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NATURE VERSUS NURTURE: LOCKE ON INNATE IDEAS

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1. Introduction and background

One of John Locke's principal targets in his *Essay* was the belief in innate ideas, then widespread throughout Europe.¹ The importance of the doctrine lay in the support it lent to the justification of religious and moral beliefs, which were held to be innate and placed within us by God himself. This meant that such beliefs were beyond question and this was not acceptable to the relatively free-thinking Locke.

Locke wants to maintain that each man is born a kind of cognitive empty vessel – there simply aren't any thoughts, sensations, mental experiences present whatsoever. Gradually, as a result of our experience of the world, we acquire these cognitive states and commit them to our memory – we learn. On this view of things every man is free to become anything and nothing is predetermined by innate ideas already present from birth.

On the other hand, it seems undeniable that human behaviour does not stem entirely from 'nurture', but that man also has a 'nature' which influences him from conception. Modern psychology reveals many innate dispositions, and these may appear to threaten Locke's claim that there are no innate ideas. I will argue that the tension between Locke and modern psychology is more apparent than real.

2. What Locke claims

It is important to recognise that Locke does not claim that there is nothing innate about man at all. His arguments attempt to reject the possibility of innate *principles*, and these are, broadly, cognitive states corresponding to propositional knowledge. Examples would be,

- (a) *Speculative* (i.e. metaphysical) principles such as 'It is impossible for something to be and not to be'
- (b) *Practical* principles such as 'Torturing innocent people is always wrong'

He rejects the view that such knowledge can be innate, but not that men could not have an innate tendency to reach such beliefs.

His first argument is rather weak. He says that the supporters of innate ideas claim that ideas can be shown to be innate by the fact that they are universally assented to. He also appears to assume that this universal assent is the sole justification for believing an idea to be innate. Locke then argues that since children and idiots certainly don't assent to such ideas, there are no ideas that

actually receive universal assent and therefore no ideas can be innate. This is a poor argument because there could be things other than universal assent that demonstrate the innateness of an idea. Nevertheless, the argument does somewhat undermine the innatist position if they at least claim that universal assent is good evidence of innate ideas (and they do).

Locke makes a more telling point when he goes on to question whether a principle can have any existence at all other than in the immediate consciousness, or in the memory, having got into memory as a result of having previously been in consciousness. In modern parlance we might say that a belief must be either occurrent or dispositional.

Locke seems to be assuming here that a principle can be innate only if one is (or was in the past) consciously aware of it. He is implicitly denying the reality of tacit beliefs and the possibility of non-conscious cognitive states. Indeed he seems to hold the very notion of tacit, non-conscious beliefs to be incoherent. There is an element of circularity in Locke's reasoning here. For him, all ideas (and beliefs) are, by definition, either in present consciousness or used to be, having now been consigned to memory. This assumption of Locke's immediately makes tacit, non-conscious beliefs impossible. He is defining *ideas* and *principles* so narrowly as to guarantee that they could not possibly be innate.

In practice we not only ascribe a belief to someone if we hear them speak it (and then it must be in their consciousness) but we also ascribe beliefs using Davidson's principle of charity – we assume a person is rational and ascribe various beliefs to them which enable their behaviour to have a rational explanation. So if we see a young infant crawl after an object, then we assume the infant believes it sees the object and desires to have it. This model of belief does not require that a person should be able to speak at all. However, it could still be argued that the person has the belief in a state of consciousness, albeit non-linguistic. Such pre-linguistic beliefs still correspond to Lockean ideas.

Could it make any sense to ascribe a belief to someone that definitely has no conscious awareness of that belief, and never has had? Many rationalists (Leibniz and Chomsky to name but two) have answered 'Yes' to this question. Leibniz holds that the law of non-contradiction (nothing can both be and not be) informs the behaviour of all, including those that have never heard of it and who would certainly not be able to explicitly affirm it. It informs their behaviour because, for example, they are not observed trying to close a door and open it simultaneously. And Chomsky holds that the rules of a deep grammar inform the linguistic behaviour of every infant in the process of learning a language from its parents. But surely the kind of 'belief' that is being ascribed in both these cases is quite different from our normal usage of the word. They are examples of '*as if*' beliefs. It is *as if* the idiot believed the law of non-contradiction, and *as if* the infant believed the laws of a deep grammar. But *as if* beliefs are not beliefs, and are not Lockean ideas.

3. Psychology and innate dispositions

It seems undeniable that some aspects of human behaviour are innate. Surely no one would deny that we have an innate disposition to walk upright², to use tools, to use our arms to throw things. The very way our bodies are constructed determines likely ways of behaviour. But what of more advanced examples of behaviour such as swimming, riding a bike, learning and speaking a language?

What might it mean to say that we have an innate ability to swim? Well it clearly cannot mean that at every point in our careers as humans we can swim. Some people never learn to swim, and new born babies cannot swim. But it is reasonable to say that there is something about humans that makes learning to swim, *ceteris paribus*, a natural thing to do, and swimming can therefore be called an innate ability.

Someone might argue against this, in the spirit of Locke, that people may learn to swim simply from experience, simply from seeing others swim, and learning from it. But this will not do. A small number of people can walk upside down on their hands. Most people who witness this do not learn to walk upside down on their hands, precisely because there is not an innate tendency for humans to walk upside down on their hands – we very obviously are not constructed to facilitate this! Nevertheless, Locke's empiricism is not impugned by this – we become able to swim through learning from experience, but no amount of learning would ever teach us to swim were it not for the innate disposition.

Similar considerations apply to the innate ability to walk upright and to speak a language. Whilst they also have to be learned through experience, it is reasonable to say that there is something about humans that makes walking upright and speaking a language, *ceteris paribus*, natural things to do, and these can therefore be called innate abilities.

A most interesting example of an innate behavioural disposition that has particular bearing here is the innate tendency most of us have to use the right hand rather than the left (ninety percent of humans are right handed). Pre-natal investigation reveals that this innate tendency (whether right or left) can clearly be seen at extremely early stages of pregnancy. Interesting though this is, the key finding in this area is that this tendency to use right or left begins before the development of those parts of the brain concerned with left/right motor control³. The evidence is that the very early innate disposition for one particular hand to predominate begins in muscle activity that originates in the spine, but then goes on to affect the subsequent development of those aspects of the brain that will eventually control all this. In other words, first of all the body determines whether we will be right or left handed, and only then does the brain evolve so as to reinforce that. So the innate tendency here starts out at the level of the physical body, and eventuates in an innate tendency within the brain. Most discussions of innatism assume that things are the other way around.

4. Innate dispositions are not cognitive principles

The innate abilities discussed here have little to do with the innate ideas and principles that Locke set out to attack. It is not altogether clear that these abilities are concerned with knowledge at all, but if they are, it is not the kind of knowledge Locke was concerned with. He was concerned with propositional knowledge – the kind beloved of philosophers since Plato. This kind of knowledge has been analysed as justified true belief, and it is cognitive in nature. It is knowledge *that* something is the case. Knowledge *that* torturing innocent people is always wrong; knowledge *that* it is impossible for something to be and not to be.

On the other hand, innate behavioural dispositions are concerned with knowledge *how*. Knowing *how* to swim; *how* to ride a bike; *how* to walk upright; *how* to speak a language. Without doubt, this is a form of knowledge, but a very different form. My knowing how to ride a bike cannot be reduced to any set of items of propositional knowledge. I do not say to myself anything like this:
* *If the bike leans to the left, leaning my body to the right will correct it.*

This is a true piece of propositional knowledge but I can be ignorant of it and yet still know how to ride a bike⁴. Even if it was argued that there must be some level of cognition at which * is believed, this would be a tacit belief, not a Lockean type belief, of which one is conscious.

Locke's view that a principle held in the conscious mind cannot be innate does not seem to be at all affected by the kind of innate dispositions we have looked at.

In addition, there are two senses in which Locke would have felt unperturbed by these considerations concerning innate dispositions: First, if we were born with a specific innate belief then our freedom is impaired, for we are not able to believe otherwise. On the other hand, if we are born with a disposition to behave in a certain way, then we remain free not to behave in that way. Innate dispositions dispose us to act in a certain way, but do not compel us. This is surely at the heart of why Locke was concerned to attack innate principles – they would impair our ability to be completely free agents. Nothing about innate dispositions affects our freedom to choose.

The second sense in which Locke would have felt comfortable with innate behavioural dispositions is that it still represents an entirely naturalistic account of the acquisition of human knowledge. The innate ideas attacked by Locke were implicitly divine in origin, and therefore beyond question, and beyond explanation.

5. Conclusion

Locke's arguments against the existence of innate ideas are not always convincing, and are perhaps more successful as polemic than as philosophy. Nevertheless, they raise issues that have remained at the centre of the nature or nurture debate ever since. The principal issue raised is the questioning of the coherence of an innate idea that is not, and never was, consciously held. The modern proponents of innatism do little to undermine this because they are more concerned with innate behavioural dispositions and are thus concerned more with *knowledge how*, as opposed to

Locke's *knowledge that*. In addition, it seems likely that Locke would have been quite happy to embrace ideas of innate dispositions since they leave intact human freedom, where 17th century innatism did not.

References:

1. For a detailed discussion of 17th century innatism see Yolton, 1956.
2. In this regard, Clark, 1997 p.40-41 describes infant 'stepping' movements showing clear evidence of an innate tendency to walk.
3. This was discussed in some detail on BBC Radio 4 on 'Life Before Birth' October 25th, 2000.
4. The knowing how/knowing that distinction was originally described in Ryle, 1949 chapter 2.

Bibliography

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