Rationalism versus Empiricism

Rationalism

Part of our knowledge and concepts is acquired independently of sensory experience.

Empiricism

Knowledge is mostly built from sensory experience.
Locke is associated in textbooks with an Empiricist viewpoint.

Descartes is associated with a Rationalist viewpoint.

But note that Locke argued that intuition and reason cannot be completely developed through experience alone. Some of his views on mental abilities are very similar to those developed by Descartes.

Unlike Descartes, though, Locke argued that a great number of mental abilities thought to be innate were actually the product of sensory experience.
Simple and Complex Ideas

A simple idea is one that cannot be analyzed further; the quality of redness, for example, cannot be analyzed further into simpler elements.

A complex idea, like horse, is made of simpler components. Note that simple is being used to refer to our mental world.
Simple ideas are *learned* by *directly perceiving* them.

Complex ideas do not have to be acquired through perception, because they can be synthesized from simpler ideas that we have perceived directly, or if not, these simpler ideas can themselves be further analyzed into constituents which have been directly experienced.
Against Innate Ideas:

**Innate predispositions**
Locke noted that merely suggesting that humans have a predisposition to readily acquire ideas does not help us distinguish between an innate *capacity* for knowledge and the more interesting possibility that infants come into the world already equipped with some form of knowledge.

**Universality**
We often conclude that any idea universally present in all cultures must be innate. Yet how secure is this inference, assuming that it is possible to show that ‘universal consent’ (as Locke put it) might occur for some other reason than innate ways of thought.

**Lack of assent in young children**
Finally, Locke pointed out that principles we might assume should be universally understood are not assented to by very young children. For example, no four year old would be able to understand and so consent to the abstract notion that it is impossible for something to both exist and not exist at the same time.
Lack of assent in young children — not a very good criticism on Locke’s part.

Children may be incapable of *assenting* to principles or ideas but they may nevertheless represent them *tacitly* or *implicitly* (i.e. unconsciously) as part of their understanding.

A modern example of innate cognitive abilities.

A) The infant’s behaviour indicates knowledge of a particular sort
B) It cannot be the case, given the limited information available to the child, that this knowledge was learned.

Children have an innate grasp of a universal grammar that allows them to very quickly represent the rules of their own language.
Locke’s definition of an “idea”

Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding.

Locke is in fact deliberately blurring the distinction between percepts and concepts.

The experience of seeing the color red is as much a kind of idea (a simple idea, in fact) as the thought

“I am now experiencing a particular kind of color” or

“Apples are red and sometimes green”.

What does it mean to “perceive an idea”? compare this with “to perceive an apple”.

Is there an apple that exists independently of the idea of an apple?

To perceive an idea? There is no independent object affecting our nervous system like an apple, so how can we say perceiving an idea is just like perceiving an apple?
Let us try and resolve this question by considering what happens when we see this colour:

and we say: I am seeing red.

When we see we have a sensation “RED” as well as the idea “RED”.
Let’s give an active name to what the perceiver is doing when he or she generates the sensation red:

Redding!
In addition to generating **visual qualia** the observer has ideas, beliefs, and feelings driven by this ‘redding’ that themselves are experienced, but now as something the observer can talk about.

He or she can say: I am seeing red, for example, or This colour does not suit you, and so on.
Having the idea **RED** involves:

- A red sensation
- A red perception
- Conceptual content
- Redding
What happens when the brain is damaged or affected by an experimental manipulation so that we can no longer experience visual sensations?

A red sensation

A red perception

Redding

Conceptual content
Having an idea, for Locke, was akin to having a pain.

When we experience a pain we are ‘paining’ — we have a conscious sensation accompanied by the thought “I am having a toothache”.

When we experience the colour red, we are ‘redding’ - we have a conscious sensation of the color accompanied by the thought “I am seeing red”.

Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding.

Locke is implying — There are no unconscious thoughts.
Locke on Action

Libet’s experiment
You need to know how the three measures used by Libet led to the inference that brain motor potentials (the Readiness Potential) is evoked before the subject is aware of his or her intention to move.
A willed action is made up of the conscious intention to produce an action (I have the intention to raise my arm) and the actual result of that intention (the arm is raised). So we can say that there is a *causal link* between the intention behind an action and the action itself.
What is it that determines our will? In other words, what happens *just before* we form a conscious intention to act?

According to Locke, ‘*...the true and proper answer is... always some uneasiness... This uneasiness we may call....desire’.*

The suggestion is that volitional acts are needed when we as embodied agents respond to choices that differ in terms of their positive or negative outcomes.

The competition between different choices may occur *unconsciously* but at some point, our will is determined by ‘*the most.....urgent uneasiness’* we in fact perceive.

So a *conscious intention* is a particular kind of mental state that emerges after competing possible desires are resolved in favor of one dominant goal.
Second-order volitions

‘For during this suspension of any desire, before the will be determined to action....we have the opportunity to.... judge of the good or evil of what we are going to do’.

As Locke pointed out, the fact that we experience voluntary action does not mean that we are free to will what we will.

Libet we may not have free will but we do have “free won’t”!

The subject only becomes aware of the intention to act after the unconscious urge has become active. The unconscious urge is indicated by the Readiness Potential. We have no voluntary control of this urge, any more than we have voluntary control of an urge to eat a piece of chocolate cake.
Having the idea **RED** involves:

**A red sensation**

**A red perception**

**Redding**

**Conceptual content**

*An idea is:*

*Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding.*

**Without conscious sensations, do we have ideas?**