Empiricism and the Mind

Hume – An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding
Rationalism

• Knowledge comes from the mind
• The mind has a substantial store of innate ideas (self, God, truth, certain mathematical notions)
• The information that the senses deliver must be conceptualized by the mind in order to count as knowledge.
Rationalism

Why do rationalists believe in innate ideas?
• Universality
• Reflections on the source of the idea
• Lack of experience needed to acquire the idea
• Innate ideas are held to be placed in us by God.
Rationalism

Why do contemporary scientists believe in innate ideas?

• Universality
• Early development
• Adaptive value
• Lack of necessary experience
Rationalism

In contemporary science, if we are unable to show how an idea could have been learned or acquired (given the acquisition conditions), it is reasonable to conclude that it is innate.
Example: UG

Universal Grammar
• An abstract structure that is common to all natural languages

Evidence for the innateness of UG
• Early, rapid development
• Independent of IQ
• Near universality
• Lack of necessary evidence for learning
Example: UG

Universal Grammar

• An abstract structure that is common to all natural languages
Other potential examples

- Moral knowledge
- Concepts of predators and prey
- Knowledge of how physical objects behave
- Knowledge about other people’s minds
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• NO innate ideas
• The mind begins as a “blank slate”
• All knowledge (of the world) comes from experience
• All concepts are derived, directly or indirectly, from basic perceptual concepts
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

The empiricist casts doubt upon the rationalist’s arguments for innateness:

• No universal ideas
• There is adequate experience for acquisition
• In general, if a person lacks a given sensory capacity, they lack the corresponding concept.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

To defend this picture, an empiricist has to show how complex ideas are derived. We don’t acquire all ideas directly from experience.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

Hume’s picture of the mind:
• The mind begins as a *blank slate*
• When a person has a sensory experience (of yellow, e.g.), she acquires an *impression* of that sensory quality.
• After the experience is over, the impression leaves behind a trace/copy, which is the *idea* or concept.
• All concepts are acquired directly from experience or are composed out of such basic sensory elements.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

Ideas vs. Impressions:
• Impressions are “vivid and lifelike” experiences that characterize conscious experience.
• Ideas are more “faint and dull.”
• Ideas are copies left behind by the impressions.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

“The utmost we say of them, even when they operate with greatest vigor, is that they represent their object in so lively a manner that we could almost say we feel or see it: But, except the mind be disordered by disease or madness, they never can arrive at such a pitch of vivacity, as to render these perceptions altogether undistinguishable. All the colors of poetry, however splendid, can never paint natural objects in such a manner as to make the description be taken for a real landscape. The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation.”
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• In sum:
  • All ideas are derived from impressions, which are caused by presently occurring experiences.
  • In effect, our concepts are the copies or traces left behind in the mind/brain by our sensory experiences.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• Question: If all ideas are derived from experience, then what explains the power of imagination to create ideas of things we have never perceived?
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• Question: If all ideas are derived from experience, then what explains the power of imagination to create ideas of things we have never perceived?

• Answer: Once the mind has acquired basic concepts, it can recombine them and unite them in various ways.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• Question: If all ideas are derived from experience, then what explains the power of imagination to create ideas of things we have never perceived?

• Answer: Once the mind has acquired basic concepts, it can recombine them and unite them in various ways.
Theory of Ideas

• Thoughts are composed of ideas/concepts
  – *The ball is red* => *BALL + RED*

• Concepts are composed of more basic concepts

  *BALL* => *ROUND + HEAVY + FLEXIBLE*

  *SNOW* => *WHITE + WET + COLD + TASTELESS + ODORLESS*
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• Problem: Is this true? The empiricist claims that all ideas are ultimately derived from experience. Can we think of any counterexamples?

• Even one genuine counterexample would serve to falsify the main empiricist thesis.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

- Problem: Is this true? The empiricist claims that all ideas are ultimately derived from experience. Can we think of any counterexamples?
- Even one genuine counterexample would serve to falsify the main empiricist thesis.
- How can Hume account for the idea of God?
To prove this, the two following arguments will, I hope, be sufficient. First, when we analyze our thoughts or ideas, however compounded or sublime, we always find that they resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment. Even those ideas, which, at first view, seem the most wide of this origin, are found, upon a nearer scrutiny, to be derived from it. The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom. We may prosecute this inquiry to what length we please; where we shall always find, that every idea which we examine is copied from a similar impression. Those who would assert that this position is not universally true nor without exception, have only one, and that an easy method of refuting it; by producing that idea, which, in their opinion, is not derived from this source. It will then be incumbent on us, if we would maintain our doctrine, to produce the impression, or lively perception, which corresponds to it.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

The empiricist criterion for ideas:

- If we are unable to show how an idea could have been derived from experience, then we must conclude that the supposed idea is *meaningless*. 
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

Secondly. If it happen, from a defect of the organ, that a man is not susceptible of any species of sensation, we always find that he is as little susceptible of the correspondent ideas. A blind man can form no notion of colors; a deaf man of sounds. Restore either of them that sense in which he is deficient; by opening this new inlet for his sensations, you also open an inlet for the ideas; and he finds no difficulty in conceiving these objects.... When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality....
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• In sum:
• All ideas are derived from impressions, which are caused by presently occurring experiences.
• In effect, our basic concepts are the copies or traces left behind in the mind/brain by our sensory experiences.
• Complex ideas are built out of simpler ones.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• Empiricism: All ideas are derived from sense experience.

• The empiricist challenge: It must be possible to show how a given idea could have derived from experience.

• If it cannot be shown how a given idea could have derived from experience, then we must claim that the idea is *meaningless*.

• This is the empiricist criterion for the meaningfulness of ideas. It is an important philosophical tool.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• The Empiricist Criterion of Ideas: All ideas are derived from sense experience.
• Suppose the empiricist comes across an idea such that it cannot be shown how it is derived from experience.
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• The Empiricist Criterion of Ideas: All ideas are derived from sense experience.

• Suppose the empiricist comes across an idea such that it cannot be shown how it is derived from experience.
  – Is this a counter-example to Hume’s thesis?
  – Or shall we say that the idea is “meaningless” and reject it?
The Empiricist Picture of the Mind

• The Empiricist Criterion of Ideas: All ideas are derived from sense experience.

• Suppose the empiricist comes across an idea such that it cannot be shown how it is derived from experience.
  – Is this a counter-example to Hume’s thesis?
  – Or shall we say that the idea is “meaningless” and reject it?

• This is a DILEMMA!
Empiricism and Rationalism Today

• Many scientists in different parts of the biological sciences support the existence of innate cognitive capacities.
• For instance, it is assumed that frog’s have innate concepts for detecting predators and prey.
• However, serious debates regarding innateness continue.