

Critique of John Locke Objection to the Innate Ideas

Coulibaly Yacouba

Department of Philosophy, Institute of Marxism, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China

Email: bayacoulib@yahoo.fr

How to cite this paper: Yacouba, C. (2016). Critique of John Locke Objection to the Innate Ideas. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 6, 302-310.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2016.64030>

Received: August 9, 2016

Accepted: September 11, 2016

Published: September 14, 2016

Copyright © 2016 by author and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The debate about innatism is not a new subject in philosophy. From the earlier philosophers up to the recent ones, the main question that remains is: men are born with some ideas or we only know through experience? In this study, the emphasis will not be the process of human knowledge but the controversy in the objection of Locke to the innate Idea. From the beginning of his objection, John Locke shows that we are born with empty mind. Then through experience we build the knowledge little by little. But later on, Locke recognizes that it's also possible that children may have some ideas from the womb. They may experience wants, diseases, hunger, and heat. To him many of those ideas which were produced in the minds of children, in the beginning of their sensation, if they are not repeated in future, then they are quite lost. If we choose the fact that people are born with ideas from pre-experience, that view is more scientific and more logical than the religious view of Plato. The paper concludes that even though there is no complete agreement on how innate ideas are made, we did not come in the world with blank mind and what is important is not how innate ideas have been made but their existence and application in life.

Keywords

Critique, John Locke, Objection, Innate Ideas

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to bring some elucidation about the innate Ideas. In the history of philosophy, there are different opinions about the existence of innate ideas. From antiquity to the contemporary period, many philosophical schools point out the existence of innate ideas. The most known among them is Plato's theories. Through mythic image he has shown that man comes in life with knowledge. Some other schools especially the empirical ones are opposed to that opinions (Sellars & Brandom, 1997).

To them man comes into life with white mind and start learning through experiences. Our interest in the comparison between Plato and Locke is due to the way each of them has presented their positions. In philosophy, most opposite theories are complementary. That's why the philosophical position of Kant about knowledge brings light upon the unnecessary fight between Rationalism and Empiricism. Kant has shown up the limitation of the experience on one hand, and the limitation of Reason on another (Adorno & Tiedemann, 2001).

In the same way, this study is not to say who is wrong and who is right. This work will be focused on the possibility of reconciliation. To reach this goal, there will first be definitions of knowledge in general and particularly innate ideas, then, on the light of each argument, there will be the critique.

The main questions to be answered include: What is knowledge? What is innate idea? What can we learn through the objection of Locke to Plato's view?

2. The Concept of Knowledge According to Different Philosophers

Knowledge is the combination of vivid and clear idea in the mind that one obtains through information or experiences with good interpretation. No matter how we get the idea, the important thing is for the idea to be vivid and clear then it can be called knowledge (Descartes, 2015). However, we have many kinds of knowledge that can be grouped into two: A priori knowledge (which depends upon what a person can derive from the world without needing to experience it (Casullo, 2012); a posteriori knowledge; which depends on experience and using of different kind of reasoning to gain knowledge (Horowitz & Camp, 2006).

Most of the time, people are focused on how knowledge is built than knowledge itself. The conflict between scholars is more focused on methodology than the result. We will go through some definitions so that the notion of knowledge may be clear for readers.

In Meno and Phaedo, Knowledge is defined as the recollection of true opinions tied together. In the discussion with Meno, Socrates shows the necessity of that process. After they are tied down (true believes), in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. The true believes or opinions are not knowledge yet before the one who holds them is able to unite them (Plato & Thompson, 1980).

By tie or unite, Socrates means to have a clear idea about opinions. We may have a true opinion but if it's not clear in our mind, with the time we may forget them (Plato & Grube, 1981). Being able to tie true believes or opinions, means also to associate them. We have two main operations: We may have to put ideas together or to differentiate them. In his book entitled: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, it's written: "Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but the perception of the connection of an agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas. In this alone it consists. Where this perception is, there is knowledge, and where it is not, there, though we may fancy, guess, or believe, yet we always come short of knowledge" (Locke, 1970). According to Locke, whatever alterations are made in the body, if they reach not the

mind; there is no perception. The perception is the first faculty of the mind exercised about our ideas.

According to Locke, all ideas come from sensation or reflection. Our observation employed either, about external sensible objects or about the internal operations of our minds. According to Locke, these are the two fountains of knowledge.

Locke discovered also in the mind two great and principal actions such as: Perception or thinking and Volition or will. The power of thinking is called understanding and the power of volition is called the will. According to Locke, there is ability in the mind when he is willing to revive ideas again. Understanding is linked somehow to the will (Locke & George, 1690).

In each of the previous definitions of knowledge some important expressions come out such as: True opinions or true believes in Plato's definition; and the perception in Locke's view. Before we go deeply into the analysis of those words, let us consider a while perception in Locke's philosophy.

There is perception, according to Locke, when our mind will have an operation upon ideas furnished by experience. Now let us think about true opinions or believes and perceptions.

True opinions or believes:

From the dictionary, we can say that believe is the confidence in the truth of the existence or reliability of something. Although without the absolute proof that one is right in doing so. That's why in his definition of the knowledge Plato doesn't take only believe but insist on the true believes or true opinions (Pirocacos, 1998). That is what Descartes calls vivid and clear idea. It's clear that we don't take any idea to be true without going through perception "the operation of the mind upon the opinions or believes we have. In Meno the following explanation help us to understand well. Socrates: For true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason. And that, Meno my friend, is recollection [anámñêsis], as we previously agreed. After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down" (Plato & Thompson, 1980: p. 90).

The perceptions:

According to Locke, whatever alterations are made in the body, if they reach not the mind; whatever impressions are made on the outward parts, if they are not taken notice of within, there is no perception (Locke, 1959). The proof is that, how often may a man observe in himself, that whilst his mind is intently employed in the contemplation of some objects, and curiously surviving some ideas that are there, it takes no notice of impressions of sounding bodies made upon the organ of hearing, with that same alterations that is used for producing the idea sound. So the know-

ledge is also vivid and clear idea in the mind. No matter its nature, no matter its origin and the process; we know we perceive obviously what we claim to know.

3. Definition of Innate Idea

The doctrine of innate ideas is not a new component in the field of philosophy. The innate ideas are pre-formed, in the mind at birth (Stitch, 1975). In philosophy, innate ideas are ideas allegedly inborn in the human mind, as contrasted with those received or compiled from experience. It's a philosophical and epistemological doctrine that holds that human beings are born with ideas or knowledge, and that the mind is not a "blank slate" at birth as some philosophers think. Those who hold nativism, see innate ideas as God's Workmanship (Descartes et al., 1932).

Others see innate ideas as pre-experience before we were born. We have different approach of the doctrine of innate idea. Some philosophers like Plato, Meno, and Phaedo among others claim that all our knowledge is innate. Others like Locke support the thesis that our knowledge is not innate. Nativism seems to have been answering both the psychological question; "how do what is in our minds come to be there?" and epistemology concern "why do beliefs that are arrived a priori are justified?"

Plato is known well with that doctrine of innate born. This work is focused on the proof and argumentation provided by Plato. Then from the objection of Locke we will see how Locke argued his view.

In his dialogues Meno and Phaedo, Plato presents a classic theory of innate ideas. Through the example of mathematical truths, Plato argues that such rules of the mind are not the fruit of learning. They are hidden in the depth of the soul. "Then if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal so that you should always confidently try to seek out and recollect what you don't know at present".

What people usually call learning; appear to Plato as a process of "remembering," rather than a real learning process. Plato calls it "anamnesis," which means remembering. The remembrance, for Plato, is that of timeless ideas that are engraved in an equally timeless soul. When the soul is incarnated into a body, it forgets these truths, hence the need for education as a process of anamnesis. In the platonic dialogues, Socrates presents himself as a midwife, helping his discussion partners bring into consciousness knowledge they already have. The view of Plato is radical. He claims the fact that all our knowledge were already in us before we were born. In Phaedo, before Socrates was put into death, he had some discussion with many friends into the prison. One of them called Phaedo reported the last discussion they had with Socrates to the demand of ECHECRATES. Socrates said: "And if we acquired this knowledge before we were born, and were born having the use of it, then we also knew before we were born and at the instant of birth not only the equal or the greater or the less, but all other ideas; for we are not speaking only of equality, but of beauty, goodness, justice, holiness, and of all which we stamp with the name of essence in the dialectical process, both when we ask and when we answer questions. Of all this we may certainly affirm that we acquired the

knowledge before birth?" (Plato & Rowe, 1993).

Socrates argues his statement by showing that we were born with the ideas of quality. So from that point he assumes that all other ideas are the same. Socrates continues in his argument showing that the knowledge which we acquired before birth was lost at birth. That's why he defines knowledge as recollection. The function of the senses is to recollect what have been lost in the process of combination between body and soul.

In the discussion of Socrates with Meno about the definition of virtue, he made a remark: "The soul, then, as being immortal, and having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all; and it is no wonder that she should be able to call to remembrance all that she ever knew about virtue, and about everything; for as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things; there is no difficulty in her eliciting or as men say learning, out of a single recollection—all the rest, if a man is strenuous and does not faint; for all enquiry and all learning is but recollection." (Plato & Thompson, 1980).

Socrates is convinced that we don't learn as people use to believe. According to him the soul has been in contact with all kinds of knowledge because of its immortality and what it does is to call into remembrance all knowledge that it has been in contact with before birth. To show up the truth of his statement, Socrates asks Meno to call upon one of his attendants for the journey of remembrance. Socrates uses square figures. Through questions and answers, the boy was able to calculate and multiply by his own the space of a square. The focus point here is that we don't learn at all. There is just a process of remembrance which can be led by somebody more knowledgeable than the one who is still in ignorance. That's why Socrates compares himself to a midwife whose duty is just to help to deliver. She is not the one who put enfant in the womb of the pregnant lady. But out of experience and being warn about the process she can fulfill the duty (Plato & Thompson, 1980).

If we support the idea that we learn from outside it shows that the theory of Innate idea is wrong. In the process of discussion with Meno, Socrates emphasized on the fact that we don't learn knowledge, but we recollected what have been lost at a point of time.

The theory of innate Idea was criticized by many authors, but in this article we will be focused on the view of Locke. However, before that, let us have the view of Descartes about the innate ideas.

In his meditations even in some other works, Descartes holds the idea that the innate ideas are from God. He is our maker and owner. Then he has put into our mind some truths that are indubitable. Among those ideas he mentions the Idea of perfect being as God himself. Descartes gives three main ideas about innate ideas' link to God. The first one: "With those preliminary theses at hand, Descartes is now ready to offer some proofs of God's existence (Descartes et al., 1932).

I am an imperfect being, and I have a clear and distinct idea of perfection. Everything must have a cause. The fact that my idea of God represents an infinitely perfect being must have a cause which is infinitely perfect. I am not infinitely perfect. Therefore, there have to be a perfect being, existing formally from whom my innate idea of a per-

fect being derives. That is God”.

The second: “Who keeps me in existence? If I owe it to myself, I would have given to me all sorts of perfections; yet, evidently I am not perfect; my parents as well as any other imperfect being could not be the cause of my existence, since they could not have created me with my idea of perfection. Therefore, a perfect being (God) has to exist and being constantly recreating me.” The third “I am a finite substance which means that there is an infinite substance who gives me the idea of infinite. So an infinite being must be the cause of an idea with infinite objective reality. That infinite being is God.” According to Descartes the innate ideas were formed by God and put in us. Therefore they are true for God is perfect and doesn’t do imperfect work. According to Descartes, our minds come stocked with a variety of intellectual concepts or ideas whose content is preconceived. This storehouse includes ideas in mathematics, logic, and metaphysics. In further view, Descartes seems to hold that even our sensory ideas involve innate content. He believes that the new mechanical physics such as, bodies have no real properties resembling our sensory ideas of colors, sounds, tastes, and the like, thus implying that the content of such ideas draws from the mind itself (Descartes, 1960).

4. The Objection of Locke to Innate Knowledge

The choice of John Locke is not by chance, it is done willingly. Even though John Locke rejected the theory of innate idea, he somehow falls into a kind of contradiction.

According to him, all the ideas come from sensation. John Locke thinks that at the birth, the mind is empty as a white paper. Through our senses ideas are conveyed into the mind. Then the task of the mind is to receive and distinct one idea from another. In other ways we can say that, according to Locke, ideas come from experience. For external objects furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities. But it is the mind who furnishes understanding.

The first capacity of human intellect is that mind is fitted to receive the impressions made on it. To understand well Locke, we need to follow carefully his steps in understanding of different ideas and their functions and the function of mind as well. He wrote himself the following ideas: “The better to understand the nature, manner, and extent of our knowledge, one thing is carefully to be observed concerning the ideas we have; and that is, that some of them are simple and some complex.” (Locke & Seth, 1978).

Simple Ideas:

Simple ideas are like the raw material of all the knowledge. There are presented or provided to the mind by different way. Some ideas come by one sense only for example light and colors by eyes; noises by sounds and tones by ears; heat, cold, solidity by touch. Once those channels are damaged there is no way to fulfill their functions. If by accident someone loses his eyes before having an idea about colors, there is no way for him to know the difference between colors. The ideas like ex-

tension, figure, rest, motion are conveyed by more than one sense. For example the wind is felt at the same time by eyes and by the body. Some others are from reflection only. We acquire simple ideas of reflection through our own mental operations. During those operations, the human mind is either passive; when the mind passively receives ideas or active when the mind actively initiates something itself (Locke & Winkler, 1996).

Complex ideas:

They are made by the mind out of simple ideas. After the reception of simple ideas, the mind exercise over them three main actions: It combines them to make complex ideas. Ideas that have been made up of many simple ideas are called complex. For example beauty, gratitude, man and so on. The mind can also bring two ideas together (simple or complex) without uniting them into one. Finally it can separate them from all the other ideas. That action is called abstraction. Complex ideas are either of modes, substances, or relations (Locke, 1970).

Modes:

Modes are complex ideas which contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves. Some modes are different combinations of the same simple idea without the mixture of any other (a triangle is a figure of three angles). Others are compounded of simple ideas of several kinds such as beauty. Many criteria come together to form what we call beauty; color, figure, and so on (Locke & Mostert, 1923).

Substances:

Substances are like combination of simple ideas taken to represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves (color, hardness). We have single substances, which exist separately (man or sheep). We also have collective ideas of several substances put together; group of men, flock of sheep (Locke & George, 1690).

Relations:

Complex ideas of relations consist in consideration and comparing on idea with another. They are made through the mental operation of comparing distinct ideas without thereby combining them together into an entirely new whole.

It's that the mind is passive in the reception of simple ideas. But the mind plays the main role in the association of ideas. For there is no knowledge without discernment which is a faculty of the mind. "Unless the mind had a distinct perception of different objects and their qualities, it would be capable of very little knowledge" P 138 (Brunt & Locke, 1804).

5. The Controversy of Locke

Locke is at beginning convinced that there is no innate idea. He supposes that the mind is like a white paper, void of all characters, without any Ideas. Later he said: "Children,

though they have in the womb, have none innate. Therefore I doubt not but children, by the exercise of their senses about objects that affect them in the womb, receive some few ideas before they are born.” P 127 (Locke & Mostert, 1923).

Before they are born, according to Locke, it's possible that children may have some ideas from the pre-experience of their senses. They may experience wants, diseases, hunger, and heat. Even though he assumed that there is possibility to have some pre-experience; Locke is convinced that those pre-experiences are different from innate principals. To him many of those ideas which were produced in the minds of children, in the beginning of their sensation; if there are not repeated in future, are quite lost. For example someone who has lost his sight in his childhood may not have ideas of colors (Locke, J., George, F, 1969).

However, Locke doesn't consider those ideas as knowledge. To him the first step of knowledge is perception. So we may be born with ideas but not knowledge as think Plato. In one hand, Plato's innate ideas are more religious than rational. The basics is the doctrine of metempsychosis; the belief that holds the passing of the soul at death into another body, either human or animal (Katz, 2013). In ancient Greece, Pythagoras and Plato believed in the doctrine of incarnation. They even held that the reason of multiple reincarnations is the process of purification and perfection. Metempsychosis is a fundamental doctrine of several religions originating in India (Rao, 2002). In Hinduism for example, the individual soul enters a new existence after the death of the body (Stich, 1975). This idea is linked to Karma which means accountability and pay-back. We also find the same knowledge is a process of remembrance. To him the soul after different experiences was in contact with all kind of experience. The doctrine of innate ideas of Socrates and his disciple Plato cannot be true unless the one who holds it believes in reincarnation.

The objection of Locke suffers from inner contradiction. He previously said that a man comes into life with taburasa mind like blank paper. Later on he talked about pre-experience in the womb. Both assertions cannot be true, either men are born with ideas or they are born with a taburasa mind. In that case, the objection of Locke is really funny. If we choose the fact that people are born with ideas from pre-experience, that view is more scientific and more logical than the religious view of Plato. This can be linked to the persuasive way that Locke explains the process of pre-experience.

6. Conclusion

The debate about the existence of innate ideas at birth is not recent in philosophy. We saw and kept seeing different view about how innate ideas are formed and when they have been experienced. Some explain the existence of those ideas through metempsychosis or reincarnation. Some attribute them to God who put them in us as his stamp on us (Peterson, 2001). Some other explains their existence empirically. Even though there is no complete agreement on how innate ideas are made, for sure we don't come in the world with blank mind. The most important is not how they have been made, but their existence. This paper dealt with the debate on innate ideas and critiques

Locke's idea of innate ideas and concluded with the researcher's point of view on innate ideas.

References

- Adorno, T. W., & Tiedemann, R. (2001). *Kants Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Polity, 300 p.
- Brunt, J., & Locke, J. (1804). *Extracts, from Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding*. Frankfurt Kentucky.
- Casullo, A. (2012). *Essays on a Priori Knowledge and Justification*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 344 p. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199777860.001.0001>
- Descartes, R. (1960). *Discourse on Method, and Meditations*. The Library of Liberal Arts, New York: Liberal Arts Press.
- Descartes, R. (2015). *The Passions of the Soul and Other Late Philosophical Writings*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Descartes, R. et al. (1932). *Les méditations métaphysiques* (pp. 5-343). Paris: E. Belin.
- Horowitz, T., & Camp, J. L. (2006). *The Epistemology of a Priori Knowledge*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 195 p.
- Katz, S. T. (2013). *Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Original Sources*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 618 p.
- Locke, J. (1959). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Locke, J. (1970). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Menston: Scolar Press, 41 p.
- Locke, J., & George Fabyan Collection (Library of Congress) (1690). *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding: In Four Books*. London: Eliz. Holt for Thomas Bassett, 22 p.
- Locke, J., & Mostert, A. (1923). *Causes of Weakness in Men's Understandings*. 10 p.
- Locke, J., & Seth Pringle-Pattison, A. (1978). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Hassocks Eng. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Harvester Press, Humanities Press.
- Locke, J., & Winkler, K. (1996). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: Abridged and Edited, with an Introduction and Notes*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co., 380 p.
- Peterson, M. L. (2001). *With All Your Mind: A Christian Philosophy of Education*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Pirocacos, E. (1998). *False Belief and the Meno Paradox*. *Avebury Series in Philosophy* (230 p). Aldershot, Hants; Brookfield, VT: Ashgate.
- Plato, & Grube, G. M. A. (1981). *Five Dialogues* (162 p). Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.
- Plato, & Rowe, C. J. (1993). *Phaedo* (xi, 301 p). Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics. Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato, & Thompson, E. S. (1980). *The Meno of Plato*. *Ancient Philosophy* (lxvi, 319 p). New York: Garland Pub.
- Rao, A. V. (2002). "Mind" in Indian Philosophy. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 44, 315-325.
- Sellars, W., Rorty, R., & Brandom, R. (1997). *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stich, S. P. (1975). *Innate Ideas*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Stich, S. P. (1975). *Innate Ideas* (x, 222 p). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.