

# The British Empiricism

## Locke, Berkeley and Hume



## The problem of knowledge



- Please, look out of the window (or into the box, or just in front of you...) and answer the following questions:
  - ▶ *What do you see?*
  - ▶ *Are you sure that what you see is what truly exists out there?*
  - ▶ *What do you know about it?*
  - ▶ *How do you know it?*
  - ▶ *What make you sure of it?*
- **Here you are: this is the problem of knowledge!**
- Now try to formalise it in a single question or definition.



In a certain way, we could say that **the problem of knowledge is the problem of philosophy itself, since its birth.**

- Think for example on this quotations:

**Parmenides:** *«the same thing is for thinking as is for being»*

**Eraclitus:** *«The things of which there is sight, hearing, experience, I prefer».*

(But he also says: *«Poor witnesses for men are their eyes and ears if they have barbarian souls»*)

**Gorgia:** *«Nothing exists; Even if something exists, nothing can be known about it; and Even if something can be known about it, knowledge about it can't be communicated to others. Even if it can be communicated, it cannot be understood».*

- Or try to imagine the discussion between **Plato** and **Aristotle** in the famous Raffaello's School of Athens.
- Now try to build a mind-map of all the different answers to the problem of knowledge given by the philosophers you already know



## The terrible heritage of Descartes:

**The modern problem of knowledge** originates from the conclusions of Descartes's research, which was inspired by the successful advancement of geometry and natural sciences and was **aimed to find a certain knowledge for philosophy.**

### Through methodical doubt

Descartes found an undoubtable truth in the very fact of doubting: «**cogito ergo sum!**»

BUT: If I can be sure to be a *res cogitans*...  
**how can I know the *res extensa*?**

Descartes *found a founding stone* for his answer on his demonstration of the existence of God.

But this could not be a sufficient answer for a modern, scientific, rational philosophy.

So the question about knowledge still sounds:

**How can a human subject know the world?**



- After Descartes, the question about knowledge sounds:

### How can a human subject know the world?

where «human subject» means a *rational* and *sensible* being.

- Apparently, it is impossible. This is the view of **Skepticism**, for which **nothing is knowable** ...about the (supposed) reality.
- Some other philosophers (Spinoza, Leibniz, etc.) will choose the way of **Rationalism**: **reason**, rather than sensation or observation, **is the only source of knowledge**.  
Rationalism stresses the power of **a-priori** reasoning.
- **Empiricism** instead, **stresses the power of a-posteriori reasoning** (the reasoning from observation or experience) to grasp substantial truths about the world.

## The British Empiricism in XVII and XVIII centuries

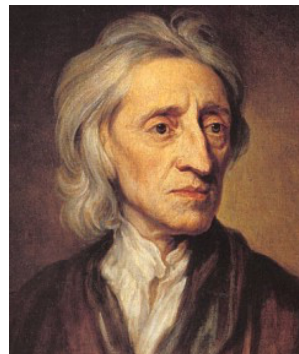
**British Empiricism** was a movement in philosophy, which rises between the centuries **XVII** and **XVIII**, at the meeting point of

- the **cartesian philosophy**,
- the **scientific revolution**,
- the **British philosophical tradition** (from Roger Bacon, to William of Ockham, to Francis Bacon).

Because of its **critical approach** and of its interest in a wide range of issues, British Empiricism is partially involved in the **atmosphere of Enlightenment**.

The main figures of British Empiricism are:

- John **Locke** (1632-1704),
- George **Berkeley** (1685-1753),
- David **Hume** (1711-1776).





John Locke was an English **philosopher and physician** regarded as one of the most influential among the **Enlightenment** thinkers and known as the "**Father of Classical Liberalism**".

Considered one of the first of the British empiricists, **following the tradition of Sir Francis Bacon**,

His work greatly affected the development of **epistemology** and **political philosophy**.

He is also important for the social contract theory (Hobbes). His writings influenced Voltaire and Rousseau, many Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, as well as the American revolutionaries. His contributions to classical republicanism and liberal theory are reflected in the United States Declaration of Independence

[Here you can read his major works](#)





## Locke: Simple and complex ideas 3

Explain and define the following concepts:

- tabula rasa
- law of non-contradiction
- perception
- reflection
- simple ideas
- complex ideas





Locke is convinced that **reality exists** (this makes of him a **dogmatist**), thinking that there are **four kinds of existents**:

1. **Selves** (or minds).

We know about the existence of minds - both, our own and those of other people - by a process he terms "intuiting."

2. **Ideas**, i.e., the contents of minds.

Which we know by reflection.

3. **Things**, or physical objects. Which we know through sensation.

4. **God**, which we know by logical proofs for his existence.



# Locke: our mind is a Tabula Rasa

3

According to Locke, our **Reason is the only source and warranty** for our knowledge...

... but our **reason is not perfect**: it is **limited by the experience** and **influenced by wrong principles** and even **by the language itself**.

In the first book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) Locke argues that **human beings have no inborn, or innate, ideas**.

- ▶ Locke believes that the **existence of an idea** coincides with **its being thought**,
- ▶ but ...if an innate idea would exist, it would be present in all men's minds (also children or primitives)
- ▶ ... and this is not true (as e.g. *the law of non-contradiction*).
- ▶ So: **when a human mind is first born**, it is a **"tabula rasa"**, a blank slate, or an empty surface.

We may be born with *instinctual behaviours*, but these are not actually *ideas* or what we might define «contents of consciousness»



Unlike Descartes, Locke thinks that **all contents of consciousness comes into our mind from one source only, which is Experience.**

There are **two kinds of experience**, for Locke.

a. **Experience of the outer world**, which he terms **sensation**, from which we derive such notions as blue, round, solid, smooth, heavy, large, etc.

b. **Experience of the inner world**, which he terms **reflection**, from which we get such notions as fear, love, willing, doubting, affirming, thinking, feeling, believing, remembering, planning, anticipating, and so on.





There are basically two kinds of ideas:

- **Simple ideas** include all our simple sensory sensations such as red, cold, sweet, loud, soft, round, etc.
- **Complex ideas** are complexes of simple ideas.

There are three kinds of complex ideas:

- **compounds** (“green apple” = “green” + “apple”);
- **relations** (“better than...”, “it belongs to...”)
- **abstractions** by which general ideas are generated from particular ideas (red, cat, circle...)



**Ideas** in minds are caused (through sensations) by **qualities** in things.

***A quality is a power in a thing to cause an idea in a mind.***

There are **two kinds of qualities**, according to Locke

- **Primary qualities** are «**objective**».  
They **actually belong to the physical object**.  
There are only six primary qualities: solidity, extension, motion or rest, number and figure
- **Secondary qualities** are «**subjective**».  
They result from the interaction of sensible data with our sense organs:  
**They are only ideas in our minds** (not qualities of the object) caused by the perception of certain qualities of objects.  
Everything we perceive besides the six primary qualities are all secondary qualities (Sound, color, temperature, taste, texture, smell, etc.)
- While questions on primary qualities find answers in the object itself, discussions about secondary qualities can lead to mistakes, misunderstanding and infinite debates.

# Locke: a dangerous contradiction?

Locke is convinced that:

- there is **(it exists) a real (substantive) world** out of our consciousness;
- **this world has certain primary qualities**, which we are able to experience.

**Does it mean** that the qualities which we perceive are **qualities of an underlying “substance”**?

How can we admit that **we know substance**, since **we have no sensation of substance**?

Here we are in front of a dangerous contradiction:

Should Locke's **empiricist principles** cohabit with the affirmation of **non-empirical notions** of metaphysical entities as God and substance?



*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, **Chapter XXIII: Complex ideas of substances**

«1. The mind is supplied with many simple ideas, which come to it through the senses from outer things or through reflection on its own activities.

Sometimes it notices that a certain number of these simple ideas go constantly together, and it presumes them to belong to one thing; and - because words are suited to ordinary ways of thinking and are used for speed and convenience - those ideas when united in one subject are called by one name. Then we carelessly talk as though we had here one simple idea, though really it is a complication of many ideas together.

What has happened in such a case is that, because we can't imagine how these simple ideas could exist by themselves, we have acquired the habit of assuming that they exist in (and result from) some *substratum*, which we call *substance*.

2. So that if you examine your notion of pure substance in general, you'll find that your only idea of it is a supposition of an unknown support of qualities that are able to cause simple ideas in us, qualities that are commonly called accidents.

If anyone were asked: *What is the subject in which colour or weight inheres?* he would have to reply *In the solid extended parts*; and if he were asked *What does that solidity and extension inhere in?* he wouldn't be in a much better position than **the Indian philosopher** who said that the world was supported by a great elephant, and when asked what the elephant rested on answered *A great tortoise*. Being further pressed to know what supported the broad-backed tortoise, he replied that it was something he knew not what.

... So too here, as in all cases where we use words without having clear and distinct ideas, we talk like children who, being asked *What's this?* about something they don't recognize, cheerfully answer *It's a thing*. Really all this means, when said by either children or adults, is that they don't know what it is, and that the thing they purport to know and talk about isn't something of which they have any distinct idea at all. They are indeed perfectly in the dark about it.

So the idea of ours to which we give the general name «substance», being nothing but the supposed but unknown support of those qualities we find existing and which we imagine can't exist *sine re substante* that is, without something to support them, we call that support *substantia*; which, according to the true meaning of the word, is in plain English standing under or upholding... literally means *something that stands under something*.

3. In this way we form an obscure and relative idea of substance in general. (...) From this we move on to having ideas of various sorts of substances, which we form by collecting combinations of simple ideas that we find in our experience tend to go together and which we therefore suppose to flow from the particular internal constitution or unknown essence of a substance. Thus we come to have the ideas of a man, horse, gold, water, etc. If you look into yourself, you'll find that your only clear idea of these sorts of substances is the idea of certain simple ideas existing together».

## Locke: «even that of God himself»

*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Chapter XXIII: Complex ideas of substances

« 32. Whenever we try to get beyond our simple ideas, to dive deeper into the nature of things, we immediately fall into darkness and obscurity, perplexity and difficulties. But whichever of these complex ideas is clearer, that of body or that of immaterial spirit, each is evidently composed of the simple ideas that we have received from sensation or reflection. So are all our other ideas of substances, even that of God himself.

[In section 33 Locke develops that last remark, contending that we can build up our idea of God as infinitely powerful, wise, etc. through a general procedure that he illustrates with an example in section 34.]

34. If I find that I know a few things, some or all of them imperfectly, I can form an idea of knowing twice as many; which I can double again, and so on indefinitely, just as I can generate an endless series of numbers by repeated doubling. In that way I can enlarge my idea of knowledge by extending its coverage to all things existing or possible. And I can do the same with regard to knowing them more perfectly, thus forming the idea of infinite or boundless knowledge. The same may also be done for power. . . .and also for the duration of existence. . . . We form the best idea of God that our minds are capable of, by taking simple ideas from the operations of our own minds (through reflection) or from exterior things (through our senses) and enlarging them to the vastness to which infinity can extend them.



## Locke: «even that of God himself»

*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, **Chapter XXIII: Complex ideas of substances**

35. It is infinity - joined to existence, power, knowledge, etc. - that makes our complex idea of God. Although in his own essence (which we don't know, any more than we know the real essence of a pebble, or of a fly, or of ourselves) God may be simple and uncompounded, still our only idea of him is a complex one whose parts are the ideas of existence, knowledge, power, happiness, etc. all this infinite and eternal. . . .

36. Apart from infinity, there is no idea we attribute to God that isn't also a part of our complex idea of other Spirits [here = something like 'angels']. We can attribute to Spirits only ideas that we get from reflection; and we can differentiate them from God on one side, and from us on the other only through differences in the extent and degree of knowledge, power, duration, happiness, etc. that each has.

Here is another bit of evidence that we are confined to the ideas that we receive from sensation and reflection: even if we think of unembodied Spirits as ever so much, even infinitely, more advanced than bodies are, we still can't have any idea of how they reveal their thoughts one to another. We have to use physical signs and particular sounds; they are the best and quickest we are capable of, which makes them the most useful we can find. Of course unembodied Spirits must have also a more perfect way of communicating their thoughts than we have; but of such immediate communication we have no experience in ourselves, and consequently no notion at all ».



## two essential questions

6

Two essential questions arise from Locke's inquiry:

1. **How can we know** that things continue to exist during the time in which **they are not being observed** by anyone?
2. Even while we are directly observing an object, can we know **for sure** that the object **actually** exists?

These are the questions to which George Berkeley try to answer

## George Berkeley: *esse est percipi*

Irish, Anglican Bishop, George Berkeley (1685-1753), assumes Locke's empiricism to defend religious values.

- Following Descartes and Locke, Berkeley thinks that **ideas are the only possible object of knowledge**.
- According to Berkeley, **there is no distinction between primary and secondary qualities**: both exist only as ideas of a mind (e.g. there is no extension without colour)
- For what we know, even what we call «**things**» aren't **anything but «collection of ideas»**
- But, to exist, **ideas need to be thought**: it means that

*«Esse est percipi»*

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According to Berkeley, the origin of any misunderstanding and of any mistake in philosophy, is the assumption that our spirit is able to form **abstract ideas**.

Extension, colour, man, apple, triangle... which Locke calls «general ideas», aren't really «abstract»: they simply are particular ideas taken as «sign» for groups of singular ideas similar to each other.





# Berkeley: the only substances are spirits

If “*Esse est percipi*», it follows that:

- If something cannot be perceived, it does not exist.

«There are those who speak of things that - unlike spirits - do not think and - unlike ideas - exist whether or not they are perceived; but that seems to be perfectly unintelligible. For unthinking things, *to exist* is *to be perceived*; so they couldn't possibly exist out of the minds or thinking things that perceive them».

(The Principles of Human Knowledge, I, 3)

- **Substance** (as it is usually conceived, as «something underlying accidents») cannot be perceived, therefore, it does not exist. Is there any other kind of substance?

«As well as all that endless variety of ideas, or objects of knowledge, there is also something that knows or perceives them, and acts on them in various ways such as willing, imagining, and remembering. This perceiving, active entity is what I call ‘mind’, ‘spirit’, ‘soul’, or ‘myself’. These words don't refer to any one of my ideas, but rather to something entirely distinct from them, something in which they exist, or by which they are perceived (...).

From what I have said it follows that the only substances are spirits: things that perceive».

(The Principles of Human Knowledge, I, 2- 3)

- **Matter**, is then also a nonsense.

«‘But’, you say, ‘*though the ideas don't exist outside the mind, still there may be things like them of which they are copies or resemblances, and these things may exist outside the mind in an unthinking substance*’. I answer that the only thing an idea can resemble is another idea; a colour or shape can't be like anything but another colour or shape».

(The Principles of Human Knowledge, I, 8)

## Berkeley: spirits causes ideas

- So: **Where do the ideas come from?**

«All our ideas - sensations, things we perceive, call them what you will - are visibly inactive; there is no power or agency in them. One idea or object of thought, therefore, cannot produce or affect another. (...)

We perceive a continual stream of ideas: new ones appear, others are changed or totally disappear. These ideas must have a cause - something they depend on, something that produces and changes them. It is clear (...) that this cause cannot be any quality or idea or combination of ideas, because that section shows that ideas are inactive, i.e. have no causal powers; and thus qualities have no powers either, because qualities *are* ideas. So the cause must be a substance, because reality consists of nothing but substances and their qualities. It cannot be a corporeal or material substance, because I have shown that there is no such thing. We must therefore conclude that the cause of ideas is an incorporeal active substance: a spirit».

(**The Principles of Human Knowledge**, I, 25-26)

## Berkeley: two kinds of ideas, two kinds of causes

«I find I can arouse ideas in my mind at will, and vary and shift the mental scene whenever I want to. I need only to will, and straight away this or that idea arises in my mind; and by willing again I can obliterate it and bring on another. It is because the mind makes and unmakes ideas in this way that it can properly be called *active*. It certainly *is* active; we know this from experience. (...)

**29.** Whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, however, I find that the ideas I get through my senses don't depend on my will in the same way. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it isn't in my power to choose whether or not I shall see anything, or to choose what particular objects I shall see; and the same holds for hearing and the other senses. My will is not responsible for the ideas that come to me through any of my senses. So there must be some other will—some other spirit—that produces them.

**30.** The ideas of sense are stronger, livelier, and clearer than those of the imagination; and they are also steady, orderly and coherent. Ideas that people bring into their own minds at will are often random and jumbled, but the ideas of sense aren't like that: they come in a regular series, and are interrelated in admirable ways that show us the wisdom and benevolence of the series' author. The phrase '*the laws of nature*' names the set rules or established methods whereby the mind we depend on—that is, God—arouses in us the ideas of sense. We learn what they are by experience, which teaches us that such and such ideas are ordinarily accompanied or followed by such and such others».

(*The Principles of Human Knowledge*, I, 28-30)

## Berkeley under trial



HW.

write a brief essay answering to one of the following questions:

1. *why should Berkeley be right?*

2. *why should Berkeley be wrong?*



## David Hume: the limited human nature

10

Scottish philosopher David Hume, disappointed by the profession of lawyer, conceived the project to **build a science of human nature on experimental basis**, aimed to understand systematically reason, feelings, ethics, politics.

Hume's **empirical approach** will drive him to describe **human nature as severely limited by its cognitive claims**.

According to Hume, all our **knowledge** is **derived from-** and **limited to- appearances**

**Appearances** are presented to us in our perceptions

and **Perceptions** are all our mind contents





«All the perceptions of the human mind fall into two distinct kinds, which I shall call ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’. These differ in the degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind and make their way into our thought or consciousness.

The perceptions that enter with most force and violence we may name ‘impressions’; and under this name I bring all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul [= ‘mind’; no religious implications].

By ‘ideas’ I mean the faint images of the others in thinking and reasoning: for example, all the perceptions aroused by your reading this book — apart from perceptions arising from sight and touch, and apart from the immediate pleasure or uneasiness your reading may cause in you.

I don’t think I need to say much to explain this distinction: everyone will readily perceive for himself the difference between feeling (impressions) and thinking (ideas)»

([Treatise of Human Nature](#), I,I,1)



## Hume: reality is ideas

**If Locke** admitted ideas as the only object of knowledge, but then claimed also the existence of God, things and selves...

...**And if Berkeley**, even denying matter, admitted the existence of spirits (God and selves)...

...**Hume solves all reality in the actual ideas**  
i.e. sensible impressions and their copies



As Berkeley, Hume **denies the existence of abstract ideas**, but explain them through the **habitude** to use the name (sign) of a particular idea to indicate a group of similar ideas:

in that way, the **logical function of the sign** (which Locke and Berkeley inherit from Bacon and Ockham **become a merely psychological fact.**



- **Imagination** is our faculty to **connect simple ideas into complex ideas**: not randomly, but **through a uniting principle**:

«We should regard the uniting principle only as a *gentle force* that usually dominates, not as an irresistibly strong one that always dominate. Among the things it explains is the fact that languages so nearly correspond to one another: it is because Nature has (in a way) pointed out to everyone the simple ideas that are most suitable for being united into a complex one.

The relations that give rise to this association of ideas, in this way carrying the mind from one idea to another, are these three: resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause and effect»

([Treatise of Human Nature](#), I,I,4)

- The most important complex ideas are:

**space, time, substance, cause and effect,**

which **aren't thing's, nor impressions**, but **our ways to perceive**.

«Having found that time *in its first appearance* to the mind is always joined with a succession of changing objects, and that otherwise we can never be aware of it, we now have to ask whether time can be *conceived* without our conceiving any succession of objects, and whether there can be a distinct stand-alone idea of time in the imagination.

To know whether items that are joined in an impression are separable in the corresponding idea, we need only to know whether the items are different from one another. If they are, it is obvious that they can be conceived apart: things that are different are distinguishable, and things that are distinguishable can be separated, according to the maxims I have explained. If on the contrary they are not different they are not distinguishable, in which case they can't be separated. But this latter state of affairs is precisely how things stand regarding time in relation to succession in our perceptions. The idea of time is not derived from a particular impression mixed up with others and plainly distinguishable from them; its whole source is *the manner in which* impressions appear to the mind—it isn't *one of them*.

Five notes played on a flute give us the impression and idea of time, but time is not a sixth impression that presents itself to the hearing or to any other of the senses. Nor is it a sixth impression that the mind finds in itself by reflection, thus yielding *time* as an idea of reflection. To produce a new idea of reflection the mind must have some new inner impression(...). And, returning now to our flute, *these five sounds making their appearance in this particular manner* don't start up any emotion or inner state of any kind from which the mind, observing it, might derive a new idea. All the mind does in this case is to notice *the manner* in which the different sounds make their appearance, and to have the thought that it could afterwards think of it as the *manner* in which other things—other than the five flute-notes—might appear. For the mind to have the idea of time, it must certainly have the ideas of some objects, for without these it could never arrive at any conception of time.

Time doesn't appear as a primary distinct impression, so it has to consist in different ideas or impressions or objects disposed in a certain manner—the manner that consists in their succeeding each other.

Some people, I know, claim that the idea of duration is applicable in a proper sense to objects that are perfectly unchanging; and I think this is the common opinion of philosophers as well as of ordinary folk. To be convinced of its falsehood, however, reflect on the above thesis that the idea of duration is always derived from a succession of changing objects, and can never be conveyed to the mind by anything steadfast and unchanging. It inevitably follows from this that since the idea of duration can't be *derived from* such an object it can't strictly and accurately be *applied to* such an object either, so that no unchanging thing can ever be said to have duration, i.e. to last through time. Ideas always represent the objects or impressions from which they are derived, and it is only by a fiction that they can represent or be applied to anything else. We *do* engage in a certain fiction whereby we apply the idea of time to unchanging things and suppose that duration is a measure of rest as well as of motion. ».

(*Treatise of Human Nature*, I,II, 3)



«*Is the idea of substance—I ask—derived from impressions of sensation or of reflection?*

If the former, that is, if it is conveyed to us by our senses, I ask: *Which of our senses, and how?* If it is perceived by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so on with the other senses. But I don't think anyone will say that substance is a colour, a sound, or a taste!

So the idea of substance must be derived from an impression of reflection, if it really exists. But the impressions of reflection come down to our passions and emotions, and none of those can possibly represent a substance.

So we have *no* idea of substance other than the idea of a collection of particular qualities, and such collections are all we can meaningfully refer to when we talk or think about 'substance'.

The idea of a substance, as well as that of a mode, is nothing but a collection of simple ideas that are united by the imagination and assigned a particular name by which we can recall that collection to ourselves or to others».

([Treatise of Human Nature](#), I, I, 6)



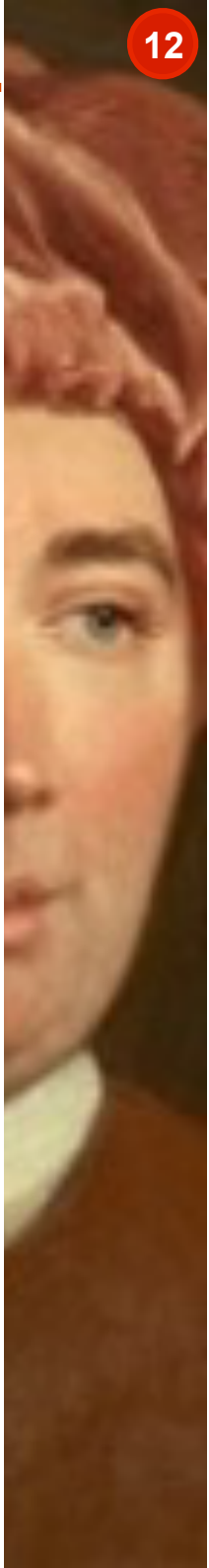
## David Hume: what we call a mind...

- Coherently, Hume lead us to change also our idea of that particular substance which we call **«self»**.

«I would remark that **what we call ‘a mind’ is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions**, held together by certain relations and wrongly supposed to be endowed with a perfect simplicity and identity. Now, every perception is distinguishable from every other, and can be considered as existing separately from any other; from which it clearly follows that there is no absurdity in separating any particular perception from the mind—that is, in breaking off all its relations with that heap of connected perceptions that constitute a thinking being.

(...) But we don't just feign this continued existence—we believe in it. Where does this belief come from?»

([Treatise of Human Nature](#), I, IV, 2)



Some philosophers believe this: *We are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self ; we feel its existence and its continuing to exist, and are certain —more even than any demonstration could make us—both of its perfect identity and of its simplicity. (...)*

Unfortunately, all these forthright assertions are in conflict with the very experience that is supposed to support them. We don't so much as have an *idea* of self of the kind that is here described. From what impression could this idea be derived? (...)

Every real idea must arise from some one impression. But *self* or *person* is not any one impression, but is rather that to which all our many impressions and ideas are supposed to be related. If the idea of self came from an impression, it would have to be an impression that remained invariably the same throughout our lives, because the self is supposed to exist in that way. But no impression is constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations follow one other and never all exist at the same time. So it can't be from any of these impressions or from any other that the idea of self is derived. So there is no such idea. (...).

For my part, when I look inward at what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure, or the like. I never catch myself *without* a perception, and never observe anything *but* the perception. When I am without perceptions for a while, as in sound sleep, for that period I am not aware of myself and can truly be said not to exist. (...)

([Treatise of Human Nature](#), I, IV, 6)



The mind is a kind of stage on which many perceptions successively make their appearance: they pass back and forth, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of positions and situations. Strictly speaking, there is no simplicity in the mind at one time and no identity through different times, no matter what natural inclination we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. That is to say: It is not strictly true that when a blue colour is seen and a whistling sound heard at the same time, one single unified mind has both these perceptions; nor is it strictly true that the mind that has a certain perception at one time is the very same mind that has a perception at another time. The 'stage' comparison must not mislead us. What constitutes the mind is just the successive perceptions; we haven't the faintest conception of *the place* where these scenes are represented or of the materials of which it is composed.

What, then, makes us so inclined to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose that we have an invariable and uninterrupted existence through the whole course of our lives? (...)

We have a clear idea of an object that remains invariable and uninterrupted while time supposedly passes. We call this the idea of *identity* or *sameness*. We have also a clear idea of many different objects existing successively in a close relation to one another; and this, properly understood, is just as good an example of *diversity* as it would be if the objects were not related to one another in any way. (...) But though these two ideas of *identity* and a *sequence of related objects* are perfectly distinct from one another and even contrary, yet in our everyday thinking they are often confused with one another, treated as though they were the same.

([Treatise of Human Nature](#), I, IV, 6)



I now explain what leads us into that confusion. Here are two mental activities:

- (1) thinking about a sequence of related objects, and
- (2) thinking about one uninterrupted and invariable object.

Although these are distinct, and involve different activities of the imagination, they *feel the same*. (...) This resemblance between these two kinds of thought generates the confusion in which we mistakenly substitute the notion of *identity* for that of *related objects*.

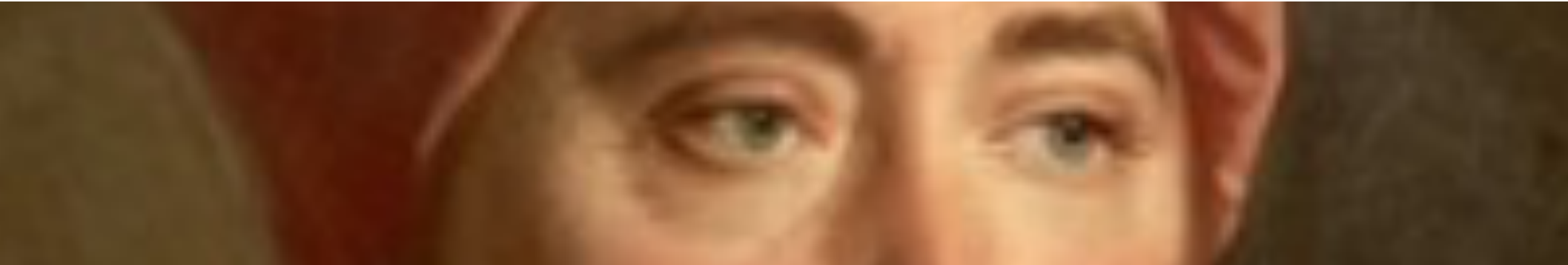
When contemplating a sequence of related objects, at one moment we think of it as variable or interrupted, which it is, yet the very next moment we wrongly think of it as a single, identical, unchanging and uninterrupted thing.

That completes the explanation. The resemblance that I have mentioned between the two acts of the mind gives us such a strong tendency to make this mistake that we make it without being aware of what we are doing; and though we repeatedly correct ourselves and return to a more accurate and philosophical way of thinking, we can't keep this up for long, and we fall back once more into the mistake. Our only way out of this oscillation between truth and error is to give in to the error and boldly assert that these different related objects are really the same, even though they are interrupted and variable.

To justify this absurdity to ourselves, we often feign some new and unintelligible thing that connects the objects together and prevents them from being interrupted and variable. The perceptions of our senses are *intermittent*—there are gaps between them—but we disguise this by feigning that they exist continuously; and they *vary*, but we disguise this by bringing in the notion of a soul or self or substance which stays the same under all the variation

([Treatise of Human Nature](#), I, IV, 6)





If what we call self it's just a heap of impressions, what *causes* impressions?  
Or, even more radically: what do we know about *causality*?

## How can we get the fundamental idea of Causation?

- We can't deduce causal relations from examining one object alone and its qualities
- Because **Causation is relation**
- **Causal relation** needs **Conjunction** and **cause-priority**
- Observing a **single instance** of one thing following the other, we must consider that the sequence of those two events **could be accidental**

Read Hume's words  
about causation in the  
*Treatise of human nature*

**The idea of causation, instead, needs Necessity**



- Repeating the (observation of) succession of events doesn't change the objects themselves.
- So we don't derive the idea of a necessary connection from looking to the (repeated) objects.
- Instead, **we begin to *infer***, from perceiving just the first object, that the second object will come about.
- this is an **Inductive reasoning**, for which the future will be like the past
- Does then the idea of causation come from our experience of willing?



## David Hume: on Causation



- It is the experience of our mind and nothing more, that provides the sense that the effect must follow the cause.
- **Expectation** is the only impression that grounds the idea of causal necessity.
- The inference from cause to effect is itself caused by the experience of constant conjunction.
- To be more precise: The idea of necessity is not derived from expectation, but the feeling of expectation.
- But: This feeling is contingent
- If causation is only a reflection of our minds and not a real relation between objects...

...What does remain of Science?



According to Hume, we could have then **two kind of knowledge**:

- **Relations of Ideas** (rational ideas)  
Ideas that are intuitively or demonstratively certain (a-priori)  
They **depend on reason** (a-priori)  
E.g. Geometry, Arithmetic, Logic, Algebra...
  - They can give us **certain knowledge**
  - **BUT** 1.They don't teach us anything new  
2. They have no bearing or relevance on reality
- **Matters of Fact** Ideas that pertain to the world,  
They entirely **dependent on perceptions** (a-posteriori)  
E.g. The sun will rise tomorrow, This chair is red...
  - They can teach us **new things about the world**
  - **BUT**: 1. they can never be certain  
2. It is always possible that they can be rendered false

## What's so radical about Hume's radical empiricism?

Following Hume's arguments, we must admit that:



**Either** our ideas are **certain**  
but **not informative**

**Or** our ideas are **informative**  
but **not certain**





## is it just about Knowledge?

Reflect on this words by Pierre Hadot, which are originally referred to ancient philosophy: are they useful also for modern world?

There can never be a philosophy or philosophers outside a group or community—in a word, a philosophical “school.” The philosophical school thus corresponds, above all, to the choice of a certain way of life and existential option which demands from the individual a total change of lifestyle, a conversion of one’s entire being, and ultimately a certain desire to be and to live a certain way.

This existential option, in turn, implies a certain vision of the world, and the task of philosophical discourse will therefore be to reveal and rationally justify this existential option, as well as this representation of the world.

Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*,  
trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2002).