

Locke's arguments against innate knowledge¹

The claim that there is at least some innate knowledge is sometimes called 'innatism'. Exactly what 'innate' means in this context is disputed. But the claim is that some knowledge is part of the mind, already 'in' the mind from birth, rather than gained from experience. If there is any innate knowledge, it cannot be a posteriori, but must be a priori. If we want to say that 'reason' is the source of this knowledge, then we can say that the knowledge is built into the 'faculty' of reason, that part of the mind with which we think about and understand the world.

The debate over innatism is whether there is any innate *propositional* knowledge. Everyone can agree that there is innate ability knowledge. Of course babies are born knowing how to breath, how to see (and apparently, how to hold their breath under water!). We can also agree that they have certain psychological abilities, such as memory and the disposition to learn a language. But is there any innate propositional knowledge?

One issue that this question raises is whether we can really make sense of the idea of innate knowledge. What are we really saying when we say that knowledge is 'innate'? If we get clear on that, does any knowledge qualify? This is the line of argument with which John Locke begins his attack on innatism in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*.

LOCKE'S OBJECTION TO INNATE KNOWLEDGE

Locke argues that we have no innate knowledge. He begins by asking how we acquire our ideas. By 'idea', he means 'whatever it is that the mind can be employed about in thinking'. Or again, an 'idea' is any 'immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding'. So he uses the word to cover a very wide range of mental phenomena. An idea can be

1. a complete thought, taking the form of a proposition, e.g. 'bananas are yellow';
2. a sensation or sensory experience, e.g. a visual sensation of yellow; or
3. a concept, e.g. 'yellow'.

Our focus here is on propositions, as these are what we can know or not know. Locke understands innate ideas as 'thoughts printed on to the soul at the point of existence, which it brings into the world with it'. As examples of potential innate knowledge, taken from the debate at the time, he offers 'Whatever is, is' and 'It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be'. He assumes that innate

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 125-30

knowledge must be universal - every human being has it (§3). However, the converse is not true: just because some claim is universally accepted, that doesn't mean it is innate - it may be that we could explain in some other way why everyone agrees.

Locke then argues:

- P1. If there is innate knowledge, it is universal.
- P2. For an idea to be part of the mind, the mind (the person) must know or be conscious of it: 'it seems to me nearly a contradiction to say that there are truths imprinted on the soul that it doesn't perceive or understand. No proposition can be said to be in the mind which it has never known or been conscious of'.
- C1. Therefore, innate knowledge is knowledge that every human being is or has been conscious of.
- P3. Children and 'idiots' (people with severe learning disabilities) do not know theorems in geometry or 'It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be'. (They do not know these claims, because they do not understand them.)
- C2. Therefore, these claims are not innate.
- P4. There are *no* claims that are universally accepted, including by children and 'idiots'.
- C3. Therefore, there is no innate knowledge.

We can undermine Locke's argument if we can reject C1. Is there something wrong with Locke's conception of innate knowledge? After all, innatists such as Plato and Leibniz don't talk of innate knowledge as *conscious*. But if innate knowledge isn't conscious as Locke says, then what can it be? Locke anticipates and objects to four alternative definitions of innate knowledge.

If we define as 'innate' *any* knowledge that we can gain, Locke objects that this is a misuse of the term - everything we come to know, including through sense experience, will be innate! What we should say is that the *capacity* for knowledge is innate. This is true - we are born with the ability to know things - but it doesn't mean that there is innate *knowledge*. Compare: the capacity to see (vision) is innate, but that doesn't mean that *what* we see is innate as well!

What if we define innate knowledge as what everyone knows and agrees to when they gain the use of reason? After all, both Plato and Leibniz emphasise the role of reason in innate knowledge. But, Locke presses, why think that what we can discover by reasoning is *innate*? If the knowledge is innate, and so we already have it, why do we need to 'discover' it? Anyway, even if we grant the definition, there is still no innate knowledge, because children can reason *before* they understand mathematical and logical truths.

To take account of this, we could say that innate knowledge is gained at some point after the use of reason. This is hopeless - it doesn't mark off innate knowledge from all kinds of other knowledge, including what we learn from sense experience.

Finally, what about defining innate knowledge as truths that are assented to promptly as soon as they are understood? Innate knowledge is 'self-evident'. But there are many such claims that rely on sense experience, e.g. 'white is not black'. So they can't be innate.

Locke concludes that there is no satisfactory definition of 'innate' that can be used to defend the claim that there is innate knowledge.

LEIBNIZ'S RESPONSE TO LOCKE

Leibniz wrote his *New Essays on Human Understanding* as a commentary on and response to Locke. Leibniz argues that Locke has not understood the sense in which knowledge can be innate. Locke's theory that ideas must be conscious has misled him. We can know things without being conscious of them. Locke is wrong to claim (P2) that an idea can only be in the mind if we are conscious of it. Innate knowledge exists as 'a disposition, an aptitude, a preformation' in the mind towards developing, understanding and knowing certain thoughts. In other words, according to Leibniz, *none* of Locke's definitions of 'innate' are quite right. We have innate knowledge in a sense not envisaged by Locke.

Unconscious knowledge

Leibniz picks up the example of 'It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be', and rejects Locke's claim that this is not universally accepted. Everyone uses this knowledge all the time, but 'without explicitly attending to it'. Indeed, we can't really think without it, since it is needed to distinguish the concept of one thing from the concept of something different. 'General principles [such as the example given] enter into our thoughts, serving as their inner core and as their mortar. Even if we give no thought to them, they are necessary for thought. The mind relies on these principles constantly'.

We can see this with Locke's example of 'white is not black'. Leibniz accepts that claims like 'white is not black' aren't innate. But they are applications of a necessary truth that *is* innate, namely 'It is impossible for the same thing to be and not be at the same time', to particular cases and concepts acquired from sense experience. Locke might object that the particular cases, such as 'white is not black', are known *before* the abstract principle. Leibniz responds that in the particular cases, we *unconsciously deploy* our knowledge of the abstract principle that something can't both be and not be at the same time.

Leibniz's theory entails that knowledge can be unconscious. But this shouldn't be controversial. Memory 'stores' ideas and usually, but not always, retrieves them when we need them. This shows two things: we can know things without being conscious of them; and retrieving this knowledge can need assistance. So even Locke, who says that an idea can only be part of the mind if it is something the person can be conscious of, must accept that there is nothing impossible about unconscious knowledge.

Locke can reply that this is true, but irrelevant to the question of innate knowledge, because in memory, we are recalling what has been conscious. But, says Leibniz, why accept that what is unconscious must always have once been

conscious or gained from experience? Why think that we can know everything about our minds straightaway?

Innate knowledge as a disposition

Leibniz comments on Locke's contrast between 'innate knowledge' as knowledge we can acquire and the innate capacity for knowledge. The contrast restricts the options. While innate knowledge does not exist 'fully formed' or explicitly in our minds, it is more than mere capacity. In gaining knowledge of necessary truths, the mind needs to actively engage with itself, albeit at the prompting of sense experience. Thus, Leibniz says, 'The actual knowledge of [necessary truths] isn't innate. What is innate is what might be called the potential knowledge of them, as the veins of the marble outline a shape that is in the marble before they are uncovered by the sculptor'. It takes work to uncover what is within us, but what we uncover, we have not learned from sense experience.