_\_
  - iii. \_\_\_\_\_
  - iv. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. What kinds of knowledge are the things you said you "know" (pre-reading question 2)?
- c. Are there other kinds of knowledge that Locke is missing? What?
2. For Locke, what are the three different degrees of knowledge?
  - i. \_\_\_\_\_



give you hope of answering the questions that concern you? Does he undermine your hope? What *difference* would Locke's theories here make?

2. As you reread, also think about the extent to which Locke is being faithful to his overall empiricism. Does his account of knowledge enrich his overall theory through the addition of cognitive capacities (e.g. for intuition and demonstration) that are legitimate bases for knowledge, or does it compromise his overall philosophical approach? Is this approach to knowledge reasonable, given Locke's account of the origin of ideas?

### After rereading:

1. Step back and assess Locke's philosophy as a whole. As with the last reading, recall page 318, §8, "The occasion of this essay." Does Locke's account of knowledge vindicate his claim that "the first step towards satisfying several inquiries the mind of man was very apt to run into [i]s to take a survey of our own understandings, examine our powers, and see to what things they were adapted"?
2. Revise your general Lockean method for dealing with tough philosophical questions in the light of his theory of knowledge, and apply Locke's method to some other philosophical issue of particular interest to you. (This should be really fun philosophical work, not merely exposition of Locke.) Do you think that you will ever "know" how to deal with your philosophical issue? If so, how? If not, why not? Would mere probability be sufficient? Can you get even that?