Notes on Empiricism (Intellectualism) and Rationalism (Cognitivism)

Empiricism: David Hume and the Association of Ideas

All Experience Begins with Sense Impressions

The contents of the mind fall into two general categories:

- **impressions**—originate in the senses ("original existences"), are not representational, have no straightforward truth value; are more intense than ideas. Hume also distinguishes impressions into
  - original (impressions of sensation, i.e. bodily pains and pleasures), and
  - secondary (impressions of reflection, i.e. feelings, passions, e.g. the feeling that if I drop my pen it will necessarily fall.)

- **ideas**—copies of impressions, are representational, have truth value; are less intense than impressions. They are subdivided into
  - simple ideas
  - complex ideas—combinations of simple ideas

Ideas derive from either

- **sensation**, or
- **reflection**

"As all the perceptions of the mind may be divided into impressions and ideas, so the impressions admit of another division into original and secondary. This division of the impressions is the same with that which I formerly made use of when I distinguish’d them into impressions of sensation and reflection. Original impressions or impressions of sensation are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul, from the constitution of the body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to the external organs. Secondary, or reflective impressions are such as proceed from some of these original ones, either immediately or by the interposition of its idea. Of the first kind are all the impressions of the senses, and all bodily pains and pleasures: Of the second are the passions, and other emotions resembling them."

Ideas are connected or related to one another by means of

- resemblance,
- contiguity (spatial and temporal), or
- cause and effect

**Belief** is understood in terms of the intensity of ideas.

"Belief or assert, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; and that this alone distinguishes them from the imagination. To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses, or a repetition of that impression in the memory. 'Tis merely the force and liveliness of the perception, which constitutes the first act of the judgment, and lays the foundation of that reasoning, when we trace the relation of cause and effect."

**Standard for Evaluating the Contents of the Mind**

The standard by which we determine the reliability of our senses is **coherence**.

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2 THN, 65
“As to those impressions, which arise from the senses, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being. Nor is such a question in any way material to our present purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses.”

**Judgments**

Judgments—that it’s raining, that someone is knocking on the door, that cars are passing by outside, etc.—are based on “custom” or inferences associated in the mind by means of cause and effect. Such inferences take us beyond immediate sensations (impressions) and memory (ideas).

“All this, and every thing else which I believe, are nothing but ideas, tho', by their force and settled order, arising from custom and the relation of cause and effect, they distinguish themselves from the other ideas, which are merely the offspring of the imagination.”

**Empiricist Scenario**

“When I wake up and hear certain familiar sounds, I come to believe that it is raining. My judgment is a representation because there are perceptions of the sight and feel of rain, perceptions that I will have if I go to the window and look, or if I go outside and feel the rain. These perceptions are the “facts” my judgment is about. My judgment is the result of a causal process: given my past associations between a certain kind of sound and the presence of rain, plus a present impression of that certain kind of sound, I expect that if I go to the window I will see it raining on my roses. My expectation is representative, and capable of truth or falsity. So if I go to the window to look at my roses, and see that Charlotte is hosing off the screen on our bedroom window, then my belief misrepresented the facts, and what I believed was false. But the facts that lead me to regard my judgment as true or false, as accurately representing or as misrepresenting those facts, are themselves perceptions — impressions, and they are not representative of anything beyond themselves.”

**Rationalism: Descartes’ Concept of the Subject**

There are three defining features of subjectivity, according to Descartes:

- **representationism**—the contents of the mind are (non-physical) representations generated by the subject.
- **indubitability** of one’s mental states—the fact, according to Descartes, that the truth or reliability of some mental states are beyond doubt, e.g. if I think I’m in pain, according to Descartes, I am in pain.
- **incorrigibility** of one’s mental states—the contents of the mind are transparent to consciousness, i.e. nothing is hidden.

Descartes believed, perhaps uncritically, that everything that exists is either a substance or an attribute (property) of a substance. This concept of substance was an ancient and problematic one. It was assumed to be the underlying and unknown basis or ground to which properties are attached. It is the thing that we are talking about when we claim that a thing has certain characteristics.

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3 THN, 64.
4 THN, 81.
So, for example, when I say "This rose is red", according to Descartes there must be something to which the property redness is attached. The same is true for all other properties of the rose. In other words, the substance is the thing to which all the properties of the rose—its color, shape, size, smell, texture, etc.—belong. But the substance as substance is not itself a property.

Since properties are what we perceive when we perceive a thing, it follows that substances cannot be perceived. A substance exists apart from its properties and depends on nothing else for its existence.

Now, given Descartes' view that everything that exists is either a substance or an attribute of a substance, since mind, matter, and God are not mere properties, they must be substances. And this is a belief that Descartes, it seems, never subjected to doubt even though he was prepared to doubt the existence of things that are observed by us.

According to Descartes, everything in the universe is either a body or a mind. Since the individual mind is identified with the self and is the center of all thinking (what Descartes calls a cogito—an "I think") it follows that we know our minds more completely and directly than we know our bodies, and we "observe many more qualities in our mind than in any other thing". All the qualities of the mind—willing, imagining, desiring, hoping, doubting, perceiving, etc.—are modes of one or the other of two basic powers:

- volition—the power to will, or
- understanding—the power to seek the truth and gain knowledge.

The will is entirely free and infinite, which is to say that we can will anything. Our powers of understanding, however, are limited.

Rationalism: Immanuel Kant and the Unity of Apperception

At the most general level, Kant defines mature human beings as autonomous agents—free to determine what course of action to take guided by rules that we give to ourselves.

Synthesis is crucial in Kant's epistemology. It involves sense, imagination, and apperception.

"The synthesis of a manifold, whether this be pure (as the forms of intuition) or empirical 'is what first gives rise to knowledge' (CPR A77/B103). What is crucial is that this act of synthesis is excessive: it cannot be derived from the manifold but is always added to it. In Kant's terms, synthesis is transcendental, 'not merely as taking place a priori, but also as conditioning the possibility of other a priori knowledge' (CPR B151)." [Howard Caygill, A Kant Dictionary, London: Blackwell, 1995]

There are three moments in perception that take place in imagination, not sensibility:
- apprehension: orders, connects, and brings intuitions into relation to time (sequence) and space (co-presence)
- reproduction: continuity over time (representation is the same representation); no representation guarantees its own continuity, so this must be achieved a priori.
- recognition: unity of apperception; the concept of the "I think…" applied to the intuition; continuity of the experiencing subject.

Apperception can be understood on two levels:
- empirical, which involves perception of an object + apperception (consciousness of perception).
• **transcendental**: as the source of the a priori concepts (“categories”) of the understanding and that which makes judgment possible; judgment is the faculty which makes our own representations objects of thought.

Apperception is not **intuition**, i.e. a representation given prior to thought and without the “I think”. Rather, apperception is

• (transcendentally) necessary for the unification of concepts and intuitions in cognition and
• for the intuition to be thought as belonging to the subject.

Transcendental apperception allows intuitions to belong to a subject and to be combined in the form of **judgments**, according to the categories of the understanding. It's also the **ground** for the possibility of the unity of intuitions and concepts in judgment.

Since transcendental apperception governs the unification of concepts—a priori and empirical—and intuitions, it cannot itself be a concept or representation. It depends on a **free**, spontaneous self-consciousness—the **transcendental ego**—which generates the representation "I think" but "which cannot itself be accompanied by any further representation" (B132).

The **freedom** linked to the TE in Kant as kind of spontaneity, is

• freedom from determination, as well as
• freedom to self-legislate.

Sensibility, which is passive, receives, and spontaneity combines and synthesizes the manifold given in sensation. This requires the freedom described above.

**Sensation and Imagination**

**Sensation** takes place in the presence of the empirical object.

**Imagination** involves an intuition not in the presence of the object. Either the empirical object was once present and is no more, or its presence lies in the future.

Kant distinguishes two aspects of imagination:

• **Empirical Imagination** (recollective)
• **Productive Imagination** (poetic) Representations: Not willed, but rather original, ordered, and not derived from experience. They establish the conditions for experience. Crucial for **reflective judgment** by means of which concepts are created and applied.⁶

**Rationalist Scenario** [a transposition of Morris’s Empiricist Scenario]

I wake up, hear certain sounds, and come to believe that it is raining. My belief that it's raining is the result of a **judgment**, i.e. an application of a **concept** (a representation) to the **intuition** I have, which is also a representation constituted from the manifold of appearances (sounds) passing from sensibility to the faculty of imagination. The representation in imagination is compared with **empirical** concepts of the understanding according to internal rules and **a priori** concepts in order to find a concept (rain) adequate to the more or less fully constituted intuition. The judgment is the culmination of this rational process of **cognition** and my belief is expressed in the proposition “It is raining”. If the state of affairs in the world corresponds to my judgment, then my belief is true and I’ve satisfied a necessary condition for **knowing** that it’s raining right now. If it turns out that the sound I hear is caused by Charlotte hosing off the screen on our bedroom window, my judgment is inaccurate and my belief is false.

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Timothy Quigley
2 Dec 09, Revised 10 Dec 09

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