

John Locke's Polemic against Innate Ideas

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Abstract

At the beginning of his *Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argues that everyone is conscious thinking; and that the object of our thought is ideas. Thus, ideas occupy a significant place in the process of determining the capacity of human understanding. One of the fundamental enquiries in Locke's *Essays* is: how do these ideas come to the mind? This piece unveils the arguments that were already in place during Locke's immediate history in favour of innatism, which proposes some of our ideas to be innate. These include the nativism of Descartes, the Anglican Churchmen and the Cambridge Platonists. It is from this background that I bring out the polemics of Locke against nativism that does not just serve as an introduction to his *Essays* but also as a frame for his further arguments in the *Essays*.

Keywords: John Locke, Innate, Ideas, polemic, nativism.

Introduction

In the 17th century, there was a strong debate in the intellectual circles, with which Locke was already familiar as to whether the human mind is furnished with innate ideas (Rickless, 2007). And by innate ideas, it is meant "Ideas (knowledge, concepts, beliefs) that are not derived in any way from our sense organs (experience) but pre-exist and originate in the mind at birth and that are brought to consciousness under certain conditions; ideas that are present to the mind as a tendency or predisposition to think in a certain way" (Peter, 1981, p.123). At the epistemological level, innatists held that all knowledge of the natural and supernatural world available to humans is based on fundamental speculative axioms, theoretical principles that neither require nor are capable of proof. These principles include: causal principles and principles of non-contradiction. They were taken to be universal, therefore impossible to derive from experience (Rickless, 2007). They are built into the mind *ab initio*. At the moral and religious levels, innatists argue that the knowledge of our duties is innate, or else, there would be moral disagreement and relativism, strong enough to break the society.

The rise of this polemic has a long history. It is often traced to Plato who employed the notion as a bridge of the realm of forms. Plato explained how even the untutored can appreciate proofs about geometrical objects never in experience. He conjectured that every soul brings into this life a memory of a previous contemplation of the pure forms of which mundane things are modelled (Sasa, 2003). It is speculated that Plato who gave an earlier and charming account of innate ideas in the 4th century B.C must have probably been influenced by the Pythagorean belief in reincarnation (Donald, 1829). Some ancient thinkers, independently of Plato, distinguished some fundamental ideas and beliefs as

natural and common. For example, Cicero called them as innate. The Epicureans and the stoics, in their argument for the existence of God have stressed this point as well (Stillingfleet, 1662). Christianity taught that there is a kind of natural revelation of principles essential to human existence that God imparts to all. Similar metaphysical and theological uses of the doctrine occur in the work of Neoplatonists like Plotinus and theologians belonging to the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, including Augustine during the early Christianity, and Ficino in the Italian Renaissance (Sasa, 2003). The doctrine of innate ideas also has an intimate relationship with the philosophy of science.

John Locke, drawing from a better informed anthropology and on common sense, returned to the maxim, no less ancient, that the mind starts as a blank tablet (*tabula rasa*) on which experience does the writing. This piece studies the idea of innatism in Locke's immediate history and his polemics against innate ideas.

The man John Locke

John Locke walked through the stage of England's history at a time that was particularly turbulent, and he was personally associated with some of the dramatic episodes, despite being a quiet character (Lowe, 1995). Locke's first works were written at Oxford, but were not published during his life time. These works are *Two Tracts on Government* and *Essays on the Law of Nature*. In the views of Ashcraft (1988) and Laslett (1988), Locke is the suspected author of *A Letter from a Person of Quality to his Friend in the Country*. This letter infuriated the government and may have led to his departure to France in 1675 (Iloyd, 1995). He is also the author of *Essays Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises of Government*. He also published a couple of minor works in his later years: *Some considerations on the Lowering of interest and Raising the Value of Money* (1668), *The Second Letter for Toleration* (1691), *Third Letter for Toleration* (1692), *Some thoughts on Education* (1693), and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). He was not just a writer, he played a prominent role in the political life of his country. He was Commissioner for Appeals, Commissioner for Trade. He influenced the repeal of the Acts for the Regulation of Printing in 1695, and also the re-coinage of the debased English currency in the 1690's. Before his death, Locke was not only an international renowned intellectual figure, he had moved in the most influential political circles in England.

Born in August 29, 1632, Locke was the eldest child of a respectable Somersetshire Puritan family. His father was a small landowner, a lawyer and a captain of a volunteer regiment in the parliamentary army (Matthew, 1997). In spite of his family's moderate income, Locke received an excellent education, first at Westminster School, where he received a thorough grounding in Latin and Greek, then in 1652, he went to Christ Church, Oxford. His association with the University of Oxford lasted for more than thirty years. He received his B.A degree in 1656, and graduated as Master of Arts in 1658. After his graduation, he remained at Oxford where he taught Greek, served as a reader in rhetoric and finally censor of moral philosophy in 1664 (Iloyd, 1995). He retained this position until he was expelled in 1684 at the instigation of Charles II, the reason being that Locke was involved with a political group that were opposed to the royal policies of the time (Lowe, 1995). His reading of Descartes, Newton, Boyle, Thomas Sydenham and the founding of the Royal Society at Oxford ignited Locke's interest in science, and medicine precisely (Hutchins, 1980).

Locke's family had a strong protestant background, accounting for the continuous influx of religion into his philosophy. He was baptized into the Church of England. He had a long-lasting interest in religious matters, which continued until the day of his death. He had a great interest in biblical scholarship, Patristics and Anglican theology (Matthew, 1997). After retiring from public life,

Locke occupied himself with biblical studies and wrote a commentary on the Epistles of St Paul. Locke died in October 28, 1704, while Lady Masham was reading the Psalms to him. He was buried in the churchyard of the parish church at High Laver near Oats, where his tomb can still be seen.

Locke's immediate proponents of nativism

Although, Locke does not give us the names of the advocates of innate principles he is attacking, scholars have offered a range of possible targets: Descartes, Cambridge Platonists, Scholastic philosophers and enthusiastic sectarians in religion and politics. However, scholars like Uzgalis (2007) would contend that Locke had no opponents in mind; he was only constructing a position to refute. This is, however, not a popular position because the works of Yolton have shown, with convincing evidences, that many literatures in the 17th century England made use of the language of innate principles. This notwithstanding, Rickless (2007), divides the immediate opponents of Locke on the issue of innate ideas into three groups: 1. Descartes, 2. prominent members of the Anglican Church and 3. Cambridge Platonists.

a. *The Nativism of Rene Descartes*

Locke was intimately familiar with the doctrine of Descartes. Descartes (1984) argues that ideas are adventitious, constructed or innate. About ideas that are adventitious, Descartes refers to those occasioned by images received by the senses, like the sun. About ideas that are innate, Descartes speaks of scientific constructs: ideas of God, mind, body, soul and triangle and, those that represent true, immutable and eternal essences. His claim about innate ideas was the bone of contention. Descartes (1989) argues that the search for truth requires the rejection of doubtful opinions. He doubts everything. He believes that sense knowledge could be deceptive, geometrical reasoning could be false. In his doubt, however, he discovers that something resists doubt:

But immediately upon this I observed that, while I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat, and as I observed that this truth, *I think, hence I am*, was certain and of such evidence, that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the sceptics capable of shaking it. I could that I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of philosophy of which I was in search. (p. 30).

The knowledge of himself as a thinking being was gained, not through the senses. It was something inside and innate. The thinking being, he says, is a substance, which is only known through its effects and attribute - thinking. From this realisation, he arrives at the following conclusion.

I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that 'I', that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such, that although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is. (p. 31).

For Descartes (1989), the thinking thing is the only mirror through which the world can be seen. It is clear and a distinct idea, and can be conceived with certitude. It is unlike the body which could be denied. *I think therefore I exist*, is necessarily true each time it is expressed by Descartes.

b. *The Nativism of the Anglican Church men*

Hobbes (1994) had argued in the *Leviathan* that there are no incorporeal substances. This has some implications in relation to the divine. He said that since God is a substance and all substances are

corporeal, it then means that God is a body. The resultant effect of this argument was atheism. To deny God as body was to deny his existence, and to speak about God as a body was to deny his perfection and as such, the existence. This called for a response from the Christian elite, and Stillingfleet (1662), bishop of Worcester and the most intellectually gifted and prominent scholars of the Anglican Church of the time responded through the work, *Origines Sacrae* in 1662. In this work, he confuted atheism with the following reasons: God has stamped a universal character of himself on the minds of humans; the reason for this belief being that the whole world has consented to it. As such, if we find out that all humans agree God exists, it is the result of *a natural propensity to religion implanted in them, and founded in the general belief of the existence of a Deity*. The argument of Stillingfleet for God's existence is based on the claim that the idea of God is innate. He defends this claim on the grounds of universal consent.

c. *The Nativism of Cambridge Platonists*

Whichcote (1901) was the father of Cambridge Platonists. In reaction to Hobbes's work in the *Leviathan* in which he wrote that in the state of nature, the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have no place, and that where there is no common power there is no law, where no law, no injustice. Benjamin reacted to this view of Hobbes, quoting Romans 2:15, where scripture speaks of it being written in the hearts of gentiles. From this, he concludes that there is a sense in which moral principles are natural. Thus, when a human being flouts moral principles, he confounds his own principles and must necessarily be self-condemned. Although Whichcote was more of a preacher than a philosopher, his philosophical descendants More (1978) and Samuel (1985) provided philosophical basis for innatism.

From the foregoing, Yolton (1996) divides the polemics of innatists into two: firstly, is the naive version that treats innate principles as stamped on the mind at birth and secondly, it's the propositional version that speaks of innate ideas as those principles that we easily assent to. In the contention of Uzgalis (2007), propositional innate ideas hold that innate ideas are capable of being perceived under certain circumstances. Until these circumstances are met, the propositions remain unperceived in the mind. Having identified the positions of those who advocated for innatism, what was the response of Locke to their arguments?

Locke's polemics against Nativism

In Locke's polemic against nativism, he first undermines the reasons given for nativism and then he provides reasons for thinking that nativism is false. His first attack was on the argument of universal consent of certain speculative and practical principles. For instance, he argues that infants and the weak-minded do not assent to, let alone understand the principle of non-contradiction. As regards the argument on universal consent about doing what is just, Locke (1999) thinks that simple observation of human behaviour is sufficient to establish that when outlaws embrace this principle, they do so only as a rule of convenience, ready to be broken at a moment's notice. For Locke, universal consent to practical propositions can be explained as resulting from inculcation, while universal consent to speculative propositions can be explained as the concomitant of intuitive knowledge.

As regards the second argument which says that there are speculative and practical principles to which every human accents when it comes to the use of reason, and it means that they are innate, Locke claims that mathematical theorems, no less than mathematical maxims, are such that every human assents to them when the use of reason first makes them known. The reason why they are

general, argues Locke (1999), is because general ideas are created by the mental operation of abstraction, a faculty that is not ready to be used until a person reaches the age of reason. In this case, Locke is pointing out that the proponents of this universality are confusing the innateness of the faculty for the mental operation of abstraction with the innateness of the universal ideas which this faculty produces.

Having criticized the arguments for universal consent, Locke (1999) begins his own criticisms of nativism and tries to turn the argument of universal consent against the nativists. He says, “this argument of universal consent, which is made up of, to prove innate principles, seems to me a demonstration that there are none such: because there are none to which all mankind give a universal assent” (p. 49). First, he maintains that there are no principles to which every human assents, thus, if nativists argue that every human person assents to universal principles, therefore, they are innate; it then means that there are no innate principles. He further argues that there are no principles to which every human has at some time or other assented. However, if innatists argue that every human has at some time or the other assented to universal principles, thus they are innate; he concludes that there are no innate principles. The nativists argue that human beings would not transgress innate practical principles with confidence and serenity. But Locke argues that every practical principle is such that there are human beings who transgress it with confidence and serenity; he thus concludes that there are no practical innate principles.

Conclusion

As Locke saw the matter, the doctrine of innate ideas was superfluous because it contained nothing that he could not explain in terms of his empirical account of the origin of knowledge. His criticisms hit the mark, thereby shaking one of the reasons being commonly given in favour of nativism by his opponents. Samuel Rickson describes Locke’s argument as a mixed bag: some of them rank as powerful indictment of occurrent nativism; some are inconsistent and less powerful. However, none of his arguments can reasonably be read as a knockdown argument against dispositional nativism. Locke’s polemics against innatism unveils his anti-authoritarian tendencies. Locke sees innate ideas as an authoritative instrument for controlling and governing the minds of those who accept them; as such, Locke sees those who teach the doctrine of innatism as constituting a barrier to enquiry, and as such in the process of knowing. It is therefore not surprising that he views the scholastic curriculum of the universities, which enhances the concepts of master and teacher as responsible for blocking rational enquiry. The scholastic model of science, which is based on syllogistic argument, and which proposes that principles are innate and which the scholastics used to argue from innate first principles to the rest of knowledge, for Locke, are of little use in the discovery of truth. In the areas of natural philosophy and morality, Locke lists a couple of Ancient Philosophers: Polemo, Anaximenes, Aristippus, Antisthenes, Plato and Archelaus, who operated on false principles, revealing how students might be deceived by accepting certain principles as innate. But here again, Locke’s polemic against nativism sounds authoritarian. He strongly feels that it should be known against the scholastic tradition. He feels that the scholastic tradition should be sapped of its authoritarian nature and comes in with another version of authoritarianism. This notwithstanding, Locke’s argument against innatism, does not in Book one of his *Essays* just introduces, but forms the frame for his arguments in the *Essay*. It is such that a better understanding of his arguments against nativism, leads to a deeper grasp of his arguments in the whole *Essays*.

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