

The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 2

Locke: innate ideas (cont.), taxonomy of ideas

DISCOVERY AND JUSTIFICATION. To the modern empiricist eye, the debate over innatism seems off target. We distinguish between the ways of discovering true propositions and justifying them. Since, according to empiricism, no idea is innate, no proposition can be discovered without experiential input. That, however, does not preclude the possibility that some propositions are justified without recourse to experience.

Example 1. Consider ‘Bachelors are unmarried men.’ Should anyone entertain the possibility that the idea of bachelorhood is innate? Unlikely! Still, the remaining unclear question is what path I take towards justifying it. I do not need to run through all instances of bachelors to know its truth. Should I then say that I know its truth *a priori*—that is, without any experiential input?

THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY. Suppose our evidence is as strong as to suggest that a certain principle *P* commands absolutely universal assent. Suppose, moreover, we can go as far as to say that *P* is implanted in our minds. What then? This will not entail the truth of *P*. We can only infer that a certain fact is true *of* the human species. There is a missing link between discovering how people think and react and how reality is.

Example 2. Suppose our findings suggest that absolutely every human believes that blue eyes are beautiful and that purple eyes are ugly (Plato’s example, by the way). It is rather grotesque to maintain that, because of this uniformity of opinion in the human species, blue eyes must *really* be beautiful. We would prefer a naturalist explanation: an evolutionary trait has developed that makes us strongly prefer blue-eyed people as sexual partners. Aesthetic judgements were developed to sustain that preference. Also, since purple-eyed people have never been encountered, evolution could not gain us knowledge whether purple eyes are beautiful, or whether their possessors are good sexual partners.

Example 3. As in our earlier discussion, suppose natural selection favoured those individuals who could identify regularities in the flow of their experiences, and so could identify ‘causes’ and ‘effects’. That of course is not at all sufficient for knowing that there *really* are causes and effects.

What makes the innatist argument tick is the hidden theological assumption that it was the good God, rather than anyone or anything else, that implanted innate ideas in us. This and the questions that follow (why? which?) put the discussion largely beyond the purview of philosophy.

BELIEF, KNOWLEDGE, CONVENTION. Supposing that I have ideas implanted in my mind, it does not entail my belief in any of the propositions containing them. These beliefs should be implanted separately. So what exactly does it mean to implant a belief? (Compare the film *Inception*.) If I remember that I had breakfast this morning, then I believe that I had tea this morning. As mentioned earlier, the innatist’s schmemory should operate analogously to memory not only in the way it stores ideas and thoughts, but also in the way it generates beliefs.

But in any event, the fact that I believe a proposition, and that this proposition is true, does not entail that I know it. I should be in possession of a way to justify it. Even supposing that God himself implanted the belief that *p* in my mind, would we say that *I* know that *p*? Would I not be like someone who is merely a Divine radio, a medium for transmitting certain propositions without being able to know them? No one, on this account, could implant the knowledge that *p* in me, unless I myself am able to generate justifications for my relevant belief. I cannot be a merely passive recipient of knowledge: to my knowledge is always attached the active capacity of justification.

E Liv.23

Is this true? Do I not know that air has oxygen, even though I am unable to perform various experiments to show that? Does my knowledge not extend beyond my daily life and the sub-sub-field of my chosen occupation? One response is to say that I do know much more, since I am able to exploit the knowledge of experts. I derive my belief about the air ultimately from chemistry experts who do have an actual capacity of justification. So the genetic conditions of my belief (the ways I acquired my belief) validate my knowledge. The same applies to the Divine belief implants. Yet this does not seem satisfactory. At most we have two senses of knowledge. The experts ‘really’ know, and I know in the secondary sense only.

Putnam on meaning

Some facts, however, essentially depend on the testimony of other agents. How do I know that Paris is the capital of France? Relevant experts (who exactly?) should be able to tell me. But more than this: if everyone in the world disagrees, Paris would not be the capital. Agreement here is constitutive of the fact. And what happens if some experts agree, and some disagree? E.g., some claim that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and some claim that Tel Aviv is, while others say that there is no Israel to begin with. So, *is* there a capital of Israel? If there is, what *is* it?

Clearly we are on to the reality and convention distinction. Even if everyone disagrees, two plus two is still four, is it not? So the innatist's gambit may be to deny that there is a pre-formatted, fixed reality on which God acts. All putatively realistic truths are in fact Divine conventions. That would allow God, if He existed, to implant in us nothing less than knowledge.

IDEAS. Having criticised innatism, Locke soon embarks on outlining his own account of how knowledge is possible. Excessive use is made of the term 'idea', and Locke is apologetic about it. He says that 'ideas' stand for any 'object of understanding' and also 'phantasms'. In short, an idea is any object of 'Perception, Thought, or Understanding'. This seems to bundle together such diverse things as qualia and concepts. Qualia are products and contents of consciousness. There is little resistance to saying that qualia are in the mind (unless, that is, you reject this notion altogether). It is more controversial to say that concepts are in the mind. You might rather think that concepts are abilities or rules.

E I.i.8

E II.viii.8

Kant,
Frege

E II.i.1

Be that as it may, we can say that (1) ideas are contents of our minds, (2) all ideas come from experience, and (3) ideas can be simple and complex. But while (4) ideas are bricks out of which knowledge is created, (5) it is wrong to say that all knowledge is justified by experience (that is, that all our knowledge is *a posteriori*). This is because in addition to *simple ideas* we draw from experience, (6) reflection manufactures its own *complex ideas*.

E II.i.2

E II.ii.2

Question 4. Can any complex idea be gained in sensation? Give a couple of examples.

YSB