

Jakob Gati
 PH199IA
 Anna Vaughn
 10 December, 2021

The Associative Chance.

Abstract:

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke introduces Associations of Ideas, or, a connection of ideas so that, if one is brought to mind the other is brought with it automatically. Locke utilizes a definition that describes associations as either coming about by chance, or by voluntary action. I make the case that voluntary actions, alone, cannot yield an association; however, chance, alone, can yield a successful association. This means that voluntary actions' role is minimal, as opposed to how Locke describes. Voluntary actions are irrelevant, though; they still can lead to the opportunities that allow for associations to be created. Nevertheless, this adjustment to Locke's framework implies a weakness of reason in a few ways. Firstly, Locke intended for associations to be what allowed for unlike ideas to become combined, sometimes in contradiction. For instance, disregarding reason for the purpose of maintaining a religious stance. If these contradictions require randomness to come about, then reason is more imperiled than even Locke postulates, due to the randomness. Secondly, the process of learning is unintuitive because of this concession. Learning is the voluntary creation of associations, and associations require randomness to be formed. Ergo, there is a role of chance in learning. This is not to say that voluntary actions cannot be a part of learning, but chance is a necessary factor. The creation of Associations of Ideas, in all contexts, requires chance as a factor. (Word Count: 236).

John Locke makes a weak case for his definition of the Association of Ideas in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; it is not as much wrong, as it is undescriptive of the true necessary factor in the creation of associations. An Association of Ideas are automatic connections of ideas such that one leads directly to another. For example, the circumstances that cause the activity of reading to become associated with the stresses of school life can be brought about intentionally or at least identified with ease. However, the particular event of a given association being created cannot be discerned so easily. In effect, one can lead themselves to the situation of an association, but they can never guarantee that the association is successful. The following will make a case for chance being the only real factor in the creation of the Association of Ideas; afterwards, I will address how this weakens Locke's conception of reason, and how chance is necessary for learning.

Associations of Ideas are automatic connections of ideas; for example, a common association of the sun is to heat or life. In effect, when one hears about heat or life, the idea of the sun comes into their

mind. This concept is mentioned by Locke as an avenue to address the sometimes inexplicable nature of associated ideas, particularly those of incompatible positions. Locke's worry is that, "Ideas that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Mens Minds, that 'tis very hard to separate them, they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it."¹ Associations, then, are part of how Locke means to explain drastic, or potentially incoherent, beliefs. The ideas, themselves, become mentally intertwined after the association is created, such that they ought to be considered one idea. These connected ideas can become established in many instances, sometimes without one even being aware of it.² This works into Locke's framework by assisting his explanation of how ideas interact with one another within the mind.

My interest in this discussion is understanding how associations are made. There are two different types of associations that can be created, Natural and Acquired. Locke states that the Natural, "...depend upon our original Constitution, and are born with us."³ This is not to say that there are predetermined ideas, but logical connections that come about with frequency. For example, the association of honey with sweetness. It is certain, unless there is a miscommunication of the definition of words, honey is clearly sweet. Locke continues about Acquired, or unnatural associations, "But a great part of those which are counted Natural, would have been known to be from unheeded, though, perhaps, early impression or wanton Phancies at first, which would have been acknowledged the Original of them if they had been warily observed."⁴ These associations come about from impressions, or situations. For example, associating Zoom with being trapped inside for nine grueling months because of an international pandemic. Locke further divides Acquired associations as voluntary or by chance, in order to explain the situations in which they arise. Associations, themselves, indicate a potential weakness in reasoning; this

¹ John Locke, "Of the Associations of Ideas," *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, pg. 394-401, Edited by Peter Nidditch, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1975.) Sec. 5: pg. 395.

² John P. Wright, "Associations, Madness, and the Measures of Probability in Locke and Hume," *Psychology and Literature in the Eighteenth Century*, pg. 103-122, edited by Christopher Fox, (New York: AMS Press, 1987.) pg. 106-107.

³ Locke. "Of the Associations..." *An Essay*.... Sec 7, pg. 396-397.

⁴ Locke. "Of the Associations..." *An Essay*.... Sec 7, pg. 397.

weakness comes about through the sometimes unrelatedness of Associations of Ideas. Locke considers wrongly connected ideas a failure of reason: associations can be an avenue to ignorance.⁵ This means that associations, at least, imperil the effectiveness of reason.

There is a concern of confusing associations with knowledge. Knowledge is, in part, the application of judgments to perceptions, sometimes unconsciously. Locke notes, “Habits, especially such as are begun very early, come, at last, to produce actions in us, which often escape our observation.”⁶ Habits in combination of judgements within perceptions seem rather similar to associations. However, they address different fusions of ideas. While judgements are tied to unconscionable actions, or of related ideas, such as the failure to notice one’s eyelid when blinking, associations tie ideas to each other in an unrelated nature. Associations are important to Locke, because they are the explanation for the rejection of reason in favor of potentially contradictory ideas. It is important to note the similarities of associations to judgments, because this is what makes unnatural associations dangerous. In effect, the wrong connection of ideas to sensations or emotions that are otherwise unrelated can create troubling contradictions, to the chagrin of reason.⁷

The circumstances that lead to Acquired associations, either voluntary actions or through randomness, are an important distinction. As Locke describes, “This strong Combination of Ideas, not ally’d by Nature, the Mind makes in it self either voluntarily, or by chance, and hence it comes in different Men to be very different, according to their different Inclinations, Educations, Interests, ect.”⁸ This means that there are two different ways in which associations come about, according to Locke, voluntarily and by chance; to extrapolate, this suggests that associations can come about from totally voluntary actions, and totally from chance. There cannot be purely voluntary associations, however, due to the major role that chance plays in the creation of associations. The role of chance makes the worry

⁵ Locke. “Of the Associations...” *An Essay*.... Sec 18: pg. 400.

⁶ John Locke. “Of Perception,” *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, pg. 143-149. Edited by Peter Nidditch, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1975.) Sec 9. pg. 147.

⁷ Anna Vaughn. The connection of associations and perception was brought to my attention by Dr. Anna Vaughn. Professor, I don’t know how to cite this.

⁸ Locke. “Of the Associations...” *An Essay*.... Sec 6: pg. 396.

described above more troubling, as well. Take the assumption that all associations are created by voluntary actions, or by chance, or by some combination thereof, as truth. If this is the case, then either voluntary actions or chance ought to be able to create an association on their own.

Let's consider how a fully voluntary action produces an Association of Ideas. For instance, Locke refers to an example regarding the development of hatred that implies intention. As he notes, "A man receives a sensible Injury from another, thinks on the Man and that Action over and over, and by ruminating on them strongly, or much in his Mind, so cements those two ideas together, that he makes them almost one."⁹ In this example, the first man *intends* to hate the second due to the injury that he caused. Locke's utilization of the term 'cements,' makes this ambiguous. The question is who or what is cementing the ideas together. It is either the man cementing these ideas together which indicates fully voluntary association, or it is the mind which indicates chance. The man cannot have intended to create this association and, therefore, it must be chance. The first man thinks very much about the second and his misdeed, and suddenly distaste is the major association with the second man. This seems straightforward, yet, it spurs a question of timing. When, exactly, did the first man start to hate the second? Is it the first time that the man ponders the actions of the second? Or, perhaps, the tenth? The sixty-ninth? Whether the 'cementing' occurred on the tenth or sixty-ninth rumination, it can only be a matter of chance. The desired outcome, or the successful association of hatred and the second man, only occurred once, yet, the voluntary action that led to this outcome occurred multiple times prior to the first time that the association manifested. Why is it not the case that, in every instance where the association of hatred was intended, that it was created? It must be randomness, or chance.

Now let's consider whether chance, alone, can create associations. Locke clearly acknowledges the role of chance in creating some associations. Returning to his examples, he notes, "A Man has suffered Pain or Sickness in any Place, he saw his Friend die in such a Room; though these have in Nature

⁹ Locke. "Of the Associations..." *An Essay*.... Sec 11: pg. 398.

nothing to do one with another, yet when the idea of the Place occurs to his Mind, it brings that of the Pain and Displeasure with it, he confounds them in his Mind, and can as little bear the one as the other.”¹⁰

In this example the association is unintentional. The room is not responsible for the friend’s death, or the pain that accompanied it. Witnessing horror can lead to an association of that stress, or emotion, with the room that it occurred in; this is Locke’s point. But Locke ignores every other event of horror that did not lead to an association of that feeling to the room. Put simply, experiencing horror in a room allows for a negative association to be created, but it is not guaranteed. Why is it not the case that all horrible events lead to interrelated horrible associations? Perhaps it has to do with the way in which the brain operates? Or, maybe it was the temperature of the room.? In any case, the association either happens, or fails to happen. Therefore, there seems to be some Boolean-esque element that determines whether or not the creation of an association is successful. What examples like this show is that there is a chance for an association to be created but there is also a chance that it will not. Chance, then, is an opportunity for association, but not a guarantee. Regardless, it is feasible for an association to follow from chance alone.

While it is possible for an association to arise from chance alone, it is not possible for them to arise from voluntary actions alone. For something to be determined by chance, it does not seem necessary for what follows to always be the case. For instance, a person going to prom does not need to have a prom date. Their being at prom means there is a chance that they have a date, and a chance they do not. Conversely, for something to be determined by voluntary actions, it seems like what follows has to be necessary. For instance, a person moves their arm, and their arm moves through space. There is a sense of inseparability to these actions. Associations are more like the prom case because it does not seem like there needs to be a guaranteed outcome; as well, associations are unlike the second case because they cannot be guaranteed, and the movement of the arm in this example seems necessary. Bearing this, then, there is a connection between chance and associations, but not voluntary actions and associations.

¹⁰ Locke. “Of the Associations...” *An Essay*.... Sec 12: pg. 398.

Even associations that are in part voluntary rely on chance. If chance alone can succeed in creating an association, but voluntary action alone cannot, maybe a combination of these two ideas can yield an association partially intentionally. Consider another example from Locke. He writes, “Many Children imputing the Pain they endured at School to their Books they were corrected for, so joyn those Ideas together, that a Book becomes their Aversion, and they are never reconciled to the study and use of them all their lives after.”¹¹ In this example the negative association is clearly the result of a combination of both voluntary and chance elements. A student may intend to create an association of the books to learning its contents or appreciating its prose. Or, perhaps, even something along the lines of associating reading with tranquility. However, an unintended part of studying is the stress or uncomfortable emotions that can be brought to the surface by student life. As such, there are multiple chances for associations in this scenario, that of the books to learning, that of the books to stress, and many other individual connections that seem utterly illogical that might not instantly spring to mind, such as the taste of their tears and the smell of books. Although the combination of voluntary actions and chance combined can successfully create an association, as demonstrated by all of the potential outcomes stated above, the types of associations that are created cannot be entirely anticipated and, therefore, not entirely voluntary.. Therefore, the role of chance is far more important than that of voluntary actions. Voluntary actions merely allow for the opportunity of associations, whereas chance defines whether or not an association actually is created.

Voluntary actions, then, cannot yield associations alone, but can in the presence of chance. This means that voluntary actions’ role is suspect at best, and impotent at worst; that is, there are situations where it seems relevant that voluntary actions be included, but it is unclear what causal role they play if any. If voluntary actions are not a factor in the creation of associations, one consequence is that reason is weakened; one could become blinded by their commitments. It is entirely up to chance whether an association that causes a commitment is created. Locke’s chief concern with the Association of Ideas is

¹¹ Locke. “Of the Associations...” *An Essay*.... Sec 15: pg. 399.

that, “Some such wrong and unnatural Combinations of Ideas will be found to establish the Irreconcilable opposition between different Sects of Philosophy and Religion; for we cannot imagine every one of their Followers to impose willfully on himself, and knowingly refuse Truth offer’d by plain Reason.”¹²

Associations as proposed by Locke are considered a problem, because people can shut themselves off from reason with the purpose of maintaining contradictory associations. For instance, insisting that the Earth is flat, because of one’s distrust in government sources; the association expressed in this example is one of distrust to the government. This person maintains that the Earth is flat, because of his distrust in government, despite the ample evidence that proves the Earth is not flat. Examples of associations such as this one demonstrate the resistance to reason that a wrong contradiction can encourage.

Another consequence is that learning becomes difficult in theory. An easy supposed solution to the problem above that springs to mind, is learning, or attempting to commit to natural associations through reading and studying. However, this is done voluntarily, which has been proven to not yield successful associations on their own. Therefore, there is no way to remedy errors of reason. However, if voluntary actions are not part of this process, then this idea becomes even more problematic. People, then, cannot just fix a problem of wrong associations by exposing the afflicted to obvious facts. If one was willing, working towards the disentanglement of the appropriate ideas could dispel the contradiction, but it is not guaranteed. In the same vein, the successful association that allowed flat earth theory to live rent free in this person’s head could be caused in many different scenarios. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there is also the indication that learning is, at least partially, a chain of associations. For instance, studying is a voluntary action that promotes the association of certain ideas for the purpose of remembering facts or concepts. If the successful creation of association is based on chance, regardless of that role of voluntary actions, then learning requires some level of chance. This means that, instead of there being strong learners or otherwise, there are people who are lucky with associations and those who are not. It is not this simple, yet, it is a necessity from this framework.

¹² Locke. “Of the Associations...” *An Essay*.... Sec 18: pg. 400.

The example of learning is far-fetched because of how thoroughly it ought to be disputed, particularly in the case of a student studying a subject. To reiterate, voluntary actions still can be part of the picture in order to spur an association, it is just that chance is necessary to bring that association out. This means that actively attempting to create a learning association, perhaps of simple concepts like combining ‘dog and animal,’ or ‘John Locke and Philosophy,’ can still be relevant to the process. However, one will only experience a successful combination of those ideas as a result of randomness. The probability of voluntarily attempting to create an association, and of the existing chance to create that same association seem to be, at the very least, connected. Instead of voluntary actions being influential on why associations of ideas come about, it is influential on the probability of them coming out. In effect, they are increasing the opportunities of such an association being created. It is like buying two lottery tickets, winning, and then saying the money was earned on purpose. Certainly, the person had some role in setting up the opportunity of earning the money, but it is difficult to say that it was the person’s actions that caused them to win. Thus, the role of voluntary action is not totally irrelevant, but necessitates chance in the case of a successfully created association.

Chance is both necessary and sufficient to bring about an association, while voluntary is neither necessary nor sufficient. This greatly damages the epistemic state that Locke projects, because it implies that we have little control of the associations that are actually established in our mind. At best, an individual can put themselves in the position to successfully create a desired association, and then chance takes over from there. This means that reasoning is at the whims of chance, because of the Boolean-esque property of associations described earlier. In this paper, I have shown that Associations of Ideas only come about by chance, as well as the major problems this spurs for reasoning. These points are intimately connected to the intentions that Locke has for associations in his framework for reason, effectively, to allow contradictions to exist in a man’s mind. (Word Count minus Abstract: 2821).

Bibliography:

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter Nidditch. Oxford University

Press, New York, 1975.

Vaughn, Anna. See footnote 7.

Wright, John P. "Associations, Madness, and the Measures of Probability in Locke and Hume."

Psychology and Literature in the Eighteenth Century. pg. 103-122. edited by Christopher Fox.

New York: AMS Press, 1987.