Innate ideas: beyond empiricism

NATIVISM: A DIFFERENT DEFINITION OF ‘INNATE IDEA’

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke argues that all ideas are derived from sense experience. The mind is a ‘tabula rasa’, empty at birth. He begins his argument by attacking the opposite view – that some ideas are not derived from sense experience, but are ‘innate’. By ‘innate idea’, Locke means a concept or proposition which is part of the mind from birth. For an idea to be part of the mind, the mind (the person) must know or be conscious of it:

> No Proposition can be said to be in the Mind, which it never yet knew, which it was never yet conscious of. (*Essay* I.II.5)

Locke’s definition of innate ideas was popular at the time Locke was writing, but no major philosopher has ever defended innate ideas using this definition. His criticisms show just how hard it is to defend. So what is an innate idea, according to those who believe in them?

Nativism – the claim that we have certain concepts or knowledge innately – has certainly been historically associated with rationalism, and the syllabus understands nativism to be a form of rationalism. More recently, however, some philosophers have argued that nativism is compatible with the spirit of empiricism, and that rationalism should be restricted to the claim that we have substantive a priori knowledge through rational intuition and demonstration.

‘Innate ideas’ are obviously meant to contrast with ideas gained from experience. Rather than say that they are ideas had from birth, nativists maintain that they are ideas *the content of which cannot be gained from experience*. Nativist arguments, then, tend to focus on how a particular concept or item of knowledge could not have been acquired from experience, and how its use cannot be justified by experience. Now since we do not have the concept or knowledge (whatever it is) from birth, there is some point at which we first come to be aware of it. And so rationalists argue that experience *triggers our awareness of the concept or truth* (some add that it is innately determined, e.g. genetically determined, that we will gain this knowledge at this time). But how does this idea of experience ‘triggering’ an idea differ from the view that we learn or derive ideas from experience?

**Experience as a ‘trigger’**

The idea of triggering is often used in the study of animal behaviour. For example, in some species of bird, a baby bird need only hear a little bit of the bird song of its species before being able to sing itself. There has been far too little experience of hearing the song from other birds for it to learn from experience; rather the experience has triggered its innately given song.

The contemporary philosopher Peter Carruthers notes that there are many developments in our cognitive *capacities* that are genetically determined (*Human Knowledge and Human Nature*, p. 51). For example, infants cannot see further than approximately 12 inches when first born. Within 8 weeks, they can see much further. This development of the eye
is genetically encoded. The ability to learn and speak a language develops around 18 months. Just as capacities develop, so why not concepts and knowledge as well? At a certain point in development, a point that is genetically determined, children begin to use an idea for the first time, but that idea cannot be acquired from experience. This is not to say that experience has no role – a child must be exposed to the relevant stimuli for the knowledge to emerge, e.g. children can’t learn language unless people around them speak.

Here is a clear sense in which the idea is innate, but which differs from Locke’s definition. With this redefinition, the idea of innate ideas is not as contradictory as Locke makes out. What shows that the idea is innate is that it cannot be derived from or justified by experience. But are there good reasons to think we actually have any innate ideas?

**THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FORMING CONCEPTS FROM EXPERIENCE**

Perhaps the most famous objection to view that all ideas derive from sense experience is that this is impossible. Both Locke and Hume appear to assume that sense experience gives us discrete ideas directly. As first examples of simple ideas, Locke lists ‘Yellow, White, Heat, Cold, Soft, Hard, Bitter, Sweet’ (Essay II.I.3). He supposes that what makes all experiences of yellow experiences of yellow is objective patterns of similarity between the experiences – yellow things all look ‘the same’. For example, he says,

> In *Ideas* thus got [through sensation], the Mind discovers, That some agree, and others differ, probably as soon as it has any use of Memory; as soon as it is able, to retain and receive distinct *Ideas*. (Essay I.II.15)

This suggests that experiences are already ‘packaged’ into ‘the same’ and ‘different’.

To stay with the example of colour, this just doesn’t seem true. First, the colour spectrum is not divided into distinct parts of red, yellow and so on; it is continuous. Second, there are many shades of yellow; to call them all yellow is to abstract from their individual different shades. Putting these two points together, we realise that acquiring the concept ‘yellow’ is not a matter of copying an impression; no experience comes neatly packaged as an experience of ‘yellow’. To learn the concept ‘yellow’ is to learn the range and variety of colours to which ‘yellow’ refers.

How is this done? In order to learn ‘yellow’, we have to pick out and unify our experiences of the very varied things that are yellow. But if all we have to go on are the many various experiences, how are we able to classify them in this way, distinguishing yellow from not yellow? Well, aren’t all shades of yellow are more similar to other shades of yellow than to shades of any other colour (say, orange)? All we need to do is read off, or copy, our concepts from experience.

We can question this – is the world is already structured by relations of similarity and difference, quite independently of us? Some philosophers argue that no one way of classifying our experiences is forced on us by the experiences themselves.

Even if there are objective similarities and differences between experiences, we must still notice and pick out these similarities to form the concept. In order to do this, to know what is ‘the same’ or ‘different’, we must already be able to classify our experiences. The same
or different \textit{in what way}? Which similarity are you identifying? In what way are things that are a shade of yellow similar? — In being yellow! To pick out the common feature between different experiences, we must \textit{already} possess the concept that unites them. (Of course, this is not to say that you have a \textit{name for the concept yet}.)

We can repeat the argument at a more general level: to be able to judge that two things are the same colour, we must already be able to pick that feature of the two objects — their colour — in virtue of which they are similar. But how do we do this? Vision picks up shape and size as well as colour. To pick things out by colour, we must already distinguish this feature from shape and size. But that means we already have the concept of colour. So we can’t form concepts by classifying experiences.

To this, empiricists could say that we don’t need to notice and pick out the similarities — they simply \textit{cause} the concepts directly. However, if the objection is right, then all our concepts — or at least, all our simple concepts — must be innate. What this means is that the mind is innately set up to interpret and classify experience in particular ways.

\textbf{INNATE IDEAS ASSESSED}

Defenders of the idea of innate ideas define them as ideas which we can’t have derived from experience, but which experience ‘triggers’. But can we make sense of this view, and are we right to think of such ideas as innate?

First, if experience is a necessary ‘trigger’, are nativists really just saying that to have an innate idea is just to have the \textit{capacity} to come to know the idea? But this would reduce all ideas to innate ideas. We have the capacity to discover such empirical facts as the height of Mount Everest and the number of planets in the Solar System, but these are clearly not known innately, but derived from and justified by experience.

But this isn’t what nativists claim. It is not just a \textit{general capacity} to learn which is innate; empiricists have always allowed that these general capacities (memory, association, and so on) are innate. Locke and Hume certainly thought the structure of our senses and our general abilities to learn were innate. However, as we specify the structure of our senses more and more, we come closer to saying that these capacities of the mind are innate forms of \textit{information} about experience. And so the nativist claims that the idea we form has not been \textit{learned} (inferred or derived or abstracted) from experience, but merely triggered by experience. This is specific to just those ideas that are innate, not all ideas.

But are we right to say that the idea is ‘innate’? Or have we changed the meaning of the term? We can cite Carruthers’ story, and say that the idea is innate in the sense of it being encoded genetically that we will develop that specific idea (not just a cognitive capacity) at a certain point or under certain conditions. Alternatively, we can defend a more general theory of human nature: Descartes thought that to speak of innate ideas is, roughly, to speak of dispositions we have as part of our nature to form certain thoughts through reasoning and self-reflection. (In this, Descartes connects innate ideas to a \textit{priori} knowledge through intuition and deduction.) This distinguishes the capacities (a \textit{priori} reasoning and self-reflection) we have which deal with innate ideas from the capacities we have to learn a \textit{posteriori} truths (the senses and a \textit{posteriori} reasoning).

Locke objected that if an idea were innate, all children and idiots would know it. To this, we may reply that the children have not had the experience or reached the point in
development when the idea comes to consciousness; and in idiots, cognitive capacities have not developed normally, and so neither has innate knowledge.

But if innate ideas do not derive from experience, just where do they come from? Carruthers suggests the cause is evolution, as what formed our genetic code. Descartes argued that our rational nature, including innate ideas, is implanted by God. Plato argues that they derive from a previous, non-physical existence.