Concept innatism

Concept innatism argues that some of our concepts are innate. This means that not all concepts are derived from experience; some are somehow part of the structure of the mind.

LOCKE’S ARGUMENTS AGAINST INNATE CONCEPTS

Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Bk 1, Ch 4

It is an important part of Locke’s argument that whatever concepts we have, we are conscious of. Furthermore, he assumes - and everyone in the debate agrees - that innate concepts must be universal - every human being has them. If we put these two thoughts together, an innate concept must be one that every human being is or has been conscious of.

Locke gives three main reasons for rejecting the existence of innate concepts, given his definition of what they are:

1. If we observe new-born babies, we have no reason at all to think that they have any concepts beyond, perhaps, ones deriving from their experience in the womb, such as WARMTH and PAIN (§2). Certainly, we can’t think that such advanced concepts as IDENTITY or IMPOSSIBILITY are concepts babies are familiar with and conscious of. (Locke chooses these examples because innatists argue that ‘It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be’ is innate knowledge.)

2. Another favourite of innatism is the concept of GOD. But not only is this not a concept that babies have, it is not a concept that all human beings have - whole societies, historically, have been atheist (§8). The concept of GOD is not innate, but learned by children from their teachers (§13).

3. The only way a concept can be part of the mind without the mind being conscious of it is if it is lodged in memory (§20). To remember something is to have been conscious of it in the past. If you aren’t remembering a concept, then it is new to your mind - arising from some impression of sensation or reflection. Innate ideas would have to be neither remembered nor new. How could there be such a thing?

Rejecting Locke’s definition

Defenders of innate concepts reject Locke’s claim that it is impossible for concepts to exist ‘in the mind’ unless we are or have been conscious of them. Innate concepts are concepts which cannot be gained from experience, and arguments defending innatism try to show that experience cannot explain how we have or use the concept. Experience is necessary to trigger our development of the concept, but it is not sufficient to explain our having the concept.
The idea of experience ‘triggering’ the concept needs to be understood carefully. The claim is not that we simply have the capacity to form the concept. Rather, we are predisposed to form just this concept, which we cannot form on the basis of experience alone.

On this understanding of innate concepts, it is no objection that babies don’t have the relevant concept of GOD or IDENTITY - it needs to be triggered by experience before it develops.

**Leibniz, New Essays Concerning Human Understanding, Bk 1, Ch 3**

Leibniz’s defence of innate concepts begins with the argument just made. He accepts Locke’s claim that innate knowledge requires innate concepts. Therefore, if we want to say that ‘It is impossible for the same thing to be and not be’ is innate knowledge, we will have to say that concepts such as IDENTITY and IMPOSSIBILITY are innate (p. 32). But, to answer Locke’s first objection, this means that we have, from birth, the disposition to form these concepts. Indeed, they are essential to all thought, even though it takes time for us to make them explicit in our thinking.

In answer to Locke’s second objection, Leibniz points out that to lack the word for God is not to lack the concept of GOD (p. 33). Some societies have no word for ‘being’, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have thoughts that use the concept. Again, it may take considerable work of reflection to develop the concept of GOD and know that God exists (Ch. 1, p. 18). We are disposed, from our experience of nature, to develop the idea of a higher power. But this isn’t yet the full concept of GOD as we have it. Our experience triggers a concept that goes beyond it; our minds are ‘receptive’ to the idea of God.

In answer to Locke’s third objection, Leibniz argues that innate concepts exist as dispositions in the mind (p. 33) - so neither new, in the sense of originating outside the mind, nor remembered.

**PROPOSED EXAMPLES OF INNATE CONCEPTS**

In this section, we’ll look at examples of innate concepts from Leibniz, Plato and Descartes.

**Leibniz, New Essays Concerning Human Understanding, Preface, Bk 1**

Leibniz gives a number of examples of ideas that he claims are innate. His longest list is in the Preface. On p. 4, he comments on Locke’s division of concepts into those that originate in sensation and those that originate in reflection, which Leibniz calls ‘intellectual ideas’. He comments ‘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’. Thus, he says the concepts of BEING, UNITY, SUBSTANCE, DURATION, CHANGE, ACTION, PERCEPTION, and PLEASURE are all innate, because we are ourselves beings, unities, substances, that endure through time, that change, act, perceive and experience pleasure. In fact, all the concepts we acquire through reflection can be called ‘innate’. (He reaffirms the claim for BEING on p. 24 and for SUBSTANCE on p. 33.)
However, reflecting on our own nature cannot be a general explanation for all innate concepts, e.g. some concepts involved in necessary truths, such as IMPOSSIBILITY, and concepts from geometry, such as SQUARE (p. 23). If these are innate, it is not because I am impossible or a square! It must be something to do with their role in innate knowledge.

Plato on universals
Plato provides an argument for the claim that very many concepts are innate. Whatever we experience through sense experience is a particular thing. We see this red bus, that green apple, and so on. We never experience ‘redness’ per se, but only ever this or that example of redness. Or, changing the example to something more complex, when we experience something beautiful, we experience this or that instance of beauty. Red and beauty are properties of things. Some philosophers think of properties as ‘universals’ - something that different particular things can have in common (red bus, red pillar box, beautiful melody, beautiful painting).

How do we acquire concepts of universals? Beauty is a property that more than one thing can have. If many different things can be beautiful, then there is something they share in common, viz. beauty. We only ever experience this particular beautiful thing or that particular beautiful thing, but, argues Plato, we never experience beauty itself (Republic, Book V, 476f.). So how can we acquire the concept?

Furthermore, our concept of BEAUTY is a concept of a kind of perfection. But everything that we experience through our senses is imperfect. Nothing is perfectly beautiful - it is always not beautiful in some way or at some time. So how could we have derived the concept of BEAUTY from experience?

Plato provides another example in the Phaedo. In judging that two sticks are of equal length, we use an idea of EQUAL that we cannot have gained from experience. Nothing is exactly equal in experience, but only ‘almost equal’. But the concept ALMOST EQUAL contains the concept EQUAL. So where does it come from? (We can give the same argument for Leibniz’s examples of SQUARE and CIRCLE. We never experience a perfect square or circle.) Plato argues that if we do not learn our concepts of universals from experience, we must already have them - they are innate. We are able to classify our experiences, e.g. that two sticks are equal, by comparing them our innate concept of EQUAL. And the same is true for judging that things manifest BEAUTY or not.

Descartes on the concept of a physical object
How do we come to have the concept of SUBSTANCE, of something that continues to exist as one and the same thing through time, that possesses properties but is not reducible to properties, because while its properties change, it remains the same thing? We have two particular concepts of substance, viz. PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE (physical objects) and MENTAL SUBSTANCE (minds or selves). Do these concepts come from sense experience or are they innate?
We saw above that Leibniz thinks that I derive the concept (MENTAL) SUBSTANCE simply from my being a substance. Descartes also argues that I know I am a substance by reflection on myself. What about PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE - the idea of a physical object?

*Descartes, Meditation II, pp, 6-8*

Descartes discusses the concept of a physical object when discussing the nature of his mind. He has argued that ‘sensing’ is just sensory experiences - whether physical objects are the cause of these experiences is not clear and distinct. This is puzzling, so he considers perceptual experiences further, focusing on the example of perceiving a piece of wax (p. 6). His question is, ‘exactly what is it that I think a piece of wax, as a physical object, is?’ (In the argument that follows, ‘imagination’ is the faculty that deals with images, including those derived from sense experiences.)

1. When I melt a piece of wax, it loses all of its original sensory qualities (the particular taste, smell, feel, and shape it has).
2. Yet I believe it is the same wax.
3. Therefore, what I think of as the wax is not its sensory qualities.
4. What I think is the wax is what remains through the changes of its sensory qualities.
5. This is a body, something that is extended, i.e. has size and shape and takes up space, and changeable, i.e. its sensory and spatial properties can change (p. 7).
6. I know that the wax can undergo far more possible changes, including changes in its extension, than I can imagine.
7. Therefore, my concept of the wax as extended and changeable does not derive from my imagination (and therefore it does not derive from perceptual experiences).
8. Therefore, I ‘perceive' (comprehend) the wax as what it is (as opposed to its sensory qualities) by my mind alone.
9. Only this thought of the wax, and not the perceptual experience of it, is clear and distinct.

Descartes finishes by commenting that the wax he comprehends by his understanding is the same wax that is presented by images from the senses. Although we say we ‘see’ the wax (through vision), in fact we judge (through understanding) that it is present from what we see.

Descartes’ question is not about the wax itself, but about his experience, knowledge and concept of it. This is shown by his comment, on p. 8, that ‘What I see might not really be the wax; perhaps I don’t even have eyes with which to see anything.’ He doesn’t, in Meditation II, know that there are physical objects. But he knows he has experiences of them. And it is this - his concept of what he experiences - that he is exploring. The argument is intended to show that the concept of a physical object does not derive from sense experience, but is part of the understanding. We can now add that this means that it is innate.

Descartes only turns to the question of whether anything corresponds to our concept of PHYSICAL OBJECT in Meditation V. He argued, in Meditation III, that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true. His concept of PHYSICAL
OBJECT, refined by the wax argument to mean a body that is extended and changeable, is clear and distinct. Therefore, it is a coherent concept and if physical objects exist, then they are indeed extended and changeable.

CONCEPT EMPIRICIST ARGUMENTS AGAINST CONCEPT INNATISM

Alternative explanations
Because empiricists reject innate concepts, they must argue that the examples of concepts given above are not, in fact, innate. The syllabus indicates two ways of doing this. First, they can argue that the concept is, in fact, derived from experience. Second, they can argue that there is ‘no such concept’. In fact, this second objection cannot work - clearly the concept exists. But empiricists can try to show that the concept is incoherent, the result of some kind of mental error. This would explain its origin as neither derived from experience nor innate. We shall take the examples discussed in the handout ‘Concept innatism’ in turn.

1. Leibniz
Locke can rightly object that reflection upon what I am does not establish innate concepts. My existence and my ability to perceive are innate, but that doesn’t mean that the concepts of SUBSTANCE and PERCEPTION are innate. Locke argues that we must first experience our own mind and its activities (in reflection) to develop the concepts - hence they are not innate. It is a confusion to argue that because we derive the concepts from our mental activities that we do not therefore derive them from experience.

2. Plato
For Plato’s universals, Locke and Hume can reply that they are derived by abstraction from experience. They can argue, for example, that the concept ALMOST EQUAL does not contain the concept EQUAL. Instead, ALMOST-EQUAL is a simple concept derived from sense experience of comparing objects. For instance, we have experiences of two sticks not being the same length. We form the concept EQUAL (as in equal length) by abstracting from the experience of differing lengths - two sticks are equal when they differ by no length. The concept BEAUTY is likewise an abstraction from what beautiful things have in common.

3. Substance: mind
It may be that I am a substance. But this isn’t doesn’t entail that I can derive the concept of SUBSTANCE from myself by reflection. I need to experience myself in reflection as a substance. Berkeley argues that we do, that we can have a ‘notion’, and so a concept of MENTAL SUBSTANCE or MIND. I am not only aware of my mental activities, but aware of my mind as that which is active in thinking, perceiving and willing. So I am aware that my mind is not reducible to the activities themselves. So, Berkeley argues, we can derive the concept of SUBSTANCE from our own minds, but the concept is not innate, as it is derived from our experience of ourselves.

4. Substance: physical objects
Empiricists can make a number of objections to Descartes’ argument regarding the concept of PHYSICAL OBJECT.
a. They can argue that the concept of extension, as a primary quality, must derive from our sense experience, both vision and touch. We can form it by abstraction from our many changeable experiences. Such abstraction may require the operation of the understanding, but that is allowed on an empiricist account of the origin of concepts. Descartes' inference from (6) to (7) needs further support.

b. Berkeley also argues that the concept PHYSICAL OBJECT cannot be a concept of mind-independent SUBSTANCE, some thing that persists through changes, as Descartes claims in (4). We do not experience physical substances, only their primary and secondary properties, and both are mind-dependent. That anything exists beyond these changeable properties is not an idea that sense experience supports. But rather than conclude that the concept is innate, we should conclude that it is confused.

_Hume on substance and self_

Hume develops this last objection further (Treatise on Human Nature, Bk 1, Part 4, §2). The concept of a PHYSICAL OBJECT is the concept of something independent of experience existing in 3-dimensional space. But how can experience show us that something exists independently of experience? I see my desk; a few moments later, I see it again. If my two experiences are of one and the same desk, then the desk existed when I wasn’t looking at it. But I don’t experience the desk existing when I’m not looking at it. So how do I arrive at the idea that it is one and the same desk, which has persisted through time even when I wasn’t experiencing it? My experience only provides the information that my two experiences of the desk are very similar. The desk as I first experience it is very similar, perhaps exactly similar, to the desk as I experience it the second time. But similarity, even exact similarity, is not quantitative identity. Being qualitatively identical is not the same as being numerically identical. (For example, two people can sit comfortably on identical chairs, but they can’t sit comfortably on one and the same chair.) My sense experience can only provide the concept of a physical object that is numerically identical (with itself) while I am experiencing it.

Hume applies the same argument to the concept of the SELF or MENTAL SUBSTANCE (Treatise on Human Nature, Bk 1, Part 4, §5). He disagrees with Descartes, Leibniz and Berkeley: We don’t experience a continuing substance over time, we only experience a continually changing array of thoughts and feelings. Even if we experienced thought as active, as Berkeley maintains, how does experience enable us to move to the claim that I am one and the same active substance, persisting through time and different thoughts?

So far, Hume has argued that we cannot derive the concepts of MENTAL or PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE from our experience. If he is right, then we could argue that both concepts must be innate. After all, we do have the concept of SUBSTANCE as something that persists through change, and we have the concepts of PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE and MENTAL SUBSTANCE. If we don’t get them from experience, they must be innate.

But Hume takes his argument to show that both concepts of SUBSTANCE are confused, rather than innate. In coming up with the concept of a PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE that exists independently of my experiences, I have confused similarity
with identity. How does this happen? Our perceptions of physical objects exhibit constancy: if I look at my desk and then shut my eyes and open them again, the desk looks exactly how it did before. On the basis of this similarity, the mind simply has a tendency to imagine that what I see after I open my eyes is not just similar but identical to what I saw before I close my eyes. The origin of the idea of that the two experiences are of something identical - something that exists between and independent of perceptions - is the imagination. The imagination creates the idea of identity is similarity and unity (the idea of an individual thing, being ‘one’), both of which we can derive from experience. But there is nothing in experience that matches this concept.

A similar story applies in the case of MENTAL SUBSTANCE or SELF. We’ve confused the similarity of our thoughts and feelings from one moment to the next with the identity of a ‘thing’ to which such mental states belong. The concept is not innate, it is confused.

We can object that Hume’s theory makes our commonsense idea of the world wrong. If we are to avoid scepticism, we must either find a way to derive these concepts from experience or accept that they are innate.

**INNATE CONCEPTS AND THE NON-NATURAL**

If we don’t acquire innate concepts from experience, then how are they already part of the mind? Plato, Descartes and Leibniz argue that our thought and experience cannot be explained without innate concepts, and argue from there to their theories about the mind or the existence of God. But there may also be at least some innate concepts, such as PHYSICAL OBJECT, that we can explain empirically in terms of evolution.