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A Case for Dispositional Innatism

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Abstract

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke argues against the claim that there are innate ideas. His arguments consisted in the denial of universal assent, the incoherency of innate ideas, and the formation of principles by inductive means. In this paper, I attempt to show why these arguments do not work in showing that there are no innate ideas and also propose and defend Gottfried Leibniz's model of dispositional innatism — the claim that we are born with at least innate dispositions or tendencies to have particular beliefs. I use the ordinary conception of memories as a proper analogy for how innate ideas can exist in a mind even without the agent being aware of them, as well as how those ideas may vary in degree of innateness in the context of being dispositions. I then end by defending the claim that we are innately disposed to believe in a mind-independent world, despite there being *prima facie* contrary evidence from Jean Piaget's stages of development in his work on child psychology. Consequentially, this will allow for further exploration into what innate dispositions, in general, would entail in the development of minds and belief-forming for human beings.

Introduction

Innatism is the position which holds that human beings are born with innate ideas. Leibniz had defended a position that affirms a particular form of innatism, what one may call dispositional innatism. His work *New Essays on Human Understanding* was written as a response to Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which Locke puts forth arguments for his belief that all of our knowledge is attained *via* our experience and that the human mind at birth is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate void of any inborn ideas. It then follows that a refutation of Locke's position only requires that one prove the existence at least one innate idea. It remains worthwhile, however, to examine and evaluate Locke's arguments against innatism as well as Leibniz's own responses to them. In addition, it will be explored how *a priori* truths and beliefs without evidence pose a problem for Locke, how Leibniz's dispositional innatism may provide a more plausible view of the mind, and how the concept of memories may serve as an appropriate analogy for the relationship between an agent and her innate

ideas. The model for innate dispositions will also be further developed in response to an empirical objection to the claim that belief in a mind-independent world is dispositionally innate.

Universal Consent and Locke's Attack on Innatism

Locke's argument against innatism begins with an evaluation of one of the fundamental principles of innate ideas: the principle of universal consent. Locke appears to make an accurate distinction between two possible types of relationships that innate ideas may have with the principle of universal consent. He writes that the argument from universal consent fails in that "if it were true in matter of fact, that there were certain [innate] truths, wherein all mankind agreed, it would not prove them innate".¹ Here, Locke is justifiably rejecting that universal consent in an idea is a sufficient condition for that idea being innate. This, of course, is to be distinguished from the claim that universal consent is a necessary condition of any idea being innate, which Locke himself believes to be true.² Given that Locke himself believed that there is no universal assent among beliefs, it follows that he would not affirm the existence of innate ideas. Quite fittingly, Locke uses empirical means to support his claim that there is no universal assent, by noting that there are many humans, namely children and the mentally impaired, who do not have any knowledge or thoughts concerning principles which are typically considered to be innate. In addition, Locke acknowledges a response claiming that while children may appear to lack knowledge of these principles, these principles remain innate as they are "imprinted on the soul", and the children are merely not aware of them yet. Locke, however, finds this odd as it seems to him "near a contradiction, to say, that there are truths imprinted on the soul, which it perceives or understands not".³ While Locke concedes that one's capacity to discover these principles are innate, he asserts that this does not entail that the knowledge that one discovers is itself innate, but rather he believes that this knowledge is ultimately dependent on one's experience. To appeal to one's capacity or potential to discover these principles as reason to believe that these principles are innate themselves is problematic, Locke suggests. If one were to do so, then there would be "no difference between the maxims of the mathematicians, and the theorems they deduce from them," since both would be innate and attainable through the use of reason.⁴ This of course is strange to suggest, however, since it seems as though the theorems would have to be less accessible than the maxims or principles they are deduced from, which would make it odd to categorize both as being equally innate. According to Locke, this move

¹ Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter H. Nidditch Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. Book 1 Ch.2 §3.

² To clarify, Locke is merely rejecting the conditional, "if an idea possesses universal assent, then that idea is an innate idea," while affirming its converse, "if an idea is an innate idea, then that idea possesses universal assent."

³ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Book 1 Ch.2 §5.

⁴ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Book 1 Ch.2 §8.

would also not avoid the charge of contradiction made earlier, as it would still hold that before the use of reason, it would be said that one would know and not know these innate principles at the same time. Locke also argues that children do not know mathematical or logical truths without the understanding of the ideas or words concerning those truths. Further, children seem to learn of these principles through inductive means, such that they would know the proposition (to use Locke's example) "that an apple is not fire" through observation, before recognizing the principle which states that "it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be".

Leibniz's Response

While it's certain that Leibniz himself believed that there is universal assent among what he calls to be innate principles, it seems as if he focused more upon Locke's suggestion that a belief in the existence of innate ideas would entail a contradiction; namely that before attaining knowledge of the "innate" principles, one would both know and not know of those principles if they were indeed innate. Leibniz correctly recognizes a gaping flaw within Locke's argument however. Leibniz notes that before Locke came to his logical contradiction in proper form, in that it is both true that these innate principles could be known yet not be known, Locke had previously stated the claim of the innatists that one may be unaware of the innate principles in his or her mind before those principles are discovered and known. But it should be pointed out that in order for Locke to make the assertion that it is a contradiction, he must affirm that having an idea in one's mind is equivalent to that agent knowing that idea, so that it may be said that the agent both knows and does not know that idea. However, as Leibniz recognizes, it is possible that one's mind may possess an innate idea that the agent has no knowledge of. It is this which is implied when one makes the claim that an innate idea may exist in the minds of individuals who are not yet aware of them. To satisfy this claim, Leibniz puts forth his own examples of such ideas, as he suggests that there are habits and memories that people may possess, but are nevertheless unaware of.⁵ While an ordinary person may use empirical means to try help himself remember where he had left his keys, he only uses his senses and observations as ways to "jog up" his own memory, as if the location of his keys was somewhere hidden in his mind and that he was merely attempting to search his own mind for that memory. Therefore, there seems to be no reason why there wouldn't be an idea within the mind which one is not aware of. In his critique that children do not know mathematical or logical truths without the understanding of the ideas or words concerning those truths, it seems as though Locke is making another mistake, as it is clear that while children may not have knowledge of the syntax involved in mathematics and logic, it does not follow that they would not possess the semantic truths that those syntactic notions and words try to convey. While it's possible that a child knows of the proposition "an apple is not fire"

⁵ Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. and trans. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Preface 52.

before knowing the principle, explicitly stated, of which the proposition is based upon, it is still the case that the child must use the principle, and so it must be said that the child has at least indirect knowledge of the principle used. Leibniz had a similar response, as he suggested it possible that people use innate principles even if they aren't aware that they are using them.⁶

***A Priori* Truths and Beliefs Without Evidence**

When reflecting upon what are considered to be non-empirical beliefs, such as *a priori* truths or beliefs without evidence, it should be clear to one that Locke has a significant issue when it comes to accounting for all ideas on the basis of empiricism, especially considering he has motivations for suggesting that we can have knowledge of mathematics and logic, as well as knowledge of God's existence. The very nature of *a priori* truths asserts that they are capable of being discovered independent of experience. Now it may be proposed that simple mathematical truths still require experience to learn the terms applied to mathematical concepts, but as it has already been shown, this does not entail that a person does not possess the semantical truths concerning the principles used to discover other truths. Locke's empiricist account fails to refute the innatist position, for it seems possible still that one could have possession of certain truths before any experience at all, since there are certain truths that are attainable independent of experience. In addition, it seems as though Locke failed to account for the majority of the *a priori* truths which are necessary. Leibniz recognized this problem as well, as he claimed that necessary truths are accessible to both our own understanding and experience but their origin must be from our own minds, since one would not be able to be certain that some truths are necessary by mere inductive reasoning.⁷ Similarly, as Robert Adams noted, since Locke's method of proof is of course an empirical method, it seems impossible that he ever could be certain that there are no innate ideas. Adams states that "if his only justification for the empiricist principle is that he has not found any idea that fails to satisfy it, then the principle stands in danger of being refuted."⁸ It then seems as though using inductive means to account for necessary truths or to argue for the non-existence of innate ideas, at best, makes each undecidable like the validity of statements in first-order logic. It also is the case that Locke's disregard for innatism appears to be incompatible with some of the beliefs he holds. J.L. Mackie himself critiqued Locke's insistence that theological, ethical, and geometrical truths can be demonstrated empirically with certainty.⁹ Perhaps it's clear that Locke's belief that there are no innate ideas would be more fitting with the beliefs of someone like Mackie, an atheist famous for his belief that there exists no

⁶ Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Book I Ch. i 84.

⁷ Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Book I ch. i 75, 80.

⁸ Adams, Robert Merrihew. "Where Do Our Ideas Come From?", in *Innate Ideas*, ed. by Stephen P. Stich. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975. 85.

⁹ Mackie, J. L. *Problems from Locke*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976. Ch.7.

objective morality in his magnum opus, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Locke's empiricist account fails to explain how one could come to know that God exists or that there are objective moral truths, as well as how people come to believe in such things without evidence.

Leibniz and Hercules

While a case has been made against Locke's tabula rasa, it remains to be asked how innate ideas would fare, if it is indeed true that they exist. Since it seems rather strange to suggest that the ideas themselves are directly implanted in the mind, perhaps it is better to explore a less radical form of innatism. One such form is that of Leibniz's dispositional innatism. Leibniz paints a picture in his *New Essays*, representing truth as the shape of Hercules from a block of marble. Leibniz explains that if our minds were merely blank tablets, then we would have no reason to believe that the block of marble would necessarily take on the shape of Hercules, rather than any other shape. However, he claims that "if there were veins in the block which marked out the shape of Hercules rather than other shapes, then that block would be more determined to that shape and Hercules would be innate in it."¹⁰ Here, Leibniz is suggesting that innate ideas are innate by virtue of being dispositions and tendencies that human beings are born with. We are more disposed to hold particular beliefs, just as the block of marble, with its cracks or "veins", is more disposed to take on the shape of Hercules. While Locke acknowledged that human beings are born with the capacity to reason, dispositional innatism goes further as it maintains that some of our beliefs would not be ultimately dependent on our experience. Some beliefs, such as beliefs in logical truths or in the existence of God and a material world, are rather "built-in" in a sense, as we are predetermined or predisposed to arrive at those beliefs. With these dispositions, Leibniz had written that our minds have a "special affinity" with innate principles.

Memories, Degrees of Innateness, and Quasi-Universal Assent

In making use of Leibniz's example of memories, which had shown that there may be ideas in our minds that we are unaware of, it can be demonstrated how one of Locke's arguments makes a faulty assumption. I've made note of Locke's claim that the existence of innate ideas is dubious as it would make "no difference between the maxims of the mathematicians, and the theorems they deduce from them," since both are claimed to be innate despite maxims being more easily attainable than the theorems deduced from the. Here, however, Locke is making the assumption that all innate ideas are equally innate. This is by no means evident, and by analogy, it may be proposed that these ideas may vary in innateness as it is common to think of memories possessing varying degrees of memorableness. For example, it is easier to recall of more recent memories than that of older memories, and it is easier to recall of eventful memories

¹⁰ Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Preface 52.

than it is to recall ordinary memories. This can serve as a possible model to show that mathematical maxims are more easily attainable than the theorems deduced from them even if they are both innate. To use Leibniz's Hercules analogy, perhaps the ideas with higher degrees of innateness have more "veins" or cracks in the marble than those with lesser degrees of innateness, such that one is more pre-disposed to believe in the former than the latter. This may entail that either "higher" innate dispositions are more likely to be manifested than the "lesser" innate dispositions, or that they just manifest themselves earlier than the "lesser" innate dispositions.

It must be also explained why there appears to be a lack of universal assent in ideas that are often claimed to be innate. I propose this is due to the ability of humans to reject their own innate ideas or dispositions at some point of maturity in their lives. This may be comparable to how humans have sometimes shut out traumatic memories so much to the point that they no longer possess the memories they once had. Likewise, it is possible for humans to reject and remove themselves from the innate dispositions they once had. Let's suppose that if there are these innate dispositions, then the disposition to believe in the existence of a material world would be one of them. It seems strange to suggest that the idealist George Berkeley was an immaterialist even as a child. More plausibly, he only came to believe the world to be entirely mind-dependent by rejecting the belief he held as a child. Namely, he had rejected the belief in a material world that he was innately disposed to believe in. Therefore, the innatist should not be troubled by a lack of universal assent in beliefs held by mature individuals. It now appears as if innatism only requires that there is at least universal assent in some of the beliefs that humans are first disposed to, rather than requiring that there is universal assent in some beliefs of humans throughout the entire span of their lives. This leaves us with just quasi-universal assent as an essential property of a belief we are innate disposed to hold.

Objection: Piaget, Object Permanence, and Withholding Belief¹¹

I will now address an objection that has been raised concerning the Berkeleyian case I had constructed. My hope is not only to propose a solution to the problem but also to expand further upon how these innate dispositions would function within the mental development of human beings. By use of Piaget's famous stages of development in psychology, one may contest the claim I've made concerning George Berkeley being innately disposed to believe in a mind-independent world even though he had not believed so later on in his life. In his studies, Piaget claimed that children do not acquire object permanence — the ability to know that an object still exists when it is

¹¹ The following section was added to this paper after the objection was raised by an undergraduate from UCSB (my apologies for my inability to recall her name) during the Q&A session of my presentation of this paper at the 2017 Pacific University Undergraduate Philosophy Conference.

not seen — until around the age of eight months.¹² The objector here would note that Berkeley, like any other child, would not have come to believe in a mind-independent world before believing that objects do not exist once they disappear from one's sight. Therefore, belief in a mind-independent world is not something we are innately disposed to possess.

The objector, however, fails in this regard: There is nothing in those experiments that would entail that these children deny the existence of a mind-independent world before the age of eight months. While Piaget only insists that children acquire belief in a mind-independent world after eight months but not necessarily that they had believed the contrary beforehand. There may be a difference here between merely withholding belief and rejecting that belief, even within the concept of a dispositionally innate belief. This may be expressed as the following:

Let p represent a proposition that subject S is disposed to believe in. This entails that when first arriving to a position at which S must believe in either p or $not-p$, p 's negation, S will believe p . However, this does not entail that S *always* believed in p . It may be the case that before arriving to said position, S did not outright reject p by believing $not-p$, but rather by withholding belief from both, such that S believed neither p nor $not-p$.

One may compare this to a person lacking an opinion on an issue that the person has no knowledge of. A person, who has no knowledge of the issue of abortion or even of what abortion is, would most likely not commit to either the affirmative or negative position regarding the moral permissibility of abortion. Once the person gains substantive knowledge regarding the issue, perhaps then it would be appropriate for the person to place belief in one of the two positions. While it may be the case that one of either p or $not-p$ must be true, there seems to be no restriction or limit, epistemically, for a person to *have* to believe in either one of those options, especially when it comes to matters he or she has no knowledge of. As it pertains to belief, the person can take on a third option, which is to believe in neither p nor $not-p$. We can now attempt to properly define what it would mean for a belief to be derived from an innate disposition. A definition may be as follows:

x is a belief humans are innately disposed to iff humans, if in the position to believe either x or its negation, would first believe x before ever having believed its negation.

It's worthy to note that, as already addressed with the proposed quasi-universal assent, a person may later reject a belief he was innately disposed to have. This working definition allows for such to happen, and it also allows for there to be a period before

¹² Piaget, Jean. *The Psychology of Intelligence*. Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield Adams.1963.

acquiring the belief one is innately disposed to have, in which one holds neither that belief nor the opposing belief. To not believe in something is not necessarily to believe in the contrary. An infant, before acquiring object permanence, perhaps does not have ability to full grasp or understand the concept of an external object being perceived by one's mind. In fact, Piaget's studies show that object permanence is only possible once the infant gains the ability to form mental representations of objects in the mind when the objects are no longer in sight.¹³ The acquisition of this ability is the point at which the infant first has the option to believe in mind-independent objects, and if that is a belief the infant is innately disposed to possess, then that will naturally be the case. Therefore, it still is consistent to suggest that we have innate dispositions to hold particular beliefs, even if those beliefs are acquired after birth and are rejected at a later, more mature point in one's life.

Conclusion

It has now been put forth how John Locke's arguments fail in refuting innatism and why the existence of innate ideas, or rather innate dispositions, is more plausible than suggesting that our ideas and knowledge are attained exclusively from experience. A possible model utilizing Leibniz's analogy and the ordinary conception of memories has also been proposed to show how a person's mind may possess innate principles without the person being aware of them, as well as how ideas formed from innate dispositions may differ in their "degree" of innateness. An objection from Piaget's stages of development was also made against the existence of an innate disposition to believe in a mind-independent world, which yielded a response concerning the role of innate dispositions in the mental development of children, providing a coherent solution to defend belief in a mind-independent world as a belief we're innately disposed to possess.¹⁴

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¹⁴ I would like to thank Jordan Bell for his helpful comments and our discussion regarding this paper, as well as those at the Pacific University Undergraduate Philosophy Conference who had participated in the discussion following the presentation of this paper.

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