

# PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

## **Session 4**

September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015

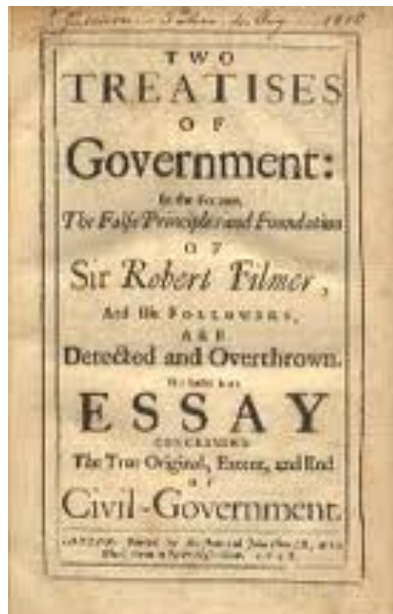


Epistemology: Locke

**John Locke** (1632-1704) was a British philosopher best known for:



- » an **epistemological** view (that is, a view about *knowledge*) called **empiricism**,
  - according to which *all human knowledge comes from sensory experience*.
- » his **political theories**, in favor of religious toleration and against monarchical governments.
  - Locke's views influenced both the American and French Revolutions.



- e.g., his sentiments about the natural rights of human beings are echoed in the American *Declaration of Independence*:
- Locke's claim that all people have the right to "*life, liberty, and property*" was adapted into the familiar phrase "*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*".

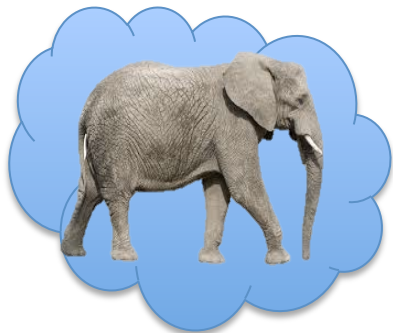
The excerpt we read from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is concerned with the question:

– ***Where do our ideas come from?***

- To begin, Locke clarifies what he is talking about by **defining** an **idea** as:
- “the *object of thinking*,” or
  - “*that which [one’s] mind is applied about whilst thinking*”.
- So for Locke, ideas are pretty much *anything that our thoughts can be about*.

He raises the question of where ideas come from by noting:

- “Every man being conscious to himself that he thinks,
- ...it is past doubt that men have in their minds several ideas,



» —such as are those expressed by the words *whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness, and others*”

- [note how he supplies helpful examples of the kinds of ideas he’s discussing!]

- “...it is in the first place then to be inquired,
- How he comes by them?” (1, §1)

– ***Where do our ideas come from?***

– Locke disagrees with a popular view on this question, called **nativism**:

» the “received doctrine that men have native ideas and original characters stamped upon their minds in their very first being” (1, §1),

– i.e., the view that we are all born with some innate ideas that we never had to learn.



➤ Philosophers use the term ‘***a priori***’ (Latin for ‘from the earlier’) to describe ideas which we either were born with, or developed by reasoning with ideas we were born with.

➤ In other words, *a priori* ideas are those we have prior to, and independent of, any experience with the world.

➤ Nativists think *all* our ideas are *a priori*.

He mentions that he has already explained his ***negative view***, that *nativism can’t be correct*, earlier in the book.

➤ His goal in this excerpt is to defend his ***positive view***, known as **empiricism**:

➤ “***All ideas come from sensation or reflection***”, that is, ***through experience*** (1, §2)

## Locke's main argument takes the form of a *disjunctive syllogism*:

### DISJUNCTIVE SYLLOGISM (DS)

1) P or Q.

2) Not-P.

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3) Therefore Q.

1) We have at least some innate ideas,  
or we get all our ideas from experience.

2) We do **not** have any innate ideas.

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3) Therefore, we get all our ideas from experience.

- He takes for granted that premise 1) is true.
  - The assumption is that if we all have ideas, we must agree that these ideas come from *somewhere*,
  - and it seems that the only options are that a) we are born with them, or b) we acquire them during our lives.
    - » Are there any other options that Locke has neglected?
    - » If so, the disjunction in premise 1 could be suggesting a **false dichotomy**, i.e. stating there are only two possible options when in fact there could be more.
- He will pose several auxiliary arguments to defend premise 2), and will explain in detail the consequences of 3)'s truth.

# The *Tabula Rasa*, or “Blank Slate”

Locke asks us to reject nativism, and suppose instead that our mind is *empty*, like a *blank slate*, when we are born.

– “...suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:

– How comes it to be furnished?

» [By ‘furnished’, he means *filled up*:

» like how furniture fills up a room.]



- Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy [i.e., imagination] of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety?
- Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge?

– To this I answer, in one word,

- **from experience.**” (1, §2)

➤ Contra the nativists, Locke is arguing that

*all of our ideas are a posteriori* (Latin for ‘from the later’)

➤ acquired during our lifetimes, and *dependent upon experience*.

According to Locke,

**“In [experience] all our *knowledge* is founded.**

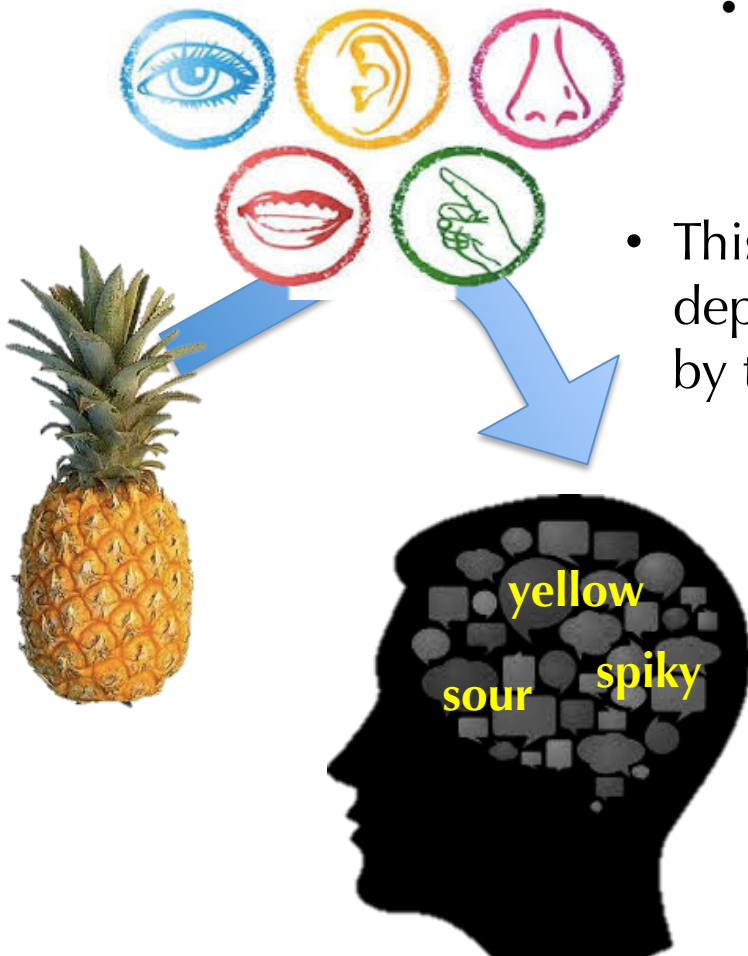
- ...Our observation employed either about external sensible objects,
- **or** about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves,
  - is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking.”
    - » “...These two are the *fountains* [i.e., ultimate sources] of *knowledge*,
    - » from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.” (1, §2)



This is all just a more elaborate restatement of Locke’s main conclusion: **“All ideas come from sensation or reflection”**

- Note that Locke means for this to be an ***inclusive disjunction***.
  - He is saying that *each idea* we have comes either from sensation, or from reflection.
  - *Our total store of ideas comes from both of these.*

- “our **Senses**, conversant about particular sensible objects,
- do *convey into the mind* several distinct *perceptions* of things,
- according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them.
  - ...the [senses] convey into the mind what produces there those perceptions.

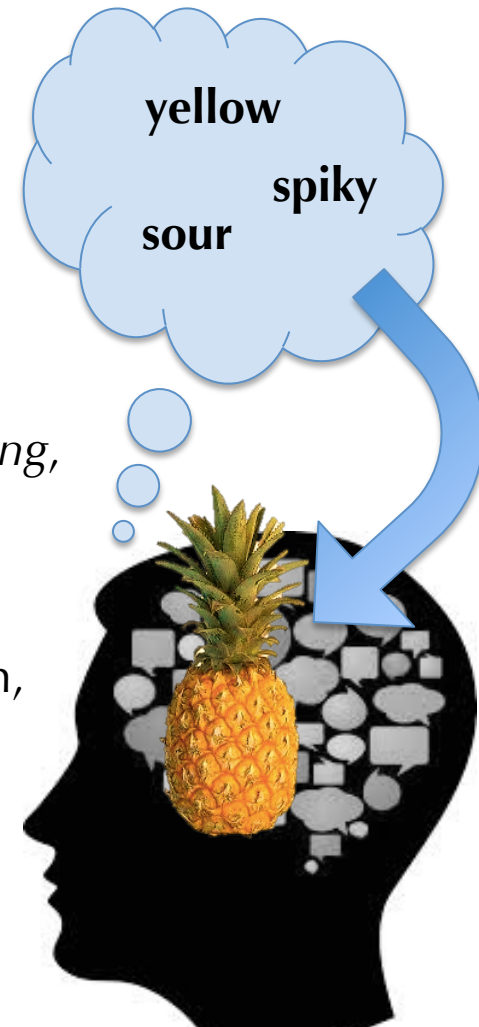


- And **thus we come by those ideas we have of yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet, and all those which we call sensible qualities . . .**
- This *great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call **sensation.***” (1)
  - Locke is likening the way our senses supply us with ideas of the sensible qualities of objects to an act of conveying (i.e. transporting) those qualities from the external world into our minds.
  - E.g., our senses, directed at the pineapple, give us ideas like yellow, sour, spiky, etc.



“...the other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas is

- the *perception of the operations of our own mind within us*, as it is employed about the ideas it has got”,
  - i.e., **reflection**.
    - This is when we apply our mental activities,
      - like “*perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing*”,
    - to the ideas we acquired earlier via sensation.
    - When we become conscious of the results of this reflection,
    - we “from these receive into our understandings as distinct ideas as we do from bodies affecting our senses.” (1-2, §4)
- So, we develop additional, more complex ideas by *reflecting upon* the ideas we gained through the senses.
- E.g., we develop the idea of ‘pineapple’ by combining all our ideas about how it looks, smells, tastes, feels, etc., in our thoughts.
  - We develop the idea of the category ‘fruit’ by thinking about apples, oranges, pineapples, grapes, etc., and recognizing that they all share common qualities.

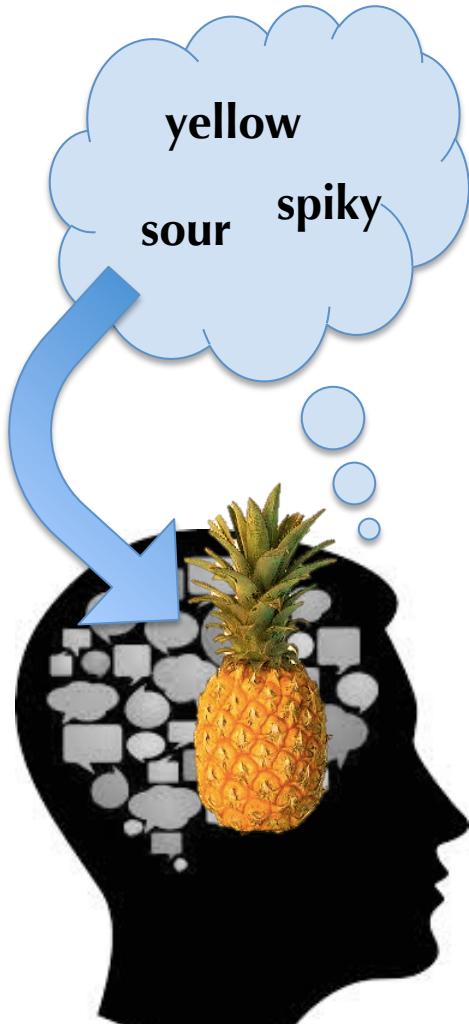


Locke says of reflection that:

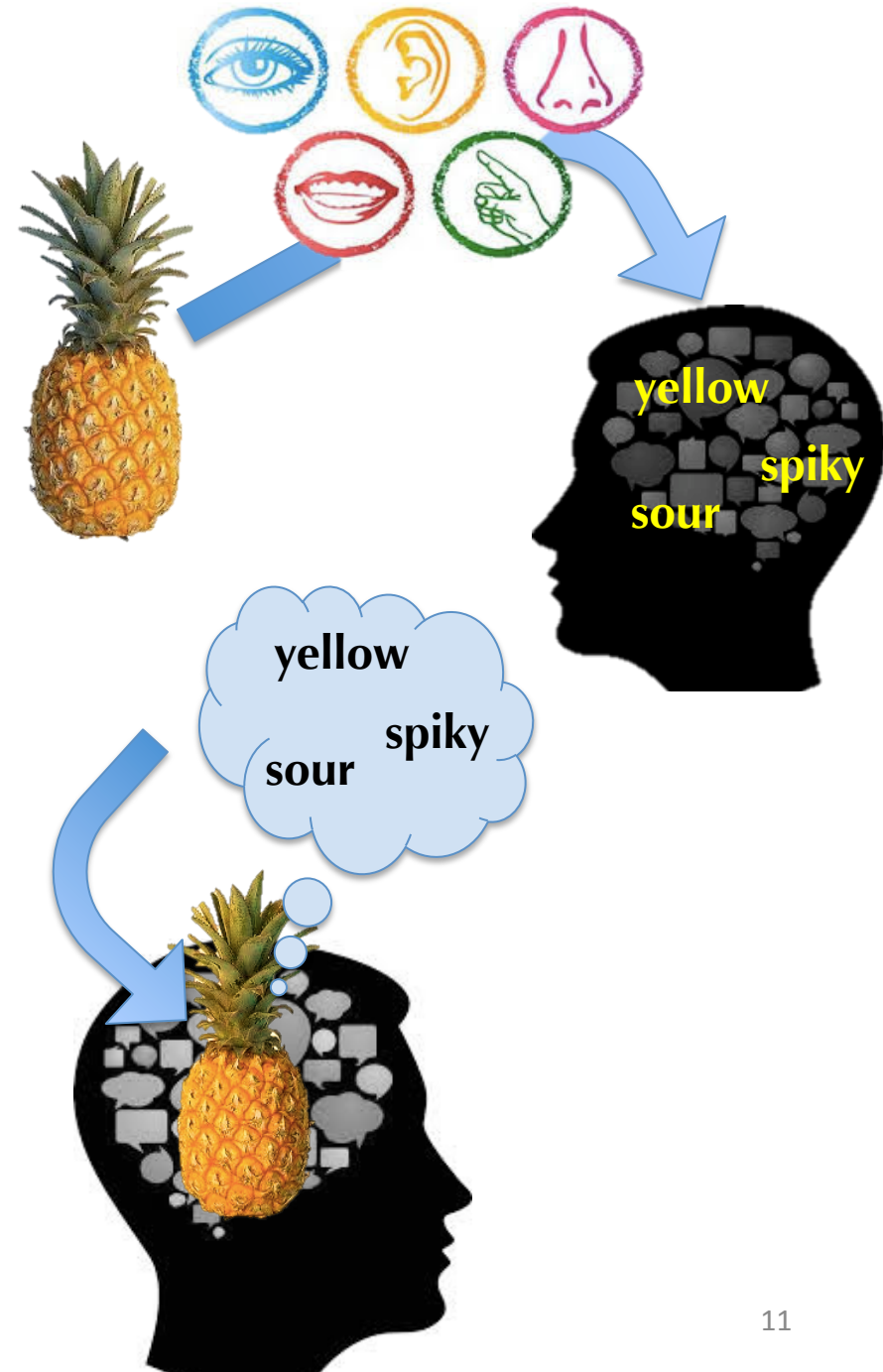
- “This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself;
  - and though it be *not sense*, as having nothing to do with external objects,
  - *yet it is very like it*, and might properly enough be called *internal sense*.
- But as I call the other sensation, so I call this reflection,
  - the ideas it affords being such only as the mind gets by reflecting on its own operations within itself.

- By **reflection** then, in the following part of this discourse,
- I would be understood to mean, *that notice which the mind takes of its own operations*,
- and the manner of them, by reason whereof there come to be ideas of these operations in the understanding.” (2, §4)

» Observe the care that Locke takes to *define the terms* he uses!



- “These two...
  - ...**external material things**,  
*as the objects of sensation*,
  - and **the operations of our own minds within**,  
*as the objects of reflection*,
- ...are to me **the only originals** [i.e., *sources*] **from whence all our ideas take their beginnings.**”
- “**All our ideas are of the one or the other of these.**
  - The understanding seems to me not to have the least glimmering of any ideas which it doth not receive from one of these two.” (2, §4)



- “Let any one examine his own thoughts, and thoroughly search into his understanding;



- » and then let him tell me, whether all the original ideas he has there, are any other than of the objects of his senses, or of the operations of his mind, considered as objects of his reflection.
- » And how great a mass of knowledge soever he imagines to be lodged there, he will, upon taking a strict view, see that he has not any idea in his mind but what one of these two have imprinted;
- » though perhaps, with infinite variety compounded and enlarged by the understanding, as we shall see hereafter.” (2, §5)

- Locke is challenging his readers to come up with **counterexamples** to his conclusion that “*All ideas come from sensation or reflection*”.
- If they cannot think of any ideas that come from a source other than sensation or reflection, then they ought to agree with his conclusion.

» *Can you think of any counterexamples?*

## One argument against nativism:



- **Children have few (if any) ideas in infancy, and gradually acquire ideas as they age.**



- “He that attentively considers the state of a child, at his first coming into the world, will have little reason to think him stored with plenty of ideas, that are to be the matter of his future knowledge.
- It is by degrees he comes to be furnished with [ideas].” (2, §6)
- He that will suffer himself to be informed by observation and experience, and not make his own hypothesis the rule of nature,
- will find few signs of a soul accustomed to much thinking in a newborn child, and much fewer of any reasoning at all.



- ...a fetus in the mother’s womb differs not much from the state of a vegetable, but passes the greatest part of its time without perception” (4, §21)



- » **Locke is reasoning that fetuses cannot form any ideas,**
- » **because there is no variety in the sensations they receive while in the womb.**

## More arguments against nativism:

- ***If a child does not encounter something through experience, they will not have an idea corresponding to that thing.***



- “Light and colours are busy at hand everywhere, when the eye is but open;
- sounds and some tangible qualities fail not to solicit their proper senses, and force an entrance to the mind;



- » but yet, I think, it will be granted easily, that if a child were kept in a place where he never saw any other but black and white till he were a man,
- » he would have no [better] ideas of scarlet or green, than [another child] that from his childhood never tasted an oyster, or a pineapple, has [an idea] of those particular relishes.” (2, §6)

- ***The more experience one has, the more complex one’s ideas become.***

- “The mind thinks in proportion to the matter it gets from experience to think about.



- » Follow a child from its birth, and observe the alterations that time makes, and you shall find, as the mind by the senses comes more and more to be furnished with ideas,
- » it comes to be more and more awake; thinks more, the more it has matter to think on.” (4, §22)

## Yet another **argument against nativism**:

- ***Our ideas become more clear and distinct by reflecting upon them.***
  - “...he that contemplates the operations of his mind, cannot [help] but have plain and clear ideas of them;
  - yet, unless he turn his thoughts that way, and considers them attentively,
  - he will no more have clear and distinct ideas of all the operations of his mind,
  - and all that may be observed therein, than he will have all the particular ideas of any landscape, or of the parts and motions of a clock, who will not turn his eyes to it, and with attention heed all the parts of it.” (3, §7)

**» If we were just born with all of our ideas, it seems implausible (to Locke) that we could have the ability to clarify our ideas by thinking about them.**

  - “And hence we see the reason why it is pretty late before most children get ideas of the operations of their own minds;
  - and some have not any very clear or perfect ideas of the greatest part of them all their lives.
  - Locke thinks that our ideas cannot become clear to us “till the understanding turns inward upon itself, reflects on its own operations, and makes them the objects of its own contemplation.” (3, §8)



Let's suppose that Locke is correct about where our ideas come from.

What are the **implications** of the claim that *all* of our ideas come from experience?

- **Even the ideas in our thoughts most remote from ordinary experience (e.g., supernatural beings) must be derived from things we have actually sensed.**
  - "...the first capacity of human intellect is, that the mind is fitted to receive the impressions made on it; either through the senses by outward objects, or by its own operations when it reflects on them.
  - This is the first step a man makes towards the discovery of anything,
  - and the groundwork whereon to build all those notions which ever he shall have naturally in this world.



- All those sublime thoughts which tower above the clouds, and reach as high as heaven itself, take their rise and footing here:
- in all that great extent wherein the mind wanders, in those remote speculations it may seem to be elevated with,
- it stirs not one jot beyond those ideas which sense or reflection have offered for its contemplation." (4-5, §24)



➤ **We should be wary of how what we experience impacts how we think and act.**

- “In the reception of simple ideas, the understanding is for the most part passive ... and whether or not it will have [any particular] materials of knowledge, is not in its own power.
- For the objects of our senses do, many of them, obtrude their particular ideas upon our minds whether we will or not...

» These simple ideas, when offered to the mind, the understanding can no more refuse to have, nor alter when they are imprinted, nor blot them out and make new ones itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the images or ideas which the objects set before it do therein produce.

» As the bodies that surround us do diversely affect our organs, **the mind is forced to receive the impressions;**

» **and cannot avoid the perception of those ideas** that are annexed to them.” (5, §25)

➤ Locke is saying that we can't help but form ideas on the basis of our experience.

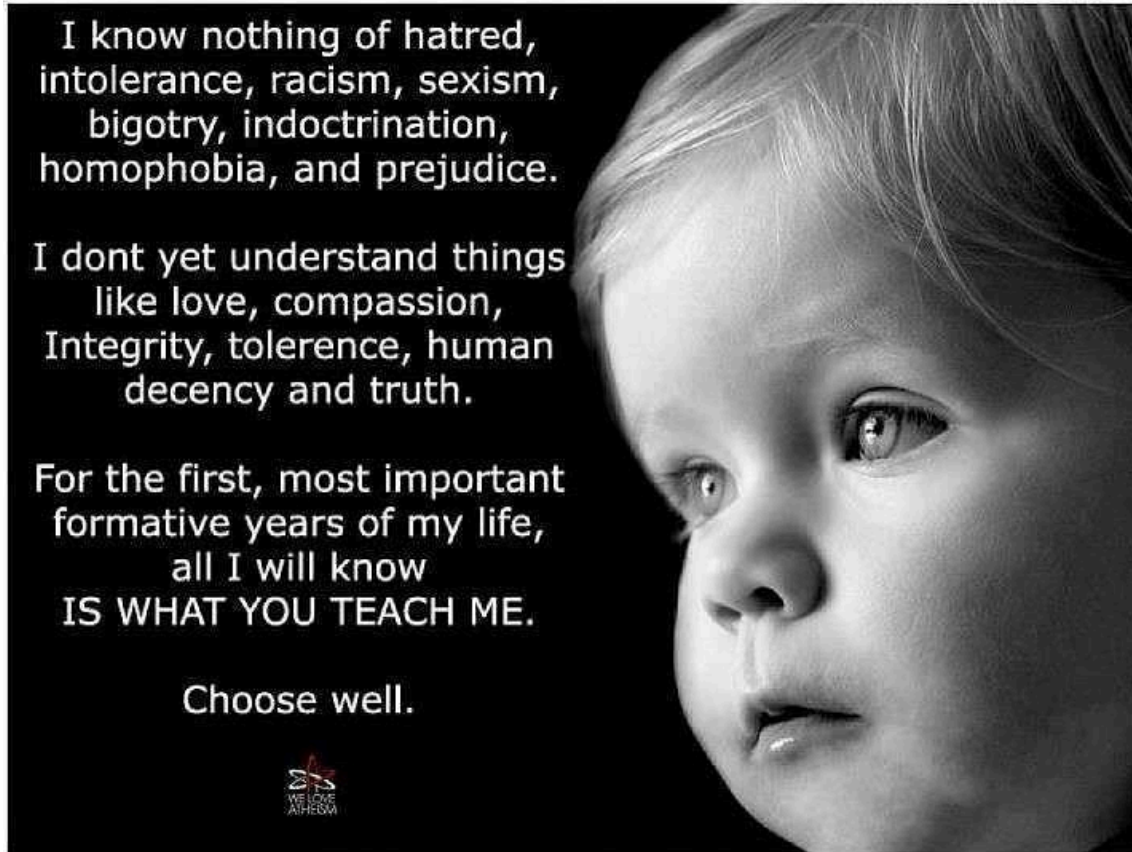
➤ It is *inevitable* that the contents our of perceptions become the contents of our thoughts, and perhaps our actions too.

**Our Children  
are like  
Sponges:**



They suck in what we say,  
what we do and what we say we do.

This PSA assumes the truth of empiricism:



The PSA implies that:

- **if empiricism is true, then parents are critically responsible for the ideas that their children develop.**
  - Does this mean that we should use censorship to protect people from acquiring dangerous ideas?
  - Do you think that people are as passively receptive to new ideas as Locke suggests?