

Locke says that before we experience anything our minds are blank, what he calls “tabula rasa”.

To what extent does our knowledge derive from our senses?

The philosopher Locke says that we are born with nothing in our heads, this means we are required to learn everything as we grow up. The meaning I am going to take for “senses” is the different ways we absorb information: Orally, by hearing; visually, by sight; by touching; by smelling and tasting. Knowledge as I understand it is everything we know. The term “tabula rasa” literally means “blank slate”. This is how Locke describes our minds at birth.

The belief that knowledge comes from our senses is called Empiricism, and two well known empiricists are Locke and Berkeley. They believe in the tabula rasa I spoke of above. The opposites of empiricists are rationalists such as Plato. They believe in forms and ideas and that we are born with a certain amount of knowledge. Plato created an analogy involving a cave, where he demonstrated that if a man had spent his life staring at moving shadows was allowed to leave the cave and go into the outside world and then made to return. The darkness in the cave would blind him as his eyes were used to the light and everyone else in the cave would think it a bad idea to leave the cave. However, Plato says that this man is a rationalist and he has a higher level of thought meaning that he would not be able to stay in the cave, even though those around him are quite happy to stay put.

I can define this in the empiricist view. The men in the cave would have been born with no knowledge, and as their senses developed they would have learned about their environment; the moving shadows. This would mean that, having been born with a blank mind; they would believe the world they were in was the only world. They would not be intrigued by the shadows, and they would know no better. However, as soon as one of these men left the cave and experienced the outside world, his senses would absorb this new world, and he would have more knowledge. After returning to the cave he would probably go mad because he would know there is a better place to be. He would most likely attempt to break free. On returning to the cave he would also pass his knowledge onto the other men in the cave, who themselves would become intrigued and eager to experience what they have learned of. This is a view that can be associated with the real world.

The empiricist’s view that you are born with no knowledge works in that you must learn everything. First you have to decide what counts as knowledge. For example, a rationalist could argue that you are born able to breathe, otherwise you would die because you are too young and do not have enough time to learn how to. However, if someone asks you “how

do you breath?" what would you reply? Although you can control how you breath, it would be very difficult, nigh on impossible to tell someone how to breath. Does this mean that breathing is not actually knowledge, so it can be neither gained nor lost and is not in our minds and does not affect the argument. In favour of empiricists, being able to walk, talk, read, write, tell the time, distinguish smells and react to dangerous situations comes from learning. All of the above listed cannot be performed by a newborn child until they have experienced them through their senses, e.g. to distinguish smells you would have to experience them and be able to relate them. The rationalists believe that the things you are born knowing are more detailed than walking etc. They believe that when you are born your mind is full of knowledge such as ostensive definitions. These are the simplest of definitions, for example: pointing out a house and saying "that is a house". Rationalists say that a new born child would know that a duck was a duck, but it is difficult to prove as very young children cannot speak.

In conclusion, I am in favour of the tabula rasa, empiricist view of the argument. This is because there is no way of proving the rationalist view, and that it is unlikely that knowledge is passed from the mother to the child.