Hello again. We’re going to do our second lecture today on the epistemology of John Locke and more generally on the subject of empiricism. We will get into the details of Locke’s view today and set ourselves up for our subsequent conversations in this topic, all of which in a sense will be responses to and discussions on implications of this basic bare empiricist theory of knowledge that we’re gonna lay out today.

If you recall, the over-arching principle of empiricism is that all substantive knowledge comes from experience. Now, let’s unpack this a little bit. By experience, we can mean one of two things if we are empiricists. We can mean sensory experience, right? So one source of the substantive knowledge that we have comes through our sense organs: our eyes, our ears, our sense of taste, our sense of smell, our sense of touch. That’s one way in which the empiricist believes that we acquire knowledge.

The other form of experience is through what the empiricist calls reflection or what we might call contemplation. That’s where we turn our proverbial mind’s eye inward and survey the contents of our own thoughts. The empiricist describes both of these forms of knowledge as experiential — that is, knowledge that is deriving from experience. I also said that the empiricist view is that all substantive knowledge comes this way. By substantive I mean — well, I mean what it sounds like. The empiricist need not necessarily deny that we might have some trivial, i.e., non-substantive knowledge. And what I’m thinking about are logical truth and tautologies. Things like A equals A or it is impossible that something can be both P and not P. That’s the law of non-contradiction.

The empiricist may acknowledge that non-substantive tautological knowledge like this may be the result of — may be a priori, a priori meaning literally prior to experience. There are different accounts of how a priori knowledge is acquired. The most popular is that it is a form of intuition. My point is that the empiricist need not have a completely
air-tight empiricism. He might be able to accept that some tiny portion or some subset of our knowledge is known by some manner other than experience. The empiricist is going to insist that all substantive knowledge comes by way of experience and he is going to vehemently reject the idea that any knowledge is innate, meaning inborn. We’ve talked about the difference between innate knowledge, on the one hand, and non-empirical or *a priori* knowledge on the other hand. We’ve spoken about that in the previous lecture.

Locke describes the mind as being like what he calls white paper upon which information is printed by its interaction with the world through the senses and by its reflection on its own thoughts. This notion of white paper, this notion that the mind begins as a blank slate and that any information, any knowledge it acquires, is the result of some kind of experience, either sensory or contemplative, is at the heart of the empiricist’s philosophy. Locke, incidentally -- just to keep you up on where he says these things, Locke uses the white paper metaphor on pages 121 to 122, paragraph 2.

In terms of motivations, let me just sort of say two things about what I take the empiricist’s motivations to be and Locke’s in particular. For one thing, I think that there is certainly in the empiricist’s epistemology a large amount of influence from the scientific revolution. The idea that our account of how human knowledge is acquired should be scientific and certainly the view that Locke espouses is one that is certainly scientifically verifiable. It is an empirical thesis about human knowledge acquisition and all of the mechanisms that it describes — that is, the mechanisms of sensory perception and the mechanism of contemplative reflection — these are both mechanisms that the sciences recognize as real, as empirically real. Certainly there is a whole branch of psychology called perceptual psychology in which the precise mechanism of sensory information gathering have been elucidated. There is also a large area of psychology which deals with the phenomenon of self-consciousness and
conscious reflection.

So I think that there is, on the one hand, a kind of desire for a scientific picture of human nature and this desire stems from the scientific revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries in which there was a more general desire for scientifically respectable knowledge. But I also think — and I mentioned this last time — I think that another motivation is the idea — the firm belief on the part of Locke and other enlightenment philosophers — a firm belief in the idea of individual intellectual autonomy. This notion that the individual comes to know and to understand the world by his or her own effort; that they don’t acquire knowledge from authorities. That is, that knowledge is not the result of having a person in authority over you tell you something. Rather, it’s the result of your going out, striking out on your own, and discovering yourself. I think there is in Locke no small amount of pride in the best sense of the word — of pride in this notion that the individual is armed simply with his brain and with his sensory organs is capable of striking out into the world and acquiring significant understanding of its processes and of the things that are in the world.

Locke’s, as I said, is the most comprehensive as well as the most influential empiricist philosophy and we’re going to sketch some of the details of his account here. Be aware that this is only a sketch and that more advanced study of this as well as the other things we’re reading in the course obviously is certainly something that you should strongly consider doing. We can only give a sketch here but I think it’ll be enough of a sketch just to give you at least a sense of this particular way of thinking about human knowledge acquisition.

As interested as I am in sketching what Locke’s view is, I’m equally if not more interested in talking about the consequences of his view. That is, its implications and especially some of the profound philosophical problems that the view has given rise to. Indeed, it’s not an exaggeration or a distortion of Locke to say that his view gives rise to
more problems than it solves. Before you think that this is a failing on his part, this is true of all the greatest philosophies. Indeed, you might even say that the greatest of a philosophical theory is measured by how many and how profound are the problems that it produces.

I think it’s a testament to Locke’s insight and the impact of his views that the problems to which it gives rise have occupied philosophers for the last several hundred years. That is, we’re still engaged to a large extent in trying to solve the problems to which John Locke’s empiricism has given rise. In the 20th century, in fact, there was a whole new brand of empiricism, very much inspired by the Lockean and enlightenment empiricisms which address and solve some of the problems that were given rise to by the original but which also spawned new problems of their own which we’re still untangling now. So I’m going to spend as much time here probably talking about some of the difficulties that arise from this view as I’m going to spend talking about the view itself.

Okay. Now, in order to do Locke, there’s gonna be some terminology we have to become acquainted with and we have to get used to employing. It’s made somewhat more difficult by the fact that Locke uses ordinary words as theoretical terms. And so we always have to be careful when we read Locke that when we see a word — for example, like the word idea — that we are reading it in the sense that Locke means it, not in the sense that we understand it in ordinary speech, in ordinary discourse. For Locke the word idea is a technical term just as the word quality as a technical term. And as we come upon these terms, I will of course define them and it’s worth keeping in mind that you may want to keep a list of these terms just so that when you’re reading and you’re perhaps taking an exam, that you’re not confused as to their meaning.

The word idea in Locke’s terminology refers to a mental content, a thought. We tend today to think about thoughts to conceive of thinking in linguistic terms. Today we
tend to think that we think in sentences. And there’s actually a very interesting conversation going on in linguistics and in the philosophy of language about whether we think in our natural languages or whether we think in a kind of mentalese, in a mental language, which then raises the question of relations of translatability between our thinking language and our natural language. This, of course, takes us way beyond what we’re talking about here today.

It’s important just to realize that Locke’s conception of thought is different from ours. For Locke and for most of the enlightenment philosophers, thought is conceived much more along pictorial lines than linguistic ones. To a large extent, philosophers in enlightenment conceive of thinking as a sort of train of pictures, kind of a mental movie going on. And the word that’s used to refer to each individual thought is the word *idea,*

Locke thinks that we can acquire ideas, we can acquire thoughts, in one of two ways. We can acquire thoughts by way of our perceptual interaction with the world. That is, by looking with your eyes, smelling with your nose, tasting with your mouth, touching and hearing. That’s one way. The other way that we acquire ideas is by reflection. That is, by thinking about our own ideas. When we return our proverbial mind’s eye inwards and contemplate our own thoughts, when we think about our ideas, that produces new ideas. That produces new thoughts. Locke refers to these types of ideas respectively as ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection. So the thoughts that arise as a result of our perceptual experience are called ideas of sensation. The thoughts that arise as a result of our contemplations are called ideas of reflection.

He gives an account of these beginning on page 121, paragraph one, where he basically defines what the word *idea* means. He says, quote, “Every man being conscious to himself that he thinks and that which his mind is applied about while thinking being the ideas that are there.” So there he defines the word *idea.* With respect to ideas of sensation and reflection, he defines both of these, between pages
122 and 124, paragraphs three to five. On page 123 he defines the ideas of sensation and on page 124 he defines ideas of reflection. I will not read all the quotations there. There are quite a few of them but you'll find them easily.

Now, what’s important and difficult to understand is that Locke believes — and indeed virtually all of the philosophers of this period believe — that it is our ideas and not the objects of the external world that are the direct objects of our awareness. Let me explain this. When we speak about the external world or external objects, we’re speaking about the world as it exists separately from our perception of it. So there’s an external world and it’s got things in it. Our sensory interaction with it produces mental pictures, produces thoughts, produces ideas. It is Locke’s view that these thoughts, these ideas, are the direct objects of our awareness. So some object in the external world projects sort of a picture of itself into the mind and it’s the picture that the mind is directly aware of, not the thing in itself. Not the external object.

So we would want to distinguish between our world — that is, the world as perceived — and the world, the world as it exists independently of our perception. And Locke’s point is our world is comprised of ideas. That is the world that you are directly conscious of. The external world, the world that exists independently of our perception, the world that is causally responsible for this picture that we have of it, that world we are only, in a sense, indirectly aware of.

All right. If you look on page 169, paragraph eight, Locke says as much: “Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding, that I call idea.” Now, certainly this view is strange to us. I’m not sure it should be as strange to us as it seems, because I think a lot of the things that we currently believe about perception certainly lend credence to a view like this. This, I’m sure, will become clearer as we go further in discussing Locke’s view.

But the view, certainly when first hearing it, sounds strange to us. I mean, to
say, well, this is not a book. This is not an external object. This is my idea of an external object. This is the sort of collection of ideas that are caused by my touch, my sight, my smell, my taste if I wanted to taste it, and so on. That there is some external object which when my perception interacts with it produces this idea. This is certainly something that’s counterintuitive to us. We think today that we directly perceive external objects, that this is a book, that this is a thing that exists independently of my mind. What Locke says is no, this is an idea that’s caused by an external thing that you are perceptually in contact with that causes this idea in your mind.

There are a number of reasons why Locke — and, as I said, most of the philosophers of the enlightenment think the same way. You’ll see Descartes thinks exactly the same thing. There’s a number of reasons why Locke thinks this way which we will get to a little bit later. I will explain to you why he conceives of our relationship to the external world and to our ideas in this way in just a moment.

Continuing on, let’s talk for a minute about the relative order in which we acquire ideas. Locke does not believe that there any thoughts prior to experience. That is, when you are born, prior to your first perceptual experience — and it’s unclear exactly when that happens — when, in a sense, you have a conscious perception. And remember, for Locke it’s not simply sensory stimulation. Certainly an infant has sensory stimulation even in utero. For Locke, what we’re talking about is a conscious perception, a perception that results in an idea that is consciously recognized. It’s not clear when this happens at infancy, but it is Locke’s view that prior to that happening there literally are no thoughts at all. That a human being or any other creature does not think until it has its first perceptual contact. Locke’s reasons for this is that he thinks it’s absurd to talk about thinking without there being any materials of thought. To talk about thinking without talking about what one thinks about Locke believes is incoherent. And where would the material for thinking about come from other than the
external world, other than sensation.

So prior to there being any sensory experience, perceptual experience, there are no materials of thought and thus there are no thoughts. Our first ideas, therefore, our first thoughts have to be ideas of sensation. So in the order of how we acquire knowledge, first in the order of knowledge acquisition is — are ideas of sensation. Only once we have ideas of sensation can we then have ideas of reflection. It’s impossible to contemplate or reflect upon one’s thought contents prior to having any thought contents. So one first has to have a sensory experience of the world and then one can think about one’s thoughts, and then engender, in a sense, a second order of thoughts, these ideas of reflection.

Locke talks about this on pages 139 and 140. On 139 he says, in paragraph twenty, “I see no reason to believe that the soul thinks before the senses have furnished it with ideas to think on. As those are increased and retained so it comes by exercise to improve its faculty of thinking.” Locke literally thinks the mind starts out blank and small. And as information comes in from the world and then as more information is generated by reflection, the mind and its capacity to think literally expands and grows. This is sort of Locke’s conception of what cognitive development consists of.

So he says — and this is on page 140 near the top: “Consider that infants newly come into the world spend the greatest part of their time in sleep and are seldom awake. But when either hunger calls or some other [inaudible] the body forces the mind to perceive and attend to it.” So, in a sense, when we’re born our minds are not yet active and we sort of stay in kind of a perpetual sleep. And then as our eyes open, as we begin to consciously entertain — engage in perception and entertain ideas, the mind grows. As he says in paragraph 22 on page 140, “Follow a child from its birth. Observe the alterations that time makes and you will find as the mind by the senses comes more and more to be furnished with ideas, it comes to be more and more awake.
It thinks more the more it has matter to think on."

For this reason, because our thoughts only can arise when there is material for thinking, because all knowledge originates first with ideas of sensation, Locke believes it is literally impossible for us to have an idea of anything that’s not originally based in experience. So, for example, when you conceive of an imaginary creature, your imagination is informed by — your imagination consists of a kind of cut-and-paste. You get a cut-and-paste idea from the more basic materials that come from actual things that you’ve perceived. So if you think about all the imaginary or mythical beasts and monsters, they’re all simply combinations of body parts from actual living animals. Think about a unicorn, think about Pegasus, think about a griffin — you know, all the sorts of different monsters and animals, creatures that you get in the various mythologies and fantasy bestiaries, all of these are simply constructs out of ideas of sensation.

So one consequence of Locke’s view is that true novelty is impossible. It’s literally impossible for us to have an idea of anything not originally based in experience. However, it is possible for us to imagine a creature with different sensory organs from ours and to imagine that such a creature would have different ideas from ours. But what is impossible for us is to imagine what it would be like to be such a creature or to imagine what the character of its ideas would be like.

We’ve already mentioned that Locke believes that we are immediately directly aware of our own ideas and only secondarily have knowledge of the external world, that the external world in perception projects a picture of itself onto our minds, and that it’s this picture that we’re directly aware of. We’ve already talked about that. Let’s now talk a little more detail about the characteristics of our ideas as vis-a-vis the characteristics of external objects belonging to the external world.

Locke wants to divide the characteristics of our ideas into two classes.
are some characteristics of our ideas that also are characteristics of the external world. That is, there are certain aspects of our pictures of things that actually resemble properties in the things themselves. There are other characteristics of our ideas, there are other properties of our pictures of things, which are properties only of the pictures, which have no counterpart in the external world but simply are effects of our perceptual interaction with the external world. I know I’m gesturing a lot. These lectures in particular, I’m used to drawing things on the board so I’m imagining the pictures that I normally draw on the board when I teach this class in person.

Let’s introduce another technical word. It’s really an ordinary word that Locke puts to a technical use. The word quality. When Locke uses the word quality, what he means is the power of an external object to produce an idea in our minds. So when you use the word red, this is a quality, let’s say, of a stop sign. When Locke says that red is a quality of a stop sign, what he means is red describes a power or a capacity on the part of an external object to cause a certain kind of sensation in your mind. That’s what he means by a quality.

Now, in some cases the quality in question reflects an actual characteristic of the external object. That is, some of the aspects of our ideas, some of the aspects of our mental pictures, are qualities that have counterparts in the external world. Specifically, our ideas of solidity. Extension. By extension he means volume, the fact that something takes up space. Figure, meaning its shape, and mobility, the fact that it moves. These qualities, Locke says, are the result of actual properties in the external world. That is, our idea of solidity, the mental picture of solidity that we have, is caused by actual solidity in the external world. So in that case, our idea resembles its cause, resembles the external world. The mental picture resembles the thing that it is a picture of. Locke calls these primary qualities.

However, our ideas of color, taste, smell, and tactile sensations — touch. These
are not the result of any corresponding quality in the external world. So my idea of yellow — let’s imagine that I’m looking at a baby chick and part of this mental picture I have, this chick picture, is that it’s yellow. That idea of yellowness, Locke says, has no counterpart in the external world. The actual thing as it exists separate from my perception of it is not yellow. Rather, an external — Locke calls these secondary qualities. Color, taste, smell, touch — these are secondary qualities. And Locke says what secondary qualities are are, in a sense, phenomenal effects that result from the impact of an object’s primary qualities, and especially their configuration upon our senses. So depending on how an object’s primary qualities are configured. Primary qualities, remember, are solidity, extension, figure and mobility. Depending on how an external object’s primary qualities are configured, it may have certain secondary quality effects on our minds.

So let’s stick with the chick idea. We have a mental picture of a chick, a little yellow fuzzy thing. Certain aspects of that idea belong to the actual chick as it exists in the external world separate from our perceiving it. Other aspects of that idea belong solely to the idea. They are simply phenomenal effects caused by our sensory interaction with the chick. The result is that our world as opposed to the world — our world is in part a construction of our own minds. If we were a different kind of creature with a different kind of sensory apparatus, our world would be very different, according to Locke.

Now, of course, to the extent to which the primary qualities — that the primary qualities of our ideas resemble actual characteristics of things in the external world, there will be a certain commonality to all our worlds, whether the our is human or whether the our is somebody else, some other type of creature — a bat, for example, which has a very different sensory apparatus. Its world is different from our world although its world and our world would have certain commonalities inasmuch as we will
have experience of primary qualities. But notice our worlds will differ very much with respect to its secondary qualities.

So primary qualities are actual characteristics of the external world, which are then in a sense replicated in the image, the mental picture that we have of it. Secondary qualities are purely effects. They are solely mental characteristics. They are properties of our ideas with no corresponding characteristics in the external world. Now, there’s a whole bunch — because this is such an important essential aspect of Locke’s theory, there are pages and pages and pages of relevant quotations. I will only read a smidgeon of them and you can sort of find the rest yourself.

Page 169, paragraph 9, he first — I’m sorry — paragraph 8, he first defines what a quality is. “So the immediate objects of perception, thought or understanding is an idea. The power to produce any idea in our mind I call a quality.” Paragraph 9: “Qualities thus considered in bodies are, first, such as are utterly inseparable from the body and such as in all the ages and changes it suffers.” Okay. A little further down he says that this includes solidity, extension, figure and mobility. Page 170, at the bottom of that paragraph, he says “These I call original or primary qualities of body which I think we may observe to produce simple ideas in us. Solidity, extension, figure and motion arrest a number.” Then in paragraph 10 he says, “Secondly, that is, the second type of qualities, such qualities which in truth are nothing in the objects themselves but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities, i.e., by the bulk, figure, texture and motion of their insensible parts, as colors, sounds, etc., these I call secondary qualities.” He goes into more detail on primary and secondary qualities on pages 172 to 173, and again on pages 178 to 179. I will not read them all.

So all knowledge ultimately comes from experience, either ideas of sensation, ideas of reflection. That experience produces ideas. Those ideas constitute in sense
a mental picture of the world. Those ideas have two types of characteristics. They have primary qualities which are, in a sense, images or pictures of actual qualities that exist out in the external world. They also have secondary qualities which are phenomenal effects of our sensory interaction with the world, but they are properties belong solely to our ideas and not to things as they exist in themselves.

Now the question arises — the question that we’ve been putting off is why does Locke think this? Why does Locke think this? He offers two reasons for thinking this. I mean, one reason for thinking what he thinks about primary qualities and one reason for thinking what he thinks about secondary qualities. His main reason for thinking that primary qualities — let’s list them again — that primary qualities of solidity, extension, figure and mobility — his primary reason for thinking that primary qualities actually exist to things as they exist independent of us are part of the external world is because he says whatever you do to an object, it will not lose its primary qualities. In other words, primary qualities, Locke thinks, are immutable characteristics and their permanence to him is evidence of their reality, of their independent reality. Incidentally, Descartes will make almost exactly the same argument. For the independent external reality of primary qualities. I want to say independent. I mean independent of our minds, independent of our experience.

On the bottom of page 169, Locke says “Take a grain of wheat to divide it into two parts. Each part still has solidity, extension, figure and mobility. Divide it again. It retains still the same qualities. And so divide it on until the parts become insensible. They must retain, still each of them, all of those qualities. For division can never take away either solidity, extension, figure and mobility from any body but only makes two or more distinct separate masses of matter,” etc., etc., etc.

So Locke says, look, these primary qualities, these characteristics that I’m referring to, these primary qualities, the way that we know that they have independent
existence of our minds is they’re immutable. No matter what the circumstances of perception, no matter what you do to an object, it has these properties. The secondary qualities, however, are an entirely separate matter.

Notice the slightest change in perceptual conditions can change a secondary quality. All you have to do is change the lighting in a room and all the colors of things in the room change. You walk into a room where there’s red light like a darkroom. Your shirt will look a different color. Everything will look a different color than it looked when you were out in regular light. And Locke’s point is, well, wait a minute. Nothing in the object has changed. You can’t say — if I’m carrying a ball, a blue ball, and I walk from a regularly lit room into a darkroom, into a red room, the ball hasn’t changed. The only thing that’s changed is the circumstances in perception. But notice the colors changed. Under the regular light the ball looks blue and under the red light the ball looks gray or even black. And so Locke thinks, well, what this must show that the property of color, the redness or the blueness or whatever, is not a property of the ball. It’s a property of our idea of the ball and thus is one that will alter when the change the conditions of perception.

Okay. I’ll give you another example. When you have a cold or the flu, everything tastes different. So the very same food that might have a very savory flavor when you’re healthy tastes bland and dull when you’re sick. Now again Locke will ask — will say nothing in the food has changed. It might be exactly the same piece of chicken. Imagine you’re eating this delicious chicken cacciatore. When you ate it when you were healthy it had this wonderful savory flavor. You saved some of the leftovers and now you’re reheating and eating it when you’re sick, and you can’t taste anything.

And the last point that is nothing in the object has changed. What’s changed is your conditions of perception. What that must mean is that the taste quality is not a
quality of the thing. It’s a quality of your perception of the thing. It’s a quality of your idea of the thing. And because the conditions of perception have changed, the idea has changed.

Page 176, he gives an example with color and a substance, porphyry. “Let us consider the red and white colors in porphyry. Hinder light from striking on it and its colors vanish. It no longer produces any such ideas in us. Upon the return of light it produces these appearances on us again. Can anyone think any real alterations are made in the porphyry by the presence or absence of light? And that those ideas of whiteness and redness are really in porphyry in the light when it is plain it has no color in the dark?” So it’s just simply the same example. Again, the circumstances, the conditions or perception have changed and the color is changed. But it’s implausible to think that anything in the object has changed, and thus Locke concludes the colors must be secondary qualities. They must be not properties of things in themselves but merely properties of ideas. Phenomenal effects of our perceptual interaction with the thing’s primary qualities. So these are his reasons for believing — for making this primary secondary quality distinction.

Let me talk now just in the remaining time about the problems that this view gives rise to, and there are a number of them. The greatest problem, however, that this view gives rise to is the problem of skepticism. Skepticism comes in both a mild and a strong form and Locke’s epistemology gives rise to both forms. The mild form of skepticism says the following: how do we actually know what the external world is really like? By the way, I’m gonna give a little analysis of each of these in a minute, but let’s just list them. And so the mild form of skepticism asks how do we know what the external world is really like? The strong form of skepticism asks how do we know that the external world exists at all?

Now, let’s deal with the mild first. Locke acknowledges that our ideas only
resemble external objects to a certain extent, right? In Locke’s view, our direct awareness is of our ideas. Our direct awareness is of a picture of the world. He acknowledges that the picture only partially resembles the world. It only resembles the world in its primary qualities. In its secondary qualities, it is in a sense a new object. The idea does not resemble the external world with respect to its secondary qualities. That’s why our world is so different from a bat’s world.

But if we think about optical illusions, sensory fallibility. That is that our senses often misrepresent things. Dreams. When we dream we imagine that we see things and feel things and hear things and touch things, even though they’re not there. All of these, to me, seem to raise the question of whether we can ever really know what the world is like. That is, with the world in a sense standing behind the picture of it that’s directly in front of our minds, how do we ever know what the thing behind the picture is really like?

You know, the famous lines that the Wizard of Oz says — he says, “Pay no attention to the man standing behind the curtain.” When Dorothy and her companions come to the Emerald City and come to Oz’s chambers, they’re presented with a giant floating head which they believe is Oz. Of course, Oz is really a man behind the curtain with a machine, and in a sense is projecting this image of the head. Now, in this case they get behind the curtain. They get to see what’s behind the curtain and so they can see to what extent the head is representative of the real thing and to what extent it’s simply a picture that has no resemblance to the real thing.

We’re in a situation perceptually where we never can get behind the curtain. In a sense, we are locked in the theater of our ideas which only resemble the things behind it but not to a full extent. And so the question is, well, to what extent? What really is the world like behind that curtain of perception? But there’s really even a worse problem. In my view, the mild form of skepticism inevitably gives way to the
Notice that our knowledge of an object’s primary qualities is also in Locke’s view the result of sensory experience. And specifically he says, “Our sense of touch gives rise to the idea of solidity and the idea of solidity is our prime evidence of the existence of external objects.” So the main way that we know that an object exists independently of us, Locke says, is via our idea of solidity which is a primary quality and we know of solidity by way of the sense of touch. He says this on pages 151 to 152. He says, “The idea of solidity received by our touch, there is no idea which we receive more constantly from sensation than solidity.” On the next page he says, “This of all others seems the idea most intimately connected with an essential to body, so as nowhere else to be found or imagined but only in matter.”

So remember, our knowledge of the primary qualities — those characteristics of ideas that are the result of actual properties in the external world, things in the external world, our knowledge of them is also through our senses. Specifically, mostly through our sense of touch. But now the question arises, why shouldn’t these ideas be subject to the same doubts that we apply to secondary qualities? Why is not the sense of touch equally subject to doubt as the sense of sight or the sense of hearing? In other words, if our ears and eyes can misrepresent the world, if my eyes can tell me that something is yellow when it really has no yellowness at all, the yellowness is simply an effect in my mind of looking it, why should the sense of touch be deemed somehow infallible? Why should the sense of touch somehow be thought of as a clear and transparent view to the external world, a view through the proverbial curtain?

It seems to me that Locke’s sort of immutability argument misses the point, right? I mean, Locke says that the way that we know that the primary qualities really exist independently of our minds is because they don’t change. But, of course, we are only perceiving that they don’t change. And why might not that perception be a mistake or
be misleading or misrepresent things as they actually are? Once you adopt the view that we are never directly aware of the external world but only directly aware of a picture of the external world, the question immediately is going to arise: how do you know that there is any external world at all? If you are forever prohibited from getting behind the curtain, how do you know there is anything behind the curtain? On what grounds do you say, “Ah, there is a man in a booth behind the head that’s floating in the chamber”? 

Presuming that one never can get behind the curtain — because, in a sense, the curtain is the entire tapestry of our ideas — presuming you can never get behind the curtain, the question has got to arise: What basis is there for thinking there is anything behind the curtain? And, indeed, one of Locke’s contemporaries, Bishop George Berkeley, argued that Locke was unjustified in distinguishing primaries from secondary qualities. If all we have direct awareness of is a picture of the world, then every aspect of that picture is a mental quality.

And Berkeley says — Berkeley’s logic is sort of devastating. Berkeley says, “One, all knowledge comes from experience. Two, our experience is of our own ideas. Three, there is therefore no basis for believing that there’s anything outside of our ideas.” Berkeley indeed is what is called a phenomenalist. Berkeley does not believe that there is an external world. Berkeley believes that the only thing we have reason to believe in the existence of is our own thoughts. For Berkeley, a table, a chair, a chicken, is simply a collection of ideas. He thinks this because of his empiricism. In a sense, Berkeley’s complaint is that Locke is not empiricist enough. Locke is assuming that the external world exists. Locke is assuming that there are these primary qualities and that when we touch things we’re actually getting a glimpse of what the thing is really like. Berkeley is saying there’s no basis for that. Beyond the curtain of ideas, we have no reason to think there’s anything.

This is where we’re going to pick up in our next lecture. So let’s talk about next
time for a minute. We are going to return to our good old friend, Rene Descartes and to Descartes’ meditations on philosophy. Descartes directly takes up the question in the first meditation as to whether we can know anything on the basis of our senses. And he goes even farther than that, to the question can we know anything at all. And so we’re going to use Descartes. Even though Descartes is earlier than Locke. I don’t want you to think Descartes is responding to Locke. Descartes is actually the earlier philosopher.

But Descartes is not an empiricist. Descartes is a rationalist. Descartes believes that some of our knowledge, while not innate, is *a priori*. And Descartes’ reason for thinking that some of our knowledge must be *a priori* is because Descartes thinks it is impossible that all of our knowledge should come from experience. His reasons for thinking that it’s impossible that all knowledge can come from experience arise from his criticisms, from the doubts that he expresses about precisely the kind of what I’ll call naive empiricism of Locke. Naive simply because it simply accepts or assumes the idea that there is an external world and that we can know it on the basis of what Berkeley and Descartes think is insufficient empirical evidence.

Let me leave you with a few things to think about in reading meditation one and two. First, is there any way to prove that you’re not currently dreaming? Read what Descartes has to say about this and then I want you to engage in a little thought exercise. Try and prove to yourself that you are not at that moment dreaming, that you are really awake and experiencing what you’re experiencing. And ask yourself, “How would I go about proving this?”

The second thing I want you to think about is are there any beliefs that are immune from doubt, from all doubt? Not just reasonable doubts but any possible doubt. Are there any beliefs that are immune from all doubt? And if so, what are they and why are they immune from doubt?
So those are the things I want you to think about and we will see you next time.