Locke 1: Critique of Innate Ideas

This week we are going to begin looking at a new area by turning our attention to the work of John Locke, who is probably the most famous English philosopher of all and is the founder of the distinctively British philosophical school of Empiricism. This school stands in contrast to the Continental school of Rationalism of which Descartes was the founder and in introducing Locke today we will have occasion to mention how his opening negative arguments are effectively responses to certain of Descartes’ positions. The relationship between Locke and Descartes in early modern philosophy echoes that of Plato and Aristotle in ancient philosophy (with Descartes reviving in certain respects the approach of Plato and Locke in response indicating an allegiance to positions that in some ways resemble those of Aristotle). Before probing these questions however we should begin by giving a first description of the purposes Locke had in composing his principal work the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

The first point to note about the title of the work is its emphasis on understanding and in presenting an inquiry into the nature of our understanding Locke is consciously aware of doing something paradoxical. The normal use of understanding is to enquire into things in order, amongst other things, to work out how to make use of them. To enquire into understanding is however to force understanding to turn back upon itself and hence to lead it to makes itself its own object. This will require then us to *reflect* on the nature of the way we understand in order to try to
understand how it is that we come to be able to understand. Locke announces this in the introductory chapter of the *Essay* when he says that his purpose it to inquire into “the Original, Certainty, and Extent” of our knowledge. One of the reasons why Locke has adopted this as his purpose is due to the fact that we are plagued by constant disagreement with each other so that to work out where it is that we may properly be said to possess knowledge as opposed to merely holding opinions might well favour the purpose of promoting greater harmony between us.

Regardless of whether this is practically plausible or not however the theoretical nature of Locke’s enquiry can be given a somewhat sharper statement. In inquiring into the *origin* of our ideas Locke will work out what the ways that our understanding came to have the thoughts it has. This would be a *genetic* enquiry and we will see some of the point of this in due course. In assessing the *certainty* of our ideas Locke will be responding to Descartes’ attempt to show on what our knowledge is *founded*. Finally in looking at the *extent* of our thought Locke will indicate clearly the *boundaries* of knowledge claims so we can find out in this way in what areas it is correct to claim that we are *able* to know something and in what areas it would be false to make such claims. So Locke’s general method then is here described: it is intended to *genetically* analyse our ideas in order to discover the *foundations* of them and to discern their *boundaries*.

However the first part of Locke’s work is not a positive part of it but instead a presentation of a negative thesis: that there are no *innate ideas*. In denying that there are *innate ideas* Locke is at once taking aim at a central
view held by both Descartes and Plato. Before examining Locke’s attack it is worth reminding ourselves of the view in question. Plato clearly argues in the *Phaedo*, particularly when he discusses the notion of recollection as a basis for the view that there are Forms, that we have ideas that we neither know we have or are conscious of but that must be possessed if we are capable of the cognitive acts we normally perform. Descartes, in the Third Meditation, distinguished between three types of ideas we possess, arguing that some are caused by the actions of things outside us (adventitious), some are inventions of ours (impressions) but some are innate. Amongst the latter Descartes included the ideas of God, mind, body, triangle and those which represent true and eternal essences. The general view that we possess at least some ideas that are innate is generally described as *innatism* and its denial as *anti-innatism* so Descartes and Locke are at odds with regard to this point.

Before turning to Locke’s arguments against innatism it is worth refining a bit more what the notion involves. It requires, at a minimum, that there is some source of ideas that is non-sensory and that we have a capacity for grasp of such ideas. The source of non-sensory ideas would be something intelligible (God or the Forms are thus posited as causal powers) whilst our capacity to grasp such ideas would be equivalent to the assertion that we possess a pure form of *reason*. To these generic commitments of innatism we need to add some more to characterize a bit further the position of Descartes as it is he who, whilst not perhaps being Locke’s only target, was his most illustrious predecessor who upheld this view. Descartes
submitted his *Meditations* to some other philosophers in order to discover what objections they might put to it and two who objected to the notion of innate ideas were Thomas Hobbes and Pierre Gassendi. Both pointed to the fact that Descartes’ conception of innate ideas appeared to require that we always think (though this is due not so much directly to his innatism as to his view of the nature of mind). However, they pointed to periods of unconsciousness as indicating that we do not always think, and hence as indicating a problem with Descartes’ view. Descartes’ replied to this objection by stating that we do not have to say that just because an idea is innate that we always have it but merely that it is an idea we could always summon up. So Descartes’ innatism is often described as being of a dispositional kind or as indicative of a capacity whilst other, more naïve, defenders of innatism who think an innate idea is one we actually hold, would be termed instead *occurrent* innatists.

In turning now to Locke’s attack on innatism we must first ask the question what he took the key claim of the innatists to be? He describes this in the first sentence of the chapter when he says that some hold the view that the understanding contains certain innate principles and he gives examples of these in paragraph four of the chapter where he points to the logical principles of identity and non-contradiction. However to this point he later in the chapter (paras. 21 and 25) makes clear also that he takes the innatist to hold that these principles are the foundations of all other knowledge and we should recall that Descartes, at the beginning of the First Meditation, also suggested that he would build up knowledge from its
foundations. So it is not merely that certain principles are innate, it is also that these principles are the ground of the rest of our knowledge on the innatist view that Locke is criticising. Locke also takes the innatist to be committed to the view that innate principles are ones that are universally assented to and the reason he thinks this is that an innate principle would be something that is self-evident to us. The claims for universal assent and self-evidence should however not be taken to be primary claims the innatist makes as they would rather follow from the point that such innate principles are the foundation of other knowledge.

Rather than beginning by attacking the claim that the principles that Locke has identified as being central to the innatist position are foundational for our knowledge however he instead opens his attack by denying that these principles are universally assented to. His basic point here is to the effect that these abstract logical principles are not explicitly affirmed or even understood by infants and certain people who are mentally underdeveloped. However this argument is only really something that touches the naïve occurrent form of innatism as it gives a quick reason for seeing that it cannot be right to think that some ideas are always held by any one who possesses even rudiments of understanding. This is not sufficient in itself however to show that very young children for example do not, in their practical reasoning, operate in accordance with these principles well before they are capable of expressing them. So for instance neither very young children nor mentally underdeveloped people attempt to both open and close
a door at the same time and this is evidence enough on a dispositional form of innatism to show that the principle of non-contradiction is innate.

Locke does next in fact turn to the dispositional form of the doctrine when he expresses the notion that some defenders of the doctrine suggest that it is our capacity to know certain truths that is innate whilst the actual truths may be acquired (or not as in the case of the mentally underdeveloped person). This point he develops as the conception that we assent to the principles that are innate when we come to the use of reason. This view is however itself somewhat ambiguous as Locke makes clear. We could mean one of two different things by the claim that we assent to these principles when we come to the use of reason. We could either mean that we assent to these principles as soon as we are mature enough to so that the acknowledgment of these principles is identical to having a mature understanding or we could instead be claiming that once reason has sufficiently developed it is capable of discovering these principles. Locke first considers the view that reason discovers these principles when it is sufficiently developed.

In responding to this argument Locke argues that on the basis of it we would have to say that whatever truths reason can certainly discover would be by virtue of this shown to be innate. He gives on this basis the fact that we would have therefore to say that both the primary axioms of mathematics and the theorems that are derived from them are hence innate. In response to this claim Locke argues that it hence appears that anything that is reasonably demonstrable is thus innate. In response to this suggestion
however Locke’s argument again aims mainly at occurrent innatism as when he says that this requires reason to discover something it already knew so that before reason discovers them we both knew them and didn’t know them. This again does not touch Descartes’ claim of dispositional innatism.

In turning to the other interpretation of the view that we assent to the principles in question when we come to the use of reason, the view that coming to reason is identical to the affirmation of these principles, Locke denies that this is correct and his denial is made on factual grounds to the effect that children who have come to the use of reason do not affirm these principles and that many persons who do not become literate but nonetheless do use reason do not affirm these principles. His argument here is to the effect that these principles are general and abstract and are indeed, as the first version of the argument suggested, discovered by reason. Furthermore this argument is responded to by pointing out that children make a distinction between sweet and bitter before they make the distinctions involved in these principles. This again however is not sufficient as a response to dispositional innatism as the distinction between sweet and bitter indicates a basic grasp of the principle that two things are distinct from each other, a principle that such an innatist can argue is a capacity that is innate.

The final version of the innatist principle that Locke replies to is the conception that universal assent is given to principles that are innate when they are proposed to us and the terms in which they are proposed are understood by us. Effectively this is a clearer way of stating the view that
we assent to them when we come to reason since on this basis we need not consider children’s reasoning powers. Locke’s response to this is that if this is a criteria for something being innate then a very large number of principles would have to admitted to be innate, not merely the general principles he takes to be the point of the innatist argument. However this is not really the strong point of his reply: the point of it is drawn out when we consider the terms in question. On this argument as soon as someone can say and understand that yellow is different from red then they will affirm it and so this proposition is innate. However the ideas of yellow and red are not innate but derived from sense perception and so the component parts of this proposition are not innate although apparently the whole in which they fall is. This involves, says Locke, a contradiction and this argument is certainly a good one for his position though it depends on the assertion that a whole proposition cannot be innate unless the parts of which it is composed are also innate and we may wonder whether the innatist has to accept this.

This argument is however the best one that Locke really offers against the various claims for universal assent for innate ideas and in this chapter he effectively assumes that universal assent is the only basis to the claim that there are any innate ideas. The initial principles that are presented as innate are formal logical principles however and what Locke does is translate the propositions involved in these principles into material ones that relate to certain given contents. In doing this he points to the absurdity of suggesting that the proposition once made thus material is one we should
accept as innate due to its conforming to the criteria in question of being assented to as soon as we grasp the meaning of the terms involved. However in so doing he is failing to note that the specification of the principle may well relate to the contents of sensory knowledge whilst the formal principle that is thereby being specified need not and that it is the former that could thus be claimed to be innate. The second point is that universal assent is not the only grounds for the claim for innate ideas though Locke is right to think that it is a ground taken to be very important. The negative arguments Locke presents against innate ideas are not intended directly to suggest some other ground for the alleged general assent to general principles, merely to undercut our empirical confidence that such general assent exists. As such this are sceptical arguments rather than arguments intended directly to convince us of a distinct empiricist view of ideas. To the more direct arguments of that kind we will turn next time.