

Innate Ideas: A Reflection

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Innate ideas are a way to explain some phenomena. Some modern philosophers, such as John Locke, think innate ideas lack a good rational standing, and thus deny their plausibility. He favors a ‘blank slate’ approach to his theory of mind. Other modern philosophers argue more in favor of innate ideas, like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz with his ‘veined marble’ metaphor.

Exploring the concept of innate ideas is worthwhile as a basis for theories of mind and thought. I will explore the definition of innate ideas with rebuttals to its plausibility, as well as its usefulness as a concept, and potential candidates for innate ideas. If the mechanism that allows us to understand or acquire ideas is innate, then innatism has rational standing. I argue that it does, as empiricism alone, which is the basis of Locke’s argument, does not fully explain ideas and their nature.

Definition, Courtesy of René Descartes

The innate ideas hypothesis claims that there are some ideas that humans have within them that do not come from their senses. This implies that humans start with these ideas already within them. Descartes claimed that God gave humans innate ideas. He claims there is no other way that humans could understand God’s infinite nature.

[W]e come to know them by the power of our own native intelligence, without any sensory experience. All geometrical truths are of this sort – not just the most obvious ones, but all the others, however abstruse they may appear. Hence, according to Plato, Socrates asks a slave boy about the elements of geometry and thereby makes the boy able to dig out certain truths from his own mind which he had not previously recognized were there, thus attempting to establish the doctrine of reminiscence. Our knowledge of God is of this sort. (May 1643 letter To Voetius, AT 8b:166f, CSMK 222f)

Here he is claiming a few things. The first is that our intelligence is able to tell us things which are not sensory. Then, that the intelligence we have is able to discern truths that we were not aware of, but were within us. Lastly, he claims that God is a type of this innate knowledge. This is close, if not identical, to empiricist reflection. If we reflect on certain facts, we find out certain truths that would otherwise be obvious or self-evident. The major discrepancy here is whether the idea or its deduction was wholly innate. I would agree with Locke's point on deductions not being innate, as they come after ideas, though would argue that the mechanism that allows us to acquire these deductions is what should be under scrutiny.

Descartes used universal assent to prove innate ideas. He argued that if innate ideas exist, they are held by everyone. He also argued that unconscious ideas exist, and that one does not need to be aware of an idea or truism in order for it to exist within them.

It is true that my being a substance explains my having the idea of substance; but it does not explain my having the idea of an infinite substance. That must come from some substance that is itself infinite. I am finite. (Descartes, Meditation 1)

This is Descartes way of defending the idea of God as an innate idea. He argues that the nature of infinity must be an innate idea, which holds even without the use of God as an example. Contemplating the nature of an all-encompassing thing under any other label would suffice.

Locke's View

Locke believes that innate ideas are nonsensical. He feels as though what the innate ideas argument accomplishes, as he restates it, can be better explained through the blank slate argument he gives in rebuttal.

Universal Assent (Locke's Restatement)

1. If all of humanity agrees on the proposition p, then the idea that p is innate.
2. All of humanity agrees on the proposition p.
3. Thus, the idea that p is innate.

Locke argues convincingly that humanity will never agree on any one thing. Even when it comes to totalities or other obvious truisms children and the mentally unwell will not necessarily agree to such things. This rules out universal assent as a possible tell for innate ideas.

One of the reasons he is able to argue so thoroughly against innate ideas is due to his definition of an idea. Locke's definition of an idea is "Whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks." Under his definition we can extrapolate 'when a human is thinking' as a necessary precursor to an idea existing. This demands the human is both conscious and conscious of the thing in question. 'The object' is that which the human is thinking about. 'Of the understanding' here is treated oddly. It implies more than just thinking about sensing something, and instead implies an interaction between the thinker and the object that is 'the understanding.' He tucks into this that one cannot be thinking of something unconsciously, thus rejecting the existence of unconscious ideas outright.

Locke argues that the faculty for reason may be innate, but that its deductions are not. Clearly any deductions made from sense data are not innate, because they rely on things from outside the mind. Sense data is not innate, though this says nothing of our ability to interpret it.

Leibniz, In Rebuttal

If there are innate ideas, they will not be concepts of any one particular thing, but instead a core ability of humans or something akin to their nature. There are versions of innatism that refer to the structure of mind instead of any particular idea as that which is innate. This nativism is most in line with Leibniz's veined marble metaphor.

If the soul were like these empty tablets, truths would be in us as the shape of Hercules is in a block of marble, when the marble is indifferent to receiving this shape or another. But if the stone had veins which marked out the shape of Hercules rather than other shapes, then that block would be more determined with respect to that shape and Hercules would be as though innate in it in some sense, even though some labor would be required for those veins to be exposed and polished into clarity. ... This is how ideas and truths are innate in us. (Leibniz, 52)

In saying how the mind is more likely to end up one shape than another, he is referring to structures like reason and rationality. That is to say, the natural form of a human is one that grows into a rational being through experience. Humans are born with the framework that allows things like logic and reason to exist, which is seen through its principles and examples like truisms. The ability to have a rational mind is, to Leibniz, like an innate idea. The mental framework that allows humans to be rational and understand rational ideas is innate. The idea, or framework, in this case is unconscious, which would cause Locke to interpret this same line of thought as insufficient due to his definition of ideas. Leibniz allows for ideas to be unconscious, while Locke does not. Locke would rather rational thinking be a part of empirical reflection, although this reflection and the extrapolation of principles that can come from it are already rational in nature. There is no one sensory experience that tells us how logical principles work, instead we must rationally conclude certain principles exist from what perceptions we are given.

Locke would claim that these self-evident truths are things that we are just able to know without some special innate idea of them. He would also claim that these structures and predispositions are not innate ideas, but instead serve as the products of abstractions. Nativists would point out that the ability to abstract is not like other predispositions. Locke wants to be able to abstract and reflect, a thing which requires reason and memory, without allowing in unconscious ideas. This is contradictory, as memory is an easily indicated example of an unconscious idea. We do not remember all of our memories at once, yet they shape our lives greatly. Unconscious memories are present and affect trauma victims vividly. In order to reflect,

Locke requires memory. Since memory can be unconscious, Locke requires unconscious ideas, since memories can be the object of the understanding in the mind.

Besides, there are hundreds of indications leading us to conclude that at every moment there is in us an infinity of perceptions, unaccompanied by awareness or reflection; that is, of alterations in the soul itself, of which we are unaware because these impressions are either too minute and too numerous, or else too unvarying, so that they are not sufficiently distinctive on their own. (Leibniz, 54)

This interpretation of ideas allows us to say that unconscious perceptions do exist and affect us. Since Locke wants to say that ideas and perceptions cannot be unconscious, this is a sufficient rebuttal to the second. If we can have unconscious perceptions, and perceptions give rise to ideas (as Locke would argue), this would imply that unconscious perceptions can give rise to unconscious ideas. This invalidates part of Locke's definition of ideas.

Leibniz's defense of innate ideas entertains that something may be innate, but that it probably isn't anything resembling epistemological knowledge. Leibniz metaphor more closely says that the innate idea is what turns into reason, upon sufficient interaction with the world around us. This is the strongest defense of innate ideas so far, and coincides with Locke's understanding (and modern understanding) of nature in psychology and biology.

A better empiricist might argue for innate ideas existing as a way to explain individual tendencies not better explain by nurture, or human nature more broadly. An empiricist looking at humans learn logic across cultures and time could rightly assume that humans have some inner capability for these things. Rejecting instincts as a bestial thing would still allow them to claim Leibniz's framework as something humans just have, thus allowing innate mental frameworks to qualify as ideas.

Candidates for innate ideas.

Leibniz is among the philosophers that find the blank slate theory from empiricism does not sufficiently explain how the human mind forms. If Leibniz could successfully argue for nature as an innate idea, it would count against Locke. Nature may also define certain defaults that our rational thinking abides by. We are often blatantly unaware of most of our own biases, it would be easy for Locke to miss ‘nature controlling your default rational method’ as ‘the innate idea that controls how you interact with ideas.’ Locke dismisses the notion of unconscious ideas, though does not better explain how oversaturation of our senses or dreams manage to produce ideas that may otherwise be foreign or unknown upon later introspection. Leibniz uses examples like these to point out that, clearly, there are ideas that do not reside in our consciousness. Since this is the case, it is plausible that the idea that allows for reason could be an innate idea. Locke may still argue it is an ability or learned faculty in some way, but due to the structure of reason and how heavily it relies on itself to build, it becomes nonsensical to assume that humans do not start capable of reason.

Rational proofs, logic, and the ability to follow and believe them without empirical proof is a strong candidate for innate ideas. Suggested by Leibniz, he would also categorize ‘truisms’, or necessary truths, as examples of this principle. Things like ‘Charlie is a dog, therefore Charlie is a mammal’ would qualify under the logical definition due to ‘dog’ containing reference to ‘mammal’ when referring to real-world entities. I do not learn that **all** dogs are mammals by experience, but instead through extrapolation and understanding of the concept of dog. It is the same way with modus ponens and modus tollens; by learning the underlying principle that connects two things I am now able to understand every instance of their relationship (assuming I recognize it for what it is). Locke calls this type of realization abstractions, gained from reflections. It is important to note that Locke is referring to the individual instance of abstraction, while Leibnitz is suggesting that the framework that allows for these abstractions is innate.

Infants start with the ability to perceive their surroundings through their physical senses. Perceiving something is not equal to understanding that same something. If the infant looked at a chair, they would not know its use or that it takes up space, but they might be able to tell that it is different in some way to the blur around it. While anything reasoned after the point of perception is not innate, that understanding of ‘same or not’ could either be an instinct or innate idea.

It could be argued convincingly that a human baby is not capable of reason or thinking. We are unable to know definitively if babies are capable of thought, and, if so, when. We do know that infants are capable of learning, as is well documented in both biology and psychology. Learning requires one of several things, such as concepts, experiences, and reflection. A concept, or idea, then forms from the interactions between the self and a catalyst. Because we understand new ideas through old ideas, it makes sense that there needed to be some sort of idea- or idea generating/understanding mechanism- that is innate.

Reason is made of ideas building on themselves and making each other stronger through revision and reinforcement. If our framework for reason is not innate, how do we know reason? An empiricist like Locke would cite habit and custom, or merely our memory of the correlation of things. Reason, in order to build on itself, requires foundations to function. Locke might call our ability to have reason an ability of man and not an idea of itself.

Recursive nature of ideas and Molyneux’s Problem.

Ideas are recursive in nature. They build and rely on each other extensively. As we collect new experiences or reflect on ideas, they are informed by our subjective past. The judgments that we make are informed by previous judgments, reflections, and experiences. This makes our interaction with ideas cyclical in nature. Empiricists like Locke claim ideas come from experience. The precursor to ideas, they claim, is that sense data. If we allow that ideas require a

precursor to exist, then we must identify all possible precursors. Experience gives rise to perceptions, which then allow us to form ideas about them. This makes experience a precursor. Ideas within us affect other ideas, such as with biases and literary tropes. This also makes ideas a precursor.

This introduces a problem. Either the first idea we have is innate, or we gain the first idea we have from something else. Leibniz is able to address this by pointing to innate frameworks like veins in marble that allow for ideas to form. Locke has no such luxury, but instead might claim our inner reflections as an innate ability. Locke is an advocate for some innate predispositions or abilities, but denies that we have innate ideas. If our rational framework is, as Leibniz suggested, innate as well as an unconscious idea, then we have the innate idea of a rational framework. If we are only concerned with conscious innate ideas, this is, as Locke suggests, fallacy. This would leave us with the problems of whether or not we can have unconscious knowledge, whether this framework of rationality counts as knowledge, and the consequences of such conclusions.

Molyneux's Problem is presented by Locke as follows.

Suppose a Man born blind, and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between a Cube, and a Sphere of the same metal, and nighly of the same bigness, so as to tell, when he felt one and t'other, which is the Cube, which the Sphere. Suppose then the Cube and Sphere placed on a Table, and the Blind Man to be made to see. Quære, whether by his sight, before he touched them, he could now distinguish, and tell, which is the Globe, which the Cube (Essay, Locke, 1694)

Because the blind man has never experienced sight, he lacks certain features of the ideas that sight data would provide. He cannot get the idea of the sight of a shape until he understands sight through its exposure. However, when his ability is restored, he takes time to understand this new sighted data.

It is either difficult or impossible to get an idea from nothing, thus, the blind from birth will not have ideas of sighted things. (Locke on Molyneux's problem) A blind person has no concept of visual data, especially in the same way that sighted individuals do. Since the blind individuals do not have a concept of 'visual' anything, they find the visual data of sphere and cube to be foreign. Even if this premise is wrong, it is one Locke would agree to, seeing as he believed the newly sighted would not be able to distinguish the two shapes through sight alone. Infants start with the world similarly unlabeled, though on an infinitely larger scale. The mechanism that allows infants to understand what things mean must be innate, otherwise, they could never learn anything. If this ability to understand and translate sense data into ideas is itself an idea, then innate ideas exist. It is likely that if this is the case, then innate ideas are unconscious as well. Either way, this necessary framework to understand still remains the best candidate for innate ideas.

Assessment:

Rationalism is necessary for ideas to exist as they are. So long as ideas are able to exist solely from other ideas, this denies empiricism alone as their source. In effect, since logic and her constructs exist, rationalism has rational standing. Empiricists' reflection is an extension of rationalism and how reflection interreacts with ideas is rational and not empirical. The data that forms these thoughts may or may not be from sense data, but that does not mean that reflection is not rational in nature. Locke in his rejection of rationalism forms a weaker argument for ideas that do not reflect the data, as that data shows ideas existing in ways different from what he would define. Leibniz instead allows for rationalism, and provides a way to explain nature that empiricism does not. In this way, Locke's argument against innatism fails, due in part to his denial of unconscious ideas.

And furthermore, why must we acquire everything through awareness of outer things and not be able to unearth anything from within ourselves? Is our soul in itself so empty that unless it borrows images from outside it is nothing? (Leibniz, 53)

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