

Locke's argument against innate concepts¹

The claim that there are innate concepts means that not all concepts are learned from experience; some concepts are somehow part of the structure of the mind.

If some propositional knowledge is innate, then some concepts must be innate, because propositional knowledge is formulated in terms of concepts. Conversely, if we can show that there are no innate concepts, we will have shown that there is no innate knowledge. In *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke provides this very argument against innate knowledge. To have innate knowledge requires that one has the concepts involved in the proposition one knows. If we first had to acquire the concepts, then the knowledge can't be innate. But there are no innate concepts.

LOCKE'S OBJECTION TO INNATE CONCEPTS

It is an important part of Locke's argument that whatever concepts we have, we are conscious of. Furthermore, he assumes (and everyone in the debate agrees) that innate concepts must be universal - every human being has them. If we put these two thoughts together, an innate concept must be one that every human being is or has been conscious of.

Locke gives three main reasons for rejecting the existence of innate concepts, given his definition of what they are:

1. If we observe newborn babies, we have no reason at all to think that they have any concepts beyond, perhaps, ones deriving from their experience in the womb, such as WARMTH and PAIN. Certainly, we can't think that such advanced concepts as IDENTITY or IMPOSSIBILITY are concepts babies are familiar with and conscious of. But these concepts are necessary for the knowledge that 'It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be' (an example of supposed innate knowledge from the debate at the time).
2. Another favourite of innatism at the time of Locke was the concept of GOD. But not only is this not a concept that babies have, it is not a concept that all human beings have - whole societies, historically, have been atheist. The concept of GOD is not innate, but learned by children from their teachers.
3. The only way a concept can be part of the mind without the mind being conscious of it is if it is lodged in memory. To remember something is to have been conscious of it in the past. If you aren't remembering a concept, then it is new to your mind - arising from some impression of sensation or reflection. Innate ideas would have to be neither remembered nor new. How could there be such a thing?

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. 133-7

REJECTING LOCKE'S DEFINITION OF 'INNATE CONCEPT'

Defenders of innate knowledge disagree with Locke's definition of innate concepts. They reject his claim that it is impossible for concepts to exist 'in the mind' unless we are or have been conscious of them. Innate concepts are concepts which cannot be gained from experience, and arguments defending innatism try to show that experience cannot explain how we have or use the concept. Experience is necessary to trigger our development of the concept, but it is not sufficient to explain our having the concept.

The idea of experience 'triggering' the concept needs to be understood carefully. The claim is not that we simply have the capacity to form the concept. Rather, we are predisposed to form just this concept, which we cannot form on the basis of experience alone. (For more on 'triggering', see the handout 'Innate knowledge'.)

On this understanding of innate concepts, it is no objection that babies don't have the relevant concept of GOD or IDENTITY - it needs to be triggered by experience before it develops.

LEIBNIZ'S DEFENCE OF INNATE CONCEPTS

In his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz accepts Locke's claim that innate knowledge requires innate concepts. Therefore, if we want to say that 'It is impossible for the same thing to be and not be' is innate knowledge, we will have to say that concepts such as IDENTITY and IMPOSSIBILITY are innate. But, to answer Locke's first objection, this means that we have, from birth, the disposition to form these concepts. Indeed, they are essential to all thought, even though it takes time for us to make them explicit in our thinking.

In answer to Locke's second objection, Leibniz points out that to lack the word for God is not to lack the concept of GOD. Some societies have no word for 'being', but that doesn't mean they don't have thoughts that use the concept. Again, it may take considerable work of reflection to develop the concept of GOD. We are disposed, from our experience of nature, to develop the idea of a higher power. But this isn't yet the full concept of GOD as we have it. Our experience enables a concept that goes beyond what we can learn from experience; our minds are 'receptive' to the idea of God.

In answer to Locke's third objection, Leibniz claims that innate knowledge and concepts exist as dispositions in the mind. While innate concepts and knowledge do not exist 'fully formed' or explicitly in our minds, they are more than mere capacity certain concepts or knowledge. Thus, Leibniz says, '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.