

LOCKE'S ATTACK ON INNATE PRINCIPLES

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THE ESSAY

BACKGROUND:

Locke is a concept empiricist:

We are born a blank slate.

All our ideas originate from experience.

Locke is an apologist for Newtonian mechanics and a critic of Aristotle's theories.

HIS OBJECTIVES:

1. He wants to explore the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge.
2. By doing this he hopes to avoid the skepticism that can arise when thoughts wander into areas where “....they can find no sure footing....” [1.1.2]

HIS METHOD:

1. First he will explore the origin of our ideas.
2. Then he will determine what knowledge the understanding has of them.

He believes that progress in philosophy requires beginning with Epistemology, rather than Metaphysics.

By doing this he hopes to avoid the skepticism that can arise when thoughts wander into areas where “....they can find no sure footing....” [1.1.2]

3. Finally he will determine the nature and grounds of faith.

He wants to make room for faith by limiting knowledge.

Note: He views what he is doing as a preliminary to discussing ethical and political ideas.

STRUCTURE OF THE ESSAY:

1. In Book 1, Locke argues against the view that there are innate ideas.

2. In Book 2, he tries to show how all our ideas are ultimately derived from experience.

3. In Book 3, he wants to lay down some foundations for the main theme of Book 4, and he criticizes Aristotle's view that we can know the essence of species.

4. In Book 4, he argues that knowledge is possible in mathematics and ethics, but not, on the whole, in metaphysics and natural philosophy, and he wants to argue against Aristotle's view that species are marked out for us by nature.

BOOK 1

HE REJECTS THE CLAIMS THAT:

1. There are speculative innate principles. [1.2]
2. There are practical innate moral principles. [1.3]
3. We have innate ideas of God, identity or impossibility. [1.4]

THE ARGUMENT FROM UNIVERSAL ASSENT:

The view was that everyone assents to at least some propositions (e.g., that “what is, is.”)

He rejects this argument on the grounds that children and idiots should be aware of such truths if they are innate, but they “... have not the least apprehension or thought of them.”

THE DISPOSITIONAL ACCOUNT:

The view was that ideas are in the mind but not known to be known until people come to the use of Reason.

He rejects this argument on the ground that such accounts do not provide an adequate criterion for distinguishing innate propositions from other propositions that the mind may come to discover.

PRACTICAL MORAL PRINCIPLES:

He rejects the view that practical moral principles are innate for the same reasons listed against the view that there are speculative innate principles.

He rejects this argument on the ground that such accounts do not provide an adequate criterion for distinguishing innate propositions from other propositions that the mind may come to discover.

But he also claims that practical principles (e.g., the Golden Rule) are not self-evident in the way speculative principles are.

Moreover, he points out that there are substantial differences between people over the content of practical principles.

CRITICISMS:

Locke has been accused of building a straw man here.

But the view he attacks was widely accepted in England at the time, so this charge seems unwarranted.

In fact, Leibniz responded to Locke's attack.

LEIBNIZ'S COUNTER ATTACK

1. Locke is committed to the view that the mind does not always think.

Thus, in response to the claim that the Principle of Non-contradiction is innate Locke claims that "... to be in the understanding and not to be understood, to be in the mind and never to be perceived, is all one, as to say anything is and is not in the mind or understanding." [p. 273]

To this Leibniz responds, "I do not know whether it will be as easy to reconcile him with me and with the Cartesians when he maintains that the mind does not always think, and in particular, that it is without perception during dreamless sleep, and when he objects that since bodies can be without motion, souls can just as well be without thought. But here I reply somewhat differently from what is customary. For I maintain that a substance cannot naturally be without action, and that there is never even any body without motion." [p. 377]

But, as Leibniz points out, this commits him to denying that there are any petite perceptions.

2. Locke cannot account for necessary truths.

If all ideas depended only on experience all knowledge would have to be based on induction.

“Although the senses are necessary for all our knowledge, they are not sufficient to give us all of it, since the senses never give us anything but instances, that is, particular or individual truths. Now all the instances confirming a general truth, however numerous they may be, are not sufficient to establish the universal necessity of that same truth, for it does not follow that what has happened before will always happen in the same way.”

“As a result it appears that necessary truths, such as we find in pure mathematics and particularly in arithmetic and geometry, must have principles whose proof does not depend on instances, nor, consequently, on the testimony of the senses, although without the senses it would never occur to us to think of them.”

“Also, it is in this respect that human knowledge differs from that of beasts.” [p. 375]

“I do not base the certainty of innate principles on universal consent.” But, “I conclude that a sufficiently general consent among men is an indication and not a demonstration of an innate principle; but that the exact and decisive proof of these principles consists in showing that their certainty comes only from what is in us.”

Moreover, “... even if they were not known, they would none the less be innate, because they are recognized as soon as heard; but I will add further, that at bottom everyone knows them and makes use at every moment of the principle of contradiction.”

“If the mind had only the simple capacity of receiving knowledge or passive power for it, ... it would not be the source of necessary truths ... for it is incontestable that the senses do not suffice to show their necessity.”

A MATERIALIST'S OBJECTION TO LOCKE

Throughout his critique Locke assumes that minds exist. Do they? We say things like, "He has a good mind." But this only means that he thinks well. Perhaps all of this talk of minds rests on a misunderstanding.