Empiricism on the origin of ideas

LOCKE ON ‘TABULA RASA’

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke argues that all ideas are derived from sense experience. The mind is a ‘tabula rasa’, empty at birth. He begins his argument by attacking the opposite view – that some ideas are not derived from sense experience, but are ‘innate’. By ‘innate idea’, Locke means a concept or proposition which is part of the mind from birth. For an idea to be part of the mind, the mind (the person) must know or be conscious of it:

_No Proposition can be said to be in the Mind, which it never yet knew, which it was never yet conscious of._ (Essay I.II.5)

What is an ‘idea’? There are many meanings of this word, and we need to get clear on what we are talking about. An idea can be a complete thought, taking the form of a proposition – ‘He had the idea that it would be fun to take the day off’; or it can be a concept – the idea of ‘yellow’. When Locke argues that there are no innate ideas, he talks about both concepts and ‘truths’. Only a proposition can be a truth. So he is claiming both that all our concepts derive from sense experience; and that we have no knowledge prior to or independent of sense experience.

From Locke’s definition of ‘innate idea’, it follows that everyone knows all innate ideas from birth. Assuming that our minds are alike in which innate ideas they have, if some truth were part of the mind from birth, every person would know it. And here, of course, we must include children and ‘idiots’; they have minds. But, Locke argues, there is no truth that every person, including children and idiots, assents to.

But perhaps innate ideas are ones that are known as soon as the person gains the use of reason – which children and idiots do not (yet) have. Locke replies that what is missing (in many cases) isn’t the use of reason, but the _ideas_. A child can’t know that $3 + 4 = 7$ before he can count to 7 and has the idea of equality. Once he has, then he can see that $3 + 4 = 7$. It is the same thing as knowing – as children do – that a cherry is not a stick. This isn’t a development in reason; it is simply knowing what the ideas are. Everyone agrees that we must first acquire the concepts involved.

But if we must first acquire the concepts involved, this means the proposition can’t be innate: if it were, why would we need to acquire anything? We should know it already. And so Locke argues that _no proposition_ is innate unless the concepts used are also innate. But there are no concepts which the mind has from birth. All our concepts derive from sense experience; and so no truths (or concepts) can be innate.

EMPIRICISTS ON ACQUIRING CONCEPTS

Locke summarises his view of how the mind acquires ideas like this:
The Senses at first let in particular Ideas, and furnish the yet empty Cabinet: And the Mind by
degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the Memory, and Names got to
them. Afterwards the Mind proceeding farther, abstracts them, and by Degrees learns the use of
general Names. In this manner the Mind comes to be furnish’d with Ideas and Language, the
Materials about which to exercise its discursive Faculty. (Essay I.II.15)

As we come to remember particular experiences through repetition, we start to be able to
label them. From there, we can abstract from the individual cases to talk about ‘types’ of
experience, e.g. we move from ‘red’, ‘yellow’, ‘blue’ and so on, to the idea of ‘colour’.

But what does Locke mean when he says that the senses let in ideas? We often contrast
an idea with a sensation: the sensation of yellow isn’t the same thing as the concept
YELLOW (When I am referring to a concept, I will put the word in capitals). 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’. But Locke doesn’t mark this
distinction strongly, which is confusing.

Hume corrects this mistake (we will use his terminology from now on). Like Locke,
Hume believes that we are immediately and directly aware of ‘perceptions’ (An Enquiry
concerning Human Understanding, § 2) ‘Perceptions’ are divided into ‘impressions’ and
‘ideas’. And both Locke and Hume divide impressions divided into impressions of
’sensation’ and those of ‘reflection’. Impressions of sensation derive from our senses, e.g.
seeing a car; impressions of reflection derive from our experience of our mind, e.g.
feeling emotions. (Locke also includes awareness of mental processes, e.g. reasoning,
believing, willing, and so on.)

Hume then argues that ideas are ‘faint copies’ of impressions. 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. And so there are ideas of sensation (e.g. the idea of red) and
ideas of reflection (e.g. the idea of sadness). Concepts are a type of idea. So his theory of
how we acquire ideas, viz. by copying them from impressions, is a theory of how we
acquire concepts.

So Locke and Hume have slightly different versions of how we first acquire ideas with
which we can think. We start with sense experiences of the physical world and
experiences of our own minds; for Locke, this gives us ideas once we can employ our
memories to reflect on the experiences; but this makes it sound as if the experiences,
remembered, are the ideas with which we think. Hume corrects this: it is not sensory
impressions themselves, but copies, that we remember and use in thinking.

Simple and complex concepts
The basic building blocks of all thought and experience are simple impressions – single
colours, single shapes, single smells and so on. And to each there is a corresponding idea.
But we soon begin to unite these simple ideas in more complex ones, e.g. 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 idea of ‘that thing’ is made up of many ideas of colour,
shape, smell. This is a complex idea; in this case, it is a complex idea that has a kind of
corresponding ‘complex impression’ in that we can, through our various senses acting
together, experience this particular dog. We can also form complex ideas by abstraction,
e.g. the concept DOG doesn’t correspond to any one particular set of impressions or any
single 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 different sizes dogs are, picking out other features, like four legs, tail, bark, hairy.

ON COMPLEX CONCEPTS

The view that all ideas derive from sense experience is very appealing in many ways. The alternative – that some ideas do not – raises the question of where these non-empirical ideas come from.

However, there are complex ideas that seem to correspond to nothing in our sense experience, e.g. unicorns and God. (While many of us have seen a picture of a unicorn, someone had to invent the idea without seeing a picture.) So is it true that all ideas derive from sense experience?

Empiricists respond that all complex ideas are composed of simple ideas, and all simple ideas are copies of impressions. This is easy to see in the case of unicorns: we have experiences of horses and of horns and of whiteness; if we put them together, we get a unicorn.

Hume and Locke argue that in creating new complex ideas, we can only work with the materials that impressions provide. No idea, no matter how abstract or complex, is more than a putting together, altering or abstracting from impressions. It is important to notice that there are many ways in which we do this; combination and abstraction are two of the most important.

But we can challenge empiricists to give us their analysis of complex concepts, such as NECESSITY, CAUSATION, SUBSTANCE or SELF. If they cannot give us a satisfactory analysis of how we derive these concepts from experience, that is a reason to think that the concepts derive from elsewhere – either they are innate, or they are reached using a priori reasoning.

Hume accepts that these four particular examples cannot be derived from experience. However, his response, for each of these examples, is that the concept – as we usually think of it – has no application. The concepts (and therefore our thoughts about necessity, causation, substance and the self) are confused; in their place, he suggests a clearer way of thinking, using concepts that can be derived from experience.

For example, we have no experience of our ‘selves’ – we only experience a continually changing array of thoughts and feelings. (Treatise on Human Nature, I.IV.6) To come up with the idea of SELF – meaning each of us as one and the same thing over time, we’ve confused similarity – the similarity of our thoughts and feelings from one moment to the next – with identity – the identity of a ‘thing’ to which such mental states belong.

We do the same thing again with the idea of a physical object as a ‘thing’ or ‘substance’, meaning something that exists independently, in its own right. The concept of PHYSICAL OBJECT is of something independent of experience existing in 3-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 can’t know that my two experiences are of one and the same desk; I can only know that the
two experiences are very similar. In coming up with the concept of a physical object that exists independently of my experiences, I have confused similarity with identity.

So, Hume concludes, the concepts SELF and PHYSICAL OBJECT (and SUBSTANCE) are confusions, they aren’t coherent. But, we can object, this makes most of our commonsense idea of the world wrong. This is unacceptable. If an empiricist analysis makes such concepts ‘illusory’, we may feel empiricism too challenging to accept. Our concepts are coherent. The fact that we cannot derive them from experience only shows that they are innate (or known through rational intuition). So the difficulty empiricists have in explaining our most abstract complex concepts is an argument that these concepts are not derived from experience.

We can also rephrase the objection, to attack empiricism a different way. The empiricist theory has two claims: that complex ideas are built out of simple ideas, and that these are copied from experience. The previous objection looked at the problem of deriving a concept from experience. We could instead object that complex concepts cannot be built out of simple ones (leaving aside the question of experience): Hume challenges us to find an example of a complex idea that cannot be analysed into simple ideas, we can respond by suggesting one and challenging empiricists to provide an adequate analysis. For example, attempts to analyse philosophical concepts like ‘knowledge’, ‘truth’, ‘beauty’ into their simple constituents have all failed to produce agreement. Perhaps this is because they don’t have this structure.

**THE MISSING SHADE OF BLUE**

Hume discusses a second objection: If someone has seen all shades of blue except one, and you present them with a spectrum of blue with this one shade missing, they will be able to form an idea of that shade, which they have nevertheless never seen. So here is an example of an idea which has not been copied from an impression.

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 preceding impressions? How can we allow for the missing shade of blue, but hold on to the view that all ideas are derived from experience? One solution is to say that all (coherent) ideas can be derived from experience. We can only create ideas that correspond to something we can experience. The idea of the missing shade of blue fits this perfectly, and the definition still ties ideas to experience.

A different solution maintains the stronger, original claim that all ideas are derived from impressions as a general principle, but explains both why the missing shade of blue is an exception and that exceptions to the rule must be limited. The explanation is this: the simple impressions of different shades of blue are not unrelated to each other, as they can be arranged in a sequence of resemblance. From the arrangement, we can form the idea of the missing shade, drawing on other similar impressions we already have. But if we have no relevantly similar impressions which strongly resemble the missing impression, we cannot form the missing idea.

Hume presents a separate argument to support this claim: someone who lacks a certain type of experience also lacks a certain type of idea – showing that the ideas derive from experience. Thus, a blind man does not know what colour is and a milde man cannot comprehend the motive of revenge. More generally, as human beings, we can have no
ideas corresponding to the senses of aliens (if there are any). We are limited to thinking about what we can experience.