

# Empiricism

- Empiricists hold that all knowledge comes through the senses, not through reason.
- All knowledge is a posteriori.
- Empiricists deny that we are born with innate ideas.
- Rather, we are born with minds that are a “blank slate” (Latin: *tabula rasa*).
- The idea that we are born with innate ideas isn't necessary in explaining our knowledge of the world.

# Hume's Empiricism

- Hume thinks that the mind only has access to 2 things:

- Impressions**

- Ex: The experience I'm having *right now* of the apple I'm currently biting

- Ideas**

- Ex: What passes before my mind when I think about an apple

**Hume thinks the difference between impressions and ideas is only one of *degree*, or what he calls “vivacity”**

- Ideas are essentially just weak impressions**

- Ideas and impressions are essentially the same mental phenomena**

- Every* idea must come originally from some impression**

# Here's a Question:

**How do I have ideas about things I've never experienced?**

Have you ever had direct sensory experience of a mountain made of gold, or of a unicorn? Probably not. But you have *ideas* of these things. How could that be?

*Do we have any ideas that do not come from some impression?*

# The Sense Data Theory

What exactly is it we perceive when we say that we're seeing, for example, an apple?

-We don't perceive the apple *directly*

-Instead, we perceive something like *a mental representation of the apple*

**The implication here is that you've never *seen an apple***

Why the hell would anyone think this?

# Considerations in favor of sense data

## -Double vision

1. In a case of double vision, one sees two of something.
2. There are not two (relevant) physical objects in this situation.
3. Therefore, in a case of double vision, one sees something non-physical.

It would be implausible to maintain that one of the two things is a sense datum while the other is a real object. One reason this would be implausible is that there seems to be nothing relevantly different between the two things that could make one of them the “real” object. Therefore, one should conclude that both of the things one sees are sense data, rather than physical objects.

# Considerations in favor of sense data

## **-Illusions**

“Bent Stick” in water

Other optical illusions

The qualities of the thing that I perceive aren't the same as the qualities of the thing in the real world (i.e. I perceive something bent when I look at the stick in the water, but in the real world nothing is bent). This shows that what I perceive isn't the thing in the world, but something else—sense data.

# What kinds of things are sense data?

- i. Sense data are the kind of thing we are directly aware of in perception,
- ii. Sense data are dependent on the mind, and
- iii. Sense data have the properties that perceptually appear to us.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sense-data/>

Now consider an old riddle from the perspective of sense data: If a tree falls in the woods and no one's around to hear it, does it make a sound?

# Why should sense data concern us?

IT LEADS TO A DEEP KIND OF SKEPTICISM:

We cannot give a reason for why we think the external world causes our sensory experiences, because the idea of a cause cannot itself be sensory experience. Since Hume is an empiricist, the only knowledge that exists comes through sensory experiences alone.

▪ This is a very skeptical conclusion since we **cannot** have knowledge of the external world.



# Why Don't We Have an Idea of a Cause?

**The short answer: Because we can never actually *observe* a cause**

“[T]he effect is totally different from the cause, and consequently can never be discovered in it. Motion in the second Billiard-ball is a quite distinct event from motion in the first; nor is there any thing in the one to suggest the smallest hint of the other.”

**When you see one billiard ball strike another and “cause” the second one to move, what is it that you actually see?**

**If you only acquire knowledge through the senses,  
and your senses can't directly access causation,  
then you can't really "know" that causation ever  
occurs.**

**Now remember the sense data theory: We don't  
directly perceive anything in the external world—  
what we perceive are sense data.**

**We can't say that sense data are *caused* by things  
in the external world—so now we *can't really know*  
*anything about the external world.***

**Does the rabbit hole go even deeper?**

# A Problem For Empiricism

Empiricists claim that all knowledge comes through the senses.

Question: Can this claim itself be known through the senses?

If it can, what would the story be to explain how this principle is known through the senses?

If it can't, then Empiricism is self-defeating.