

History of Philosophy B: Lecture Five

1. Innate Ideas

Let's have a crude working definition: an innate idea is something we're born with. That is, we're born *believing* something. Many philosophers have believed we have such innate ideas. Plato was one. He thought that we were born knowing lots of things. Descartes also had similar beliefs – we have innate ideas of God. Leibniz, also, was a fan of innate ideas. But Locke was not.

Reason one: Problems with empiricism: Empiricism says that all of our knowledge comes from the senses. If we're just born with the knowledge, then clearly we aren't learning it through any means and empiricism is false. So if Locke wants to be an empiricist, it seems he'll need to assure us that there are no innate ideas.

Problem Two: Toleration: The modern philosophers who believed in innate ideas believed that God put them there. Since God isn't a big meany, those ideas aren't misleading. So He's implanted not just *beliefs* but *knowledge*. Again this would've been a problem for Locke. Locke wants everyone to be happy clappy and get along by building an epistemology whereby you don't get to demand people sign up to what you believe. But if there were innate ideas then you'd have knowledge *personally planted there by God*. That's basically giving you a carte blanche to demand that people agree with your *God given* knowledge. So Locke wants to make sure no-one can rely on a 'God put it there, so it must be true and you should say so too' style of argument.

2. Against Innate Ideas

So Locke's philosophy couldn't make room for innate ideas. The entire of the first book of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was written as an attack on the idea of innate ideas ('nativism').

The Nativist Argument: Locke first sets up what he sees as being the nativist argument. The way Locke sees it, the nativist argues thusly: There are principles that we universally assent to; If we universally assent to a principle, then that principle is innate; Conclusion: There are innate ideas.

This is the *Argument from Universal Consent*. Before we get stuck into the counterarguments against this 'argument from Universal Consent', it's worth noting one objection levelled against Locke at this stage. That is, that he's attacking a *strawman*. That the nativists, even in Locke's time, did not propound any such argument in favour of their view. I leave you to look into that line of response.

Counterargument One: Who Cares About Universal Assent: Locke's none too happy with this argument, saying:

"Universal consent proves nothing innate. This argument, drawn from universal consent, has this misfortune in it, that if it were true in matter of fact, that there were certain truths wherein all mankind agreed, it would not prove them innate, if there can be any other way shown how men may come to that universal agreement, in the things they do consent in, which I presume may be done." [1.2.3]

So what's going on there? The quoted portion is Locke's rejection of that principle. Locke is arguing that *even if* everyone universally assented to P, that's no reason to think that one's idea that P is true is innate. Is it true that if we all assented to P then there's *no good reason* to think that P is an innate belief? I leave that you for to decide, and look more closely at Locke's argument.

Counterargument Two: There is no universal assent: Secondly, Locke thinks that not only does universal assent to P not mean that P is an innate belief but that there *is* no universal assent. That is, the other premise of the innatist's argument (that there are principles we universally assent to) is false.

Are there any examples of universally assented to principles? Locke thinks the *best* examples aren't things like murdering children for fun, but logical truisms. Surely *those* things are universally assented to? Locke disagrees.

"Not on the mind naturally imprinted, because not known to children, idiots, &c. For, first, it is evident, that all children and idiots have not the least apprehension or thought of them." [1.2.5]

What's that all mean? *Not everyone* assents to these 'logical truisms' because children and idiots don't assent to them. Children don't know what the principle of non-contradiction is! They don't come out, kicking and screaming, with knowledge of logical truisms. So you *aren't* born with these innate ideas.

There is a problem for this counterargument. What do we mean by 'assent'? Maybe children *do* assent to logical truisms. They might not be able to talk about them, or answer the exercises from your logic course, but that

doesn't mean they don't assent to them. That is, their assent to them is non-verbal. Of course, there is now a burden of proof on the nativist to explain what, exactly, *would* demonstrate that they assented to these things. In what manner could we tell that children demonstrated assent to these principles?

3. In Favour of Innate Ideas

"Our soul always possesses the ability to represent to itself any nature or form when the occasion for thinking of it arises.[...] That requires our soul to have ideas of all those things at all times, which it can do only if ideas are abilities rather than individual mental or events or aspects or properties of such events." [DM 26]

What does that mean? Well, Leibniz had some *weird* beliefs. He thought that nothing that existed *causally interacted*. Instead everything was set in motion at the beginning of time by God. So for you to have thoughts and ideas they *had to be there already* i.e. innate. That's weird, but Leibniz did have more 'sensible' things to say *against* Locke.

Leibniz also thinks Locke is committed to innate ideas anyhow. Recall, for Locke not *every* idea comes from our senses. Instead we can get 'ideas from reflection'. So when our minds are messing around with ideas to make new ideas we can 'reflect' on these processes and get the ideas of thinking, doubting, reasoning, remembering etc. Leibniz argues that this is a commitment to innate ideas:

*"After devoting the whole of Essay Book I to rejecting innate illumination, understood in a certain sense, at the start of Book II and from there on he admits that some ideas don't originate in sensation and instead come from reflection. But to reflect is simply to attend to what is within us, and **something that we carry with us already is not something that came from the senses!** So it can't be denied that there is a great deal that is innate in our minds and didn't come through the senses, because we are **innate to ourselves**, so to speak."* [NE preface]

Leibniz's view of how to deal with Locke's problems was:

"I have also used the analogy of a veined block of marble as opposed to an entirely homogeneous one or to an empty page. If the soul were like an empty page, then truths would be in us in the way that the shape of Hercules is in an uncarved piece of marble that is entirely neutral as to whether it takes Hercules' shape or some other. Contrast that piece of marble with one that is veined in a way that marks out the shape of Hercules rather than other shapes. This latter block would be more inclined to take that shape than the former would, and Hercules would be in a way innate in it, even though it would take a lot of work to expose the veins and to polish them into clarity. This is how ideas and truths are innate in us - as inclinations, dispositions, tendencies, or natural potentialities, and not as actual thinkings, though these potentialities are always accompanied by certain actual thinkings, often insensible ones, which correspond to them." [NE, preface]

So in the same way that some blocks of marble might be disposed to be easier to turn into statues, so our minds are more disposed to have certain ideas. And *that*, says Leibniz, is what it is to have innate knowledge.

4. Back to Locke

Problem One: Innate Ideas can't be dispositions: Locke argues explicitly against such dispositional accounts of innate ideas. According to Locke, if we take the view that innate ideas are mere dispositions and capacities to understand things then *everything* turns out to be an innate idea. That is, if having an innate belief that P just consists in my capacity to come to know P, then *as for everything that I come to know I clearly have a capacity to know it* then **every** belief I **ever** have is innate. And surely that's just not what the nativist was aiming for. The nativist position was never that *all* beliefs were innate. They wanted some beliefs to be *special*, to be implanted by God. If *every* belief was 'innate' then no belief would be 'special'.

Problem Two: No unconscious ideas: Leibniz and Descartes think children *do* have innate ideas – but that they just might not recognise it (they might not be acting on the disposition to have a certain belief, in the same way that a vase may be disposed to break without actually breaking). Locke doesn't think that we can have innate ideas which we don't consciously recognise.

"[...] it seeming to me near a contradiction to say, that there are truths imprinted on the soul, which it perceives or understands not: imprinting, if it signify anything, being nothing else but the making certain truths to be perceived. For to imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible." [1.2.5]

Does that work? I'll again leave that one for you to mull over.