

# The Empiricists // Spring 2016

## Handout 1

### Locke: innate ideas

**WHAT IS AT STAKE.** Suppose that some of our ideas and beliefs are innate: they are in us from birth. This is *innatism*. One question that follows is, how come? And one answer to give is that, since we are created by God, those ideas and beliefs are given to us by God. Consequence: anyone who disputes those beliefs and refuses to acknowledge those ideas is either a heretic, or a fool, or a madman. Moreover, we can maintain something stronger, namely, that these are not mere beliefs, but knowledge itself. Descartes and certain English writers of the 17th century (Henry More) used innatism to establish mathematical knowledge. Our knowledge of geometry is not based on senses, and therefore, it should be based on already available principles—imprinted by God. Others (Stillingfleet and many others, possibly including Descartes again) used them to refute atheism. According to this line of argument, our idea of God is innate. Still others sought to establish moral knowledge.

On the whole Locke's motivation in debating innatism is twofold. In the first place, there is a practical dimension. Locke seeks to establish a basis for *religious toleration* and for rational debate in the matters of faith. There is little prospect for toleration if opponents can appeal to innate principles implanted by God. That, however, would not explain why the *Essay* begins with this particular discussion. So secondly, the greater motive is related to the general framework of *empiricism*. We gain knowledge through senses. The task of the *Essay* is to show how this is possible. Before we get on with this task, therefore, it is necessary to dismiss alternative explanations, such as innatism. E I.i.3

**THE MAIN ARGUMENT.** Locke begins by introducing the argument from universal consent. It serves as his main line of attack on innatism. The central claim is very simple: there are no propositions that are universally assented to. But before we evaluate this last claim, it is essential for us to get right the exact form of the argument. Consider this argument for innatism: E I.ii.2

- (1) If a proposition  $p$  commands universal assent, then  $p$  is innate.
- (2) A proposition  $p$  commands universal assent.
- (3)  $p$  is innate.

Suppose we reject, as Locke does, the minor premiss. We can cite various propositions (commonly held as innately true) and argue that they are not accepted universally. Very well; but this will prove nothing about their innateness! E I.ii.4

*Question 1.* Explain the last claim.

Locke's argument might be the following one:

- (1) If a proposition  $p$  is innate, then  $p$  commands universal assent.
- (2) But  $p$  does not command universal assent.
- (3) So  $p$  is not innate.

This is fine. But now the difficulty is exactly why the innatist should defend the major premiss of this second argument:

If  $p$  is innate, then  $p$  commands universal assent. (1-1) E I.ii.5

Notice that (1-1) does not feature in the innatist argument above. Consider, therefore, a different argument:

- (1) If a proposition  $p$  is innate, then  $p$  commands universal assent.
- (2)  $p$  commands universal assent.
- (3) So  $p$  is innate.

This is an invalid argument. Try this:

- (1) If a proposition  $p$  is innate, then  $p$  commands universal assent.
- (2)  $p$  is innate.
- (3) So  $p$  commands universal assent.

This is fine. But it has no use for the innatist, who wants to establish the innateness of  $p$  in the conclusion.

Perhaps, however, the statement (1-1) features in an *abductive* argument, and not in a deductive one. Here we begin with a piece of evidence and then bring up a theory that ostensibly explains it best. The innatist may be construed as saying the following:

- (1)  $p$  commands universal assent. (The body of evidence available.)

(2) If a proposition  $p$  is innate, then  $p$  commands universal assent. (The innatist hypothesis.)

(3) Probably,  $p$  is innate.

But it is implausible to represent the innatist as being concerned with explaining universal consent. The evidence of universal consent is brought in support of the thesis of innatism, rather than the reverse (the thesis of innatism being brought up in order to explain universal consent). In any event, however, Locke denies that innatism provides the best explanation of universal consent (if there were such a fact, that is).

E I.ii.3

A way out is to say that the innatist adopts the following principle:

If a proposition  $p$  is innate, there should be evidence available to us for judging it to be innate. (1-2)

And also, he should endorse the following:

In the body of evidence available to us for judging  $p$  to be innate should be the fact that  $p$  commands universal assent. (1-3)

Putting (1-2) and (1-3) together we get (1-1). This manoeuvre, I think, represents the best line of defence for Locke.

**THE LACK OF UNIVERSAL CONSENT.** Now, why would the innatist endorse anything like (1-3)? One reason apparently cited by Locke is that innate principles should be transparent. If ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is innate, then it is self-evident. If it is self-evident, then everyone should recognise its truth. Locke argues that no moral propositions (which are of great interest to the innatists) are self-evident.

E I.iii.4

*Question 2.* Identify Locke's strategy in arguing the last claim.

Perhaps, then, we should conclude that some theoretical propositions are self-evident. Now Locke seems to agree that some theoretical propositions *are* self-evident, but only to *some* people. They are not self-evident to children and mentally retarded ('ideots'), and so do not command universal assent.

E I.ii.5

**IDEAS AND PRINCIPLES.** We can distinguish between innatism about ideas and innatism about principles. Most of the time Locke addresses the latter, but on occasions he explicitly mentions the former as well. Innatism about principles entails innatism about ideas, but not *vice versa*.

E I.ii.5, I.ii.16

*Question 3.* Explain the logical relationship between these two forms of innatism.

Along with the argument from consent, Locke, therefore, claims that innatism about principles is false, since no ideas are innate. Call it the 'Composition argument'.

E I.iv.1

**DISPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE.** Most of Locke's opponents defended a 'dispositional' version of innatism. Innate ideas are not *always* present to the mind. They can be brought to mind under certain conditions. One such procedure is the notorious 'recollection' deployed in Plato's *Meno*. Locke argues that no idea can be in the memory unless the subject was once aware of it. Call it the 'Memory argument'. It is a weak argument. For all it shows is that innate ideas are not stored in memory; however, they perhaps are stored in 'schmemory', a capacity of the mind that works analogously to memory.

E I.iv.20

**PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES AND GOD.** Locke confronts dispositional innatism also in the context of morality. Here the opponent might claim that people brought up under the right conditions, not corrupted by custom and education (or harsh natural environment, we might add), would assent to the innate moral principles and frame their behaviour accordingly. Locke's response is that these principles will be discovered among those least affected by custom and possible corruption, such as children and savages. Yet we do not find them there. Similarly for the idea of God: we find many variations of this idea among different populations.

E I.iii.20

E I.iv.8

**INNATE PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE?** Having reviewed this host of arguments, one might reply that specific principles are not innate. But what about very general principles, such as causation and induction? Children and 'savages' are able to form inferences from past occurrences to the future ones. And they are able to find orderly causal patterns in the world around them, instead of inchoate flow of phenomena. Similarly, children may be able to distinguish between the ideas of external things and the ideas of imagination. Those general propensities would then be innate. Well, Locke will not deny this, so far as it only implies an innate capacity of learning. But such capacities will not entail knowledge. Even so, more research will have to be done that these inferential patterns are not acquired, very quickly, very early on.

E I.iv.22