# Abstract ideas transcript

## Speaker 1

The central claim of Locke against Descartes is that all of our ideas come from experience, and in particular from sensory experience.

But all our experience is of particular things. I may meet different men, say Peter and James, and from them I get the idea of Peter and James. These will be complex ideas involving a lot of my different experience of these individual people.

But what about the general idea of a man? How can you get the general idea of something from experience of particular things?

And this is the problem of general ideas, or as Locke calls them, abstract ideas.

So Locke’s theory of abstract ideas is that we get these ideas by leaving out details of these particular ideas.

## Speaker 2

Let anyone reflect and tell me where in does his idea of man differ from that of Peter and Paul, but in the leaving out something that is peculiar to each individual.

## Speaker 1

So for example, maybe I have the idea of Peter, who is maybe tall with dark hair; James, who is short with fair hair.

And I formed the general idea of a man by keeping what is common to Peter and James and all the other men I know but leaving out what is specific to them, so my general or abstract idea of a man will include hair but not hair of any particular colour; height, but not any particular height.

You might well wonder whether this can work. Some men, after all, don't have any hair and men can be very different heights. How can I possibly form an idea of a man which is neither tall nor short but somehow fits with both tall and short men?

George Barkley famously ridiculed Locke, considering the idea of a triangle, how can you form the idea of a triangle that is neither equilateral nor isosceles nor scalene, but somehow in Locke’s words all of these and none of them at once?

I'm going to put those sorts of problems to one side and concentrate on what Locke did with the theory. Why was it useful to him?

Well, as I've said it explained where general ideas come from and he was keen to explain the origin of all our ideas, but also it did so without requiring some sort of platonic forms or other real universals in nature.

Locke wanted to say that everything we encounter is particular. We don't have any experience of abstract universals in themselves, and this theory enabled him to explain how we can think in general terms, without there actually being any real general things.

The other important feature of the theory was that it enabled Locke to explain how we can have knowledge of general truths.

How, for example, can we prove general truths about a triangle?

Well, his ingenious explanation is that if we have certain abstract ideas, for example of geometrical objects, then if we can see that there are agreements or disagreements between these abstract ideas then it follows that any particular things which match with those abstract ideas must share the same relations.

So by seeing relations of agreement or disagreement between our abstract ideas, we can establish universal truths about anything which those ideas represent.

So Locke is able to give an explanation of our knowledge of universal general truths without having to appeal to divine knowledge implanted by God or knowledge of ideas in God's mind.

We get a reassuringly down to earth and empiricist explanation of something which had seemed very hard to explain in empiricist terms.

