

Innate Ideas

Empiricist Model: Tabula Rasa

- Locke model for mind: prior to birth our mind is a blank slate and experience is the only thing that can write on it
- Two sources of experience:
 - Sensation (the primary source, derived from sensible objects external to the mind)
 - Reflection (entirely internal to the mind)



Rationalists: Innate Ideas

- Locke rejected the view that there are innate ideas
- Innate Ideas (concepts or knowledge) are those that we acquire or possess prior to being born, and so not the product of experience
- Proponents of Innate Ideas: Descartes, Plato, Leibniz

Reason Against Innate Ideas

- Locke gave several reasons to reject innate ideas
- If an idea is innate then it ought to be universally agreed upon, but it is not
- But Locke says that ideas are not universal, since “children and idiots have not the least apprehension or thought of them.”
- Example: According to Descartes, the cogito is an innate idea, and one would expect that both adults and children know this idea since they one would think equally have it. But children do not know anything about the cogito, and some adults don't do either.

Reason Against Innate Ideas

- Locke: “To make reason discover [innate knowledge] is to say that the use of reason discovers to a man what he knew before.”
- But this “is in effect to say that men *know and know them not at the same time.*”
- To say that a person both knows and does not know the same thing at the same time violates the law of contradiction.

Rationalism: Innate Ideas

- Descartes' Innate Ideas: Cogito, Clear and Distinct Ideas, logical laws
 - if p & q then p (e.g. If John is happy & John is good then John is Happy)
 - If p then q , and $\neg p$, so q
- The process of reflection appears to be a process of clarification
- What we are clarifying seems to be already there, “built in” as it were, we just weren't aware of it, or hadn't clearly thought about it

Chomsky on Innate Language

- The vocabulary (in the tens of thousands) and knowledge of grammatical rules of 6 year olds is enormous
- empirical evidence available to children is insufficient to distill among alternatives for each grammatical rule they end up knowing by the time they are six or seven. So, there a grammar must be innately known.
- babies know a universal grammar, which they use to learn their native language
- The universal grammar allows us to distinguish between expressions which are properly grammatical, even though we may have never heard them before