



V71LAR Locke, Appearance and Reality

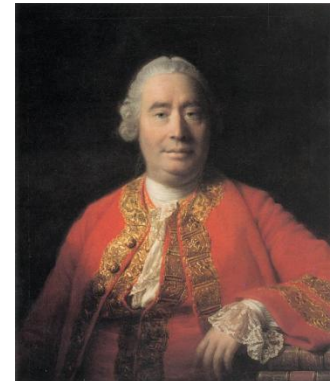
TOPIC 1: DO HUMANS POSSESS
INNATE IDEAS? Continued...

A. The Great Argument

- *The innate concept/principle thesis:* We have some concepts/principles as part of our rational nature. (Wall calls this the 'psycho-genetic' claim.)



Rationalists



Empiricists



A. The Great Argument, ctd.

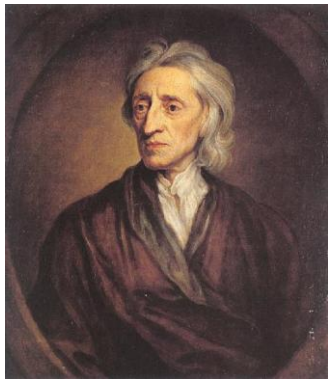
- 1) If a principle is universally accepted then it is innate (as are the ideas that make it up).
- 2) There are some principles which are universally accepted.
 - Law of (non-)contradiction: "tis impossible for the same thing to be and not to be" (I.ii.4)
 - "Whatever is, is" (I.ii.4)
 - "One should do unto others as he would be done unto" (I.iii.4)
 - "It is your duty to cherish your children" (I.iii.12)

Therefore

- 3) These principles (and the ideas that make them up) are innate.

B. Locke's criticisms of the Great Argument

- On (1): "If it were true as a matter of fact, that there were certain true principles, wherein all mankind agreed, it would not prove them innate, if there can be another way be shown, how men come to that universal agreement, which I presume may be done." (I.ii.3)
- On (2): "For... 'tis evident, that children, and idiots, have not the lease apprehension or thought of [these principles]: and the want of that is enough to destroy that universal assent." (I.ii.5)



C. Locke's attacks on the innate concept/principle thesis, ctd.

- Locke's first attack (I.ii.4-5, 24 & I.iii.1)
- 4) If there were innate principles then they would be universally accepted.
- 5) There are no principles that are universally accepted.
Therefore
- 6) There are no innate principles
- "To conclude this argument of universal consent, I agree with those defenders of innate principles, that if they are innate, they must needs have universal assent...But then, by these men's own confession, they cannot be innate, since they are not assented to, by those who understand not the terms...nor by [those who] never...thought of those propositions..." (I.ii.24)

C. Locke's attacks on the innate concept/principle thesis, ctd.

- Crucial both to Locke's criticism of the Great Argument and his first attack on the innate concept/principle thesis is the claim that there are no universally accepted principles 'in the mind' (premise 5). Is this right?



C. Locke's attacks on the innate concept/principle thesis, ctd.

- "...it seeming to me near a contradiction to say that there are truths imprinted on the soul which it perceives or understands not; imprinting, if signifying anything, being nothing else but the making truths to be perceived. For to imprint anything on the mind without the mind perceiving it, seems to be hardly intelligible." (I.ii.5)
- *Strong Transparency Principle*: A principle is in the mind if and only if it is being consciously entertained.
- Problem: Memory

C. Locke's attacks on the innate concept/principle thesis, ctd.

- *Weak Transparency Principle*: A principle is in the mind if and only if it has been consciously entertained at some point in the past.
- “No proposition [principle] can be said to be in the mind, which it never yet knew, which it was never conscious of” (I.ii.5 – makes a similar claim for grasping ideas at I.iv.20).
- Problem: Tacit or implicit acceptance
- Locke's reply: “If it be said, the understanding has an *implicit knowledge* of these principles...it will be hard to conceive what is meant...unless it be this, that the mind is capable of understanding and assenting firmly to such propositions. And thus all mathematical demonstrations, as well as first principles, must be received as native impressions on the mind: which, I fear, they will scarce allow them to be...” (I.ii.22)

C. Locke's attacks on the innate concept/principle thesis, ctd.

- Locke's second attack: the 'adequacy of the stimulus' argument.
- "All those sublime thoughts, which tower above the clouds, and reach as high as heaven itself, take their rise and footing here: in all that great extent wherein the mind wanders, in those remote speculations, it may seem to be elevated with, it stirs not one jot beyond those *ideas*, which sense or reflection, have offered for its contemplation." (II.i.24, see also II.ii.2)
- E.g. The idea of *infinity*: "Everyone, that has any idea of any stated lengths of space, as a foot, finds that he can repeat the idea...the power of enlarging his idea of space by farther additions, remaining still the same, he hence takes the idea of infinite space." (II.xvii.3)
- ...of God (II.xxiii.33)
- ...of Causation (II.xxvi)
- ...of Substance (II.xxiii) – see Topic 4.

D. Modern defences of the innate concept/principle thesis

- Tacit acceptance:
- “I have made use also of the comparison of a block of marble which has veins, rather than that of a block of marble wholly even, or of blank tablets...if there were veins in the block which should indicate the figure of Hercules rather than other figures, this block would be more determined thereto, and Hercules would be in it as in some sense innate, although it would need careful labour to discover those veins...” Leibniz *New Essays*, Preface (quoted in Harris p. 28).
- *Non-transparency principle*: A principle is tacitly accepted by an agent if and only if the agent behaves as if the principle were true.

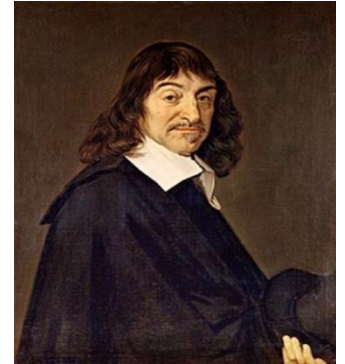


D. Modern defences of the innate concept/principle thesis, ctd.

- Revival of the Great Argument? Speaking of the laws of logic (including (non-)contradiction), Leibniz says: "...at bottom everyone knows them, and *makes use* at every moment of the principle of contradiction (for example) without considering it distinctly; and there is no barbarian who, in an affair of any moment, is not offended by the conduct of a liar who contradicts himself" (Leibniz 'On Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*' 1/1/26, quoted in Harris p.37).
- Problem: Possibility of better explanations (see Locke on premise (1)).

D. Modern defences of the innate concept/principle thesis, ctd.

- 'Poverty of the Stimulus' arguments:
- E.g. Descartes on **God, Substance**.



D. Modern defences of the innate concept/principle thesis, ctd.



○ E.g. Chomsky:

- 7) If an agent accepts a principle and there is no way they could have plausibly learnt that principle from experience, then it is innate.
- 8) There are certain principles of grammar that agents accept and there is no way they could have learned those principles from experience.

Therefore

- 9) The principles of grammar are innate.
- Problem: Chomsky hypothesises only innate learning *capacities*, not innate *principles*. Even Locke accepts that we have innate *capacities* e.g. Perception and reflection (I.iv.22).

Epilogue: Empiricism

- A. *Genetic empiricism*: Our thoughts/ideas are *caused by* experience (Wall calls this the 'psycho-genetic claim')
 - i. Phylogenetic empiricism: Our thoughts/ideas are caused by experience *of our evolutionary ancestors*.
 - ii. Ontogenetic empiricism: Our thoughts/ideas are caused by our own experience.

- B. *Epistemological or methodological empiricism*: Our thoughts are *justified by* experience.

- C. *Analytic Empiricism*: The contents of our thoughts are ultimately restricted to the contents of experience.

- Locke accepts A(ii), B and C. Chomsky accepts A(i), B and C.

Key points for this lecture

- Locke denies universal assent, not because of *dissent*, but because of *absence of assent* (e.g. In children). This is central both to his attack on the Great Argument and to his attack on the innate concept/principle thesis.
- This raises the issue of what it is for a principle to be *in the mind*. We looked at three options (strong transparency, weak transparency, non-transparency).
- Modern nativists (e.g. Chomsky) present a 'poverty of the stimulus' argument for innate ideas (or capacities).

Reading

Compulsory reading for first seminar

- E.J. Lowe *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Locke on Human Understanding* (Routledge 1995). Chapters 1 & 2.
- Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* abridged and edited by K. Winkler (Hackett 1996). Book I, chapters 1-4.

References for this lecture

- Wall, G. 'Locke's Attack on Innate Knowledge' in I. Tipton (ed.) *Locke on Human Understanding*.
- Harris, J. 'Leibniz and Locke on Innate Ideas' in I. Tipton (ed.) *Locke on Human Understanding*.

Questions?

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