

On the nature of
ideas and human
understanding:
comparing locke and
berkeley



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The turn of the 17th century prompted a rolling new age of skepticism, in which individuals began to question unequivocal prior beliefs regarding the validity of the Catholic Church, and even the nature of reality. In response to an age echoing with voices of doubt, two primary schools of thought arose. On one hand, Rene Descartes' Meditations pioneered the inception of rationalism, which arose in an attempt to establish reason and rationale as the most reliable source of knowledge. This school of thought aligned with the likes of Plato and emphasizes the existence of priori, or innate knowledge. On the contrary, John Locke argues against the rationalist focus on innate ideas; claiming instead that it is our senses and experiences that provide us with the most reliable basis for knowledge. Locke does this through his work, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, a series of arguments wherein he attempts to ascertain the origin and nature of abstract ideas by outlining the processes by which we understand ideas and reality. As with many philosophers, various criticisms arose regarding Locke's explanation of ideas and the nature of reality. Among these critics, Berkeley, another empiricist, uses Locke's own principles to support his own, nominalist account of ideas. Although both interpretations are by no means without fault, an analysis of both Locke and Berkeley's explanation of ideas offers thought-provoking insight into the nature of ideas and how we perceive reality.

At first, the prevailing explanation to all the doubt incurred from skepticism was the rationalist view. Spearheaded by Descartes, rationalism assumed that God endowed human beings with certain innate ideas, such as morality or the nature of God. However, Locke rejects this belief for an alternative

viewpoint: that all human beings are born as “ tabula rasa” or blank slates. Rather than depend on the existence of innate ideas, Locke reasons that it is very probable for human beings to “ attain to all the knowledge [we] have, without the help of any innate impressions; and arrive at certainty, without any such original notions or principles” (MP, p. 319). In doing so, he denies the need for any supernatural endowment of innate ideas, a rather bold assertion at the time. However, Locke acknowledges the need for further explanation. After all, if we none of our ideas are innate “ how does [the mind] come to be furnished? From where does it have all the materials of reason and knowledge?” (MP, p. 323). In response, Locke answers his own question and sheds light on his primary assertion: that we gain all of our ideas from experience. Thus, Locke begins his essay by boldly arguing that we are born knowing nothing and instead, obtain information from our experiences.

Furthermore, Locke elaborates on what it means for us to derive all ideas from experience. Specifically, he breaks down the “ fountains of knowledge” into two key areas: sensation and reflection (MP, p. 323). The first fountain refers to when our senses “ convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways in which those objects affect them” (MP, p. 323). In other words, sensation occurs when the mind experiences the external world through the five senses. The second fountain, reflection, refers to the “ perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has gotten” (MP, p. 323). This process refers to when the mind points towards itself and begins to reflect upon its own functions as in the case of believing, thinking, and doubting. Through

these fountains, Locke establishes the two primary ways by which the human mind is able to obtain all ideas and knowledge, without the necessity of any innate ideas.

After establishing the methods by which we obtain ideas, Locke attempts to apply them to his original argument: that even abstract ideas such as mathematics or a circle can be explained through empiricism. To begin, Locke points to the fact that everything in the world is a “particular” thing or idea (MP, p. 377). As such, it would make logical sense for a reader to assume that each particular object in the world has a corresponding particular term that can be represented by language. However, Locke instead goes on to state that, on the contrary, “universality does not belong to things themselves, which are all of them particular in their existence, even those words and ideas which in their signification are general” (MP, p. 379). Hence, Locke asserts that despite the fact that everything in this world is composed of particulars, the majority of language is comprised of general terms.

Although this may seem counterintuitive, Locke goes on to explain the reasoning behind this dichotomy. Locke begins his explanation by asserting the importance of general terms as “it is beyond the power of human capacity to frame and retain distinct ideas of all the particular things we meet with” (MP, p. 377). In other words, the ability for every single particular in this world to have a corresponding particular term is simply out of the human capability. This however, begs a new question: how are we then able to create general terms, if all things are particulars? In response, Locke

introduces the concept of abstraction, a subset of reflection, as a method of creating general terms:

“ Of the complex ideas signified by the names man and horse, leaving out but those particulars in which they differ, and retaining only those in which they agree, and of those making a new distinct complex idea, and giving the name animal to it, one has a more general term that comprehends with man several other creatures,” (MP, 378).

In other words, abstraction is the process by which particular items are grouped together and stripped away of their differences, leaving a group of things only defined by their similarities. It is this very process that allows us to label these groups of abstract ideas under a common term—in this case general terms (MP, p. 377). Thus, Locke comes full circle to reject the Cartesian view that abstract general ideas such as mathematics or the concept of a color must be endowed by God as innate ideas.

Interestingly, one area where Locke may have agreed with Descartes lies in the potential of our senses, and therefore experiences, to mislead us. This is apparent in the case of delusions or hallucinations, where our sensations may not present us with an accurate representation or understanding of reality. However, rather than throw out all sensory perception as Descartes does through Cartesian doubt, Locke draws a distinction between the “ primary qualities” and “ secondary qualities” of all objects. He asserts, that primary qualities are attributes that are often “ discovered in our senses, and are in [objects] even when we do not perceive them—such are bulk, figure, number, situation, and motion” (MP, p. 362). In comparison, secondary

qualities are “ nothing but the power those substances have to produce several ideas in us by our senses (MP, p. 362) This can be illustrated in the analogy of an apple, where its primary qualities are represented by its objective features such as its density, weight or height, and its secondary qualities are represented in things based on our perception of the apple such as its color or taste. Thus, the main difference in primary and secondary qualities is seen in the fact that primary qualities are part of the objective reality of the apple, whereas the secondary qualities are based off of our subjective perception of it.

In response to Locke’s theory of mind, one might question the process of abstraction. For instance, it is clear that Locke views abstraction as not only a part, but more importantly, an inherent necessity for communication and human interaction among individuals. This is seen in Locke’s assertion that without abstraction and the ability to create general terms, “ men would in vain heap up names of particular things that would not serve them to communicate their thought” (MP, p. 377). However, is it not possible for various individuals to perceive and therefore abstract things differently? For instance, there are clear cognitive differences that vary among different individuals. Thus, a potential issue to Locke’s idea of abstraction could be in the possibility that people could abstract in vastly different ways, causing confusion between the use of general terms.

Similarly, George Berkeley also argues against Locke’s theory of mind and ideas, albeit through a separate line of reasoning. More specifically, Berkeley attacks the concept of primary and secondary qualities in an attempt to argue against Locke’s theory of abstraction, which he describes to be “ an <https://assignbuster.com/on-the-nature-of-ideas-and-human-understanding-comparing-locke-and-berkeley/>

opinion so remote from common sense as that seems to be” (MP, p. 441).

Instead, Berkeley questions the ability for us to make clear distinctions between primary and secondary qualities. Berkeley does this by using an analogy of our ability to distinguish men:

“...the idea of man that I frame of myself must be either of a white or a black or a tawny, a straight or a crooked, a tall or a short or a middle-sized man. I cannot by any effort of thought conceive the abstract idea above described. And it is equally impossible for me to form the abstract idea of motion distinct from the body moving” (MP, p. 441).

In other words, Berkeley shows that it is impossible for us to distinguish the primary from the secondary qualities without presupposing acknowledgment of one or the other. After all, an attempt to imagine any given object with only its primary qualities would be impossible as they are shown to be inextricably linked to the secondary qualities. This is seen in the example of the color red. In an attempt to use abstraction, one might say it is possible to simply take the similarity of the color red, and subtract the different objects of that color. The issue, however, lies in the question of where one must stop with the “subtractions,” for there are also different shades of red. Even before that, and in order to know that the abstraction has come to an end, one presupposes the acknowledgement of red before the term exists. Thus, Berkeley’s main argument lies in the circularity of abstraction and its inability to fully explain the difference between primary and secondary qualities and the origin of general terms.

A true skeptic, Berkeley continues his method of criticism in pursuit of potential implications. After dismantling the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, Berkeley goes on to suggest that because the two are inextricably linked, neither primary nor secondary qualities (if there even should be a distinction between them) materially exist. Berkeley portrays this startling conclusion with a twist to Descartes' famous Cogito: "Esse Est Percipi" or "to be is to be perceived" (Routledge, p. 27). Through this, Berkeley asserts that there are no real material things in the world, but rather perceiving minds (which themselves do not have physical form). This seemingly drastic view is the primary reason why Berkeley is called a nominalist and reflects the view that things in the world simply exist in name, but not in any objective, material reality. Thus, Berkeley's version of the world's center is around a subjective reality where everything exists simply as a perception to a perceiving mind, rather than as an independent objective reality.

Expectedly, there have been various critiques of the quite drastic nominalist explanation of abstract ideas. For instance, if the only thing that exists in the world are the perceiving minds around us, then these minds must also be perceived in order to exist. However, surely the mind or even spirit cannot be perceived, at least in the way objects around us are perceived. Thus, there is an issue regarding the origin of these perceiving minds and the potential presuppositions involved in their assumed existence. Furthermore, there lies another more obvious issue. If something must be perceived in order to exist, does that not imply that in the case of a lone, sleeping man, that he simply does not exist until he is seen in the morning? In other words,

the fact that any object's existence must constantly rely on being perceived in order to exist causes all things to be in a perpetual state of chaos. A whirlwind of doubt and ambiguity, these are yet only a few of the issues that surround Berkeley's nominalist explanation of ideas.

In response to these questions, Berkeley has a seemingly straightforward answer: God. In order to establish a foundation for stable existence and eliminate many of the problems associated with an utterly subjective reality, Berkeley points to God as the ultimate perceiver (MP, p. 421). As a result, God in his "infinite perfection" as the "Creator" enables there to be a balance where minds are able to exist without being perpetually perceived by each other (MP, p. 420). Of course, this assertion does then require a further explanation behind the existence of God. However, it is interesting to see how Berkeley uses an objective, omniscient God to provide the basis for a subjective reality.

The path to explaining the nature of ideas is just as convoluted as it is interesting. On one hand, there is the rationalist argument that advocates the existence of innate ideas. On the other, Locke spearheads an explanation that relies on the human experience as the sole cause of ideas. In the years to follow, many empiricists portrayed their own insights into the nature of abstract ideas. In particular, Berkeley uses many of Locke's own philosophical tools in order to deconstruct the process of abstraction, a path which leads him to assume that there is no such thing as objective reality, and only a subjective reality. Although, the amazingly wide scope of these investigations can be at once confusing, it is interesting to observe the connection between the nature of our ideas and the world around us. The <https://assignbuster.com/on-the-nature-of-ideas-and-human-understanding-comparing-locke-and-berkeley/>

analysis of Descartes all the way to Locke and Berkeley, only proves as a testament to the importance of the mind and the ever-increasing mystery of the reality in which we live.

Works Cited

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