Locke vs Leibniz on innate knowledge

Knowledge innatism argues that there is at least some innate knowledge. Exactly what ‘innate’ means in this context is disputed. But the claim is that some knowledge is part of the mind, already ‘in’ the mind from birth, rather than gained from experience. If there is any innate knowledge, it cannot be a posteriori, but must be a priori.

LOCKE, AN ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING, BK 1, CH 1-3

Locke’s arguments against innate knowledge

Locke argues that we have no innate knowledge. He begins by asking how we acquire our ideas. By ‘idea’, he means ‘whatever it is that the mind can be employed about in thinking’ (Bk 1, Ch. 1, §8). Or again, an ‘idea’ is any ‘immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding’ (Bk 2, Ch. 8, §8). So he uses the word to cover a very wide range of mental phenomena. An idea can be

1. a complete thought, taking the form of a proposition, e.g. ‘bananas are yellow’;
2. a sensation or sensory experience, e.g. a visual sensation of yellow; or
3. a concept, e.g. ‘yellow’.

Our focus here is on proposition (1), as these are what we can know or not know.

Locke understands innate ideas as ‘thoughts printed on to the soul at the point of existence, which it brings into the world with it’ (Bk 1, Ch. 2, §1). As examples of potential innate knowledge, taken from the debate at the time, he offers ‘Whatever is, is’ and ‘It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be’. (Empiricists can accept that these claims are a priori if they are analytic - which arguably, they are. However, Locke’s target here is specifically with the claim that they are innate.) He assumes that innate knowledge must be universal - every human being has it (§3). However, he immediately objects, that just because some claim is universally accepted, that doesn’t mean it is innate - it may be that we could explain in some other way why everyone agrees. His argument against innate knowledge is this:

1. If there is innate knowledge, it is universal. (§3)
2. For an idea to be part of the mind, Locke says, the mind (the person) must know or be conscious of it: ‘it seems to me nearly a contradiction to say that there are truths imprinted on the soul that it doesn’t perceive or understand. No proposition can be said to be in the mind which it has never known or been conscious of.’ (§5)
3. Therefore, innate knowledge is knowledge that every human being is or has been conscious of.
4. Children and ‘idiots’ do not know theorems in geometry or ‘It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be’. (They do not know these claims, because
they do not understand them.) (§4) (By ‘idiots’, Locke means people with severe learning disabilities.)
5. Therefore, these claims are not innate.
6. There are no claims that are universally accepted, including by children and ‘idiots’.
7. Therefore, there is no innate knowledge.

What if we redefine as ‘innate’ any knowledge that we can gain? Locke objects that this is a misuse of the term (§5) - everything we come to know, including through sense experience, will be innate! What we should say is that the capacity for knowledge is innate. This is true - we are born with the ability to know things - but it doesn’t mean that there is innate knowledge. Compare: the capacity to see (vision) is innate, but that doesn’t mean that what we see is innate as well!

A third definition: Innate knowledge is what everyone knows and agrees to when they gain the use of reason (§6). But why think that what we can discover by reasoning is innate? If the knowledge is innate, and so we already have it, why do we need to ‘discover’ it (§§8-10)? But even if we grant the definition, there is still no innate knowledge, because children can reason before they understand mathematical and logical truths.

A fourth definition: innate knowledge is gained at some point after the use of reason (§13). This is hopeless - it doesn’t mark off innate knowledge from all kinds of other knowledge, including what we learn from sense experience.

A fifth definition: innate knowledge is assented to promptly as soon as it is understood (§§17-18). It is ‘self-evident’. But there are many such claims that rely on sense experience, e.g. ‘white is not black’. So they can’t be innate. We can explain the rapid agreement in other terms, viz. that the proposition is analytic (and obvious).

In Ch. 3, Locke makes similar arguments regarding the possibility of innate moral knowledge. In particular, he argues that there are no moral principles that everyone agrees to (§2); and that if moral principles were innate, they would be self-evident, so that asking for reasons would be ‘absurd’, but as it is, we can always legitimately ask for reasons supporting a moral rule (§4).

In Ch. 4, Locke provides a further argument against innate knowledge. To have innate knowledge requires that one has the concepts involved in the proposition one knows (§1). If we first had to acquire the concepts, then the knowledge can’t be innate. But there are no innate concepts.

**LEIBNIZ, NEW ESSAYS CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING, BK 1, CH. 1-2**

Leibniz wrote his *New Essays* as a commentary on and response to Locke. I shall comment on the argument by theme, rather than in the order in which Leibniz introduces his ideas. The argument starts on p. 16. Leibniz accepts, for now, the distinction between ‘mental content’ (knowledge, beliefs, experiences, etc.) that
comes from the senses and mental content that doesn’t. His defence of innate knowledge rests on three central claims:

1. We can know things without being conscious of them. Locke is wrong to claim that an idea can only be in the mind if we are conscious of it. (p. 18)
2. There is an important distinction between necessary and contingent truth. Necessary truths are a priori and innate, while ‘truths of fact’ are a posteriori (p. 17).
3. Innate knowledge exists as ‘a disposition, an aptitude, a preformation’ in the mind towards developing, understanding and knowing certain thoughts (p. 21).

Unconscious knowledge
On p. 18, Leibniz picks up Locke’s example of ‘It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be’, and rejects Locke’s claim that this is not universally accepted. Everyone uses this knowledge all the time, but ‘without explicitly attending to it’. Indeed, we can’t really think without it, since it is needed to distinguish the concept of one thing from the concept of something different. ‘General principles [such as the example given] enter into our thoughts, serving as their inner core and as their mortar. Even if we give no thought to them, they are necessary for thought. The mind relies on these principles constantly’ (p. 23).

This claim entails that knowledge can be unconscious. But this shouldn’t be controversial. Memory ‘stores’ ideas and usually, but not always, retrieves them when we need them. This shows two things: we can know things without being conscious of them; and retrieving this knowledge can need assistance. So even Locke, who says that an idea can only be part of the mind if it is something the person can be conscious of, must accept that there is nothing impossible about unconscious knowledge.

Locke can reply that this is true, but irrelevant to the question of innate knowledge, because in memory, we are recalling what has been conscious. But why accept that what is unconscious must always have once been conscious or gained from experience (p. 20)? Why think that we can know everything about our minds straight away?

With this argument, Leibniz has responded to Locke’s objection that no knowledge is universal. But as Locke also commented, that is not yet enough to show that the universal knowledge is innate. Leibniz’s second argument provides a reason to think that it is.

Necessary truth
On p. 19, Leibniz tackles Locke’s objections to his third definition of ‘innate knowledge’. He distinguishes between necessary and contingent truths and then argues that all necessary truths are innate. He argues that experience cannot give us knowledge of necessary truths (p. 21). Why so?

First, the distinction. A proposition is necessary if it must be true (if it is true), or must be false (if it is false). Mathematical propositions are necessary: $2 + 2$ must equal 4; it is not possible (logically or perhaps mathematically possible) for $2 + 2$ to equal any other number. A proposition that could be true or false is contingent.
Of course, it will be either true or false, but the world could have been different. It is true that you are reading this handout; but you could have been doing something else - it could have been false.

Leibniz points out that our sense experience only provides us with information about particular instances - that these two apples and these two apples make four apples; that this triangle has internal angles that add up to 180°; and so on. But ‘however many instances confirm a general truth, they aren’t enough to establish its universal necessity’ - because how things are doesn’t tell us how things must be. If we reject this, and argue that ‘2 + 2 = 4’ is just a generalization of our experience so far, then we are saying that it is possible, one day, that 2 + 2 will equal some other number. But this is inconceivable. So, we should say that mathematical knowledge is a priori, established through reasoning alone. So, whatever turns out to be a necessary truth must be known through a priori reasoning.

Now, because these truths are not conscious, we need to discover them. We do so by attending to ‘what is already in our minds’, and Leibniz approvingly cites Plato’s example in *Meno*. In fact, in a broad sense of ‘innate’, all the knowledge we gain by a priori reasoning from ‘basic’ innate knowledge can also be called innate.

This doesn’t mean, however, that we can discover our innate knowledge without any sense experience. We need sense experience in order to form abstract thoughts, we rely on words, letters, sounds, which we learn from experience. That makes sense experience necessary but not sufficient.

Leibniz makes a similar point about sense experience when talking about God (p. 18). He accepts that many aspects of the knowledge of God could be gained from teaching. But our experience of the universe doesn’t bring us ‘the whole way to the idea of God that we have and require’. If nothing else, we have a prior inclination, a receptivity, to the idea of God. (This will lead to Leibniz’s third main claim.)

Leibniz’s response to Locke’s fifth definition of innate knowledge also draws on the distinction between necessary and contingent truth (p. 22). Claims like ‘white is not black’ aren’t innate, it is true. But it is an application of a necessary truth that is innate, viz. ‘It is impossible for the same thing to be and not be at the same time’, to particular cases and concepts acquired from sense experience.

Locke might object that the particular cases, such as ‘white is not black’ are known before the abstract principle. Leibniz responds that in the particular cases, we unconsciously deploy our knowledge of the abstract principle that something can’t both be and not be at the same time.

**Innate knowledge as a disposition**

On p. 20, Leibniz tackles Locke’s second definition of ‘innate knowledge’, that it is merely a capacity for knowledge. While innate knowledge does not exist ‘fully formed’ or explicitly in our minds, it is more than mere capacity. In gaining knowledge of necessary truths, the mind needs to actively engage with itself,
albeit at the prompting of sense experience. Thus, he says on p. 24, ‘The actual knowledge of [necessary truths] isn’t innate. What is innate is what might be called the potential knowledge of them, as the veins of the marble outline a shape that is in the marble before they are uncovered by the sculptor.’ Because it takes work to uncover what is within us, we should say that innate knowledge is learned. But the point is that we don’t learn it from sense experience.

**Morality**

In Ch. 2, Leibniz applies these ideas to moral knowledge. Innate moral principles are ones that we know through reasoning. However, in addition, we have an unclear sense of them through ‘instinct’, such as the instinct to ‘pursue joy and flee sorrow’. Moral knowledge is especially difficult to come to know, because it can conflict with our desires, which leads us to conceal what we know from ourselves. Hence the fact that people behave badly is no proof against universal, innate moral knowledge. Geometry would be disputed and violated as much if it conflicted with what we wanted as well!