The Slate Is Not Empty: Descartes and Locke on Innate Ideas

René Descartes and John Locke, two of the principal philosophers who shaped modern philosophy, disagree on several topics; one of them concerns whether the human mind contains innate ideas. In this essay, I will defend Descartes’ argument that some ideas, indeed, are engraved in the mind at birth, and demonstrate how Lockean claim against innate ideas is incomplete.

Descartes’ arguments, in Meditations on First Philosophy [1641/42], depend heavily on innate ideas. He argues that we have some ideas that must be innate, since they have not originated from the senses, and they could not have been invented by our own mind (Descartes, VII 37-38). In other words, there are ideas such as existence, identity and infinity that are not derived from anything we may perceive through the senses, while being far beyond what the power of imagination of the human mind is capable of creating. They are products of pure reason, rather than based on experience, or what we see, hear, smell, taste or feel. For example, Descartes, after having deemed dubitable all ideas derived from sensory information, maintains that he exists, although he, in fact, might not be who he thought himself to be (Descartes, VII 25). Upon eliminating all dubitable candidates of his identity, he concludes that he is a thinking thing, a being that thinks (Descartes, VII 27; also see 28). In both cases, Descartes’ logic for deducing his existence and his identity relies only on the faculty of the mind, rather than any sensory experience or perception of the outside world. Furthermore, such ideas as God and infinity contain more formal reality than we, finite human beings, do, and therefore must have been “put there by some cause which contains at least as much reality as [we] conceive to be in [the objects of the ideas]” (Descartes, VII 41); Descartes believes that the cause of an effect must have at least as much reality as the latter contains (Ibid.), hence eliminating the chance of finite beings possibly inventing the idea of infinity, or an infinite being, God. Therefore, these ideas, he argues, must be innate, having been engraved in the mind at birth.
Locke, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1689], written largely in response to Cartesian philosophy, argues against the notion of innate ideas. He argues that we can obtain all knowledge “barely by the use of [our] natural faculties … without the help of any innate impressions” (Locke, 7). For Locke, innate ideas, if they exist at all, must be universally agreed upon, as well as being known to the mind without the need for enlightenment or “activation” of any sort. Even the most basic logical statements, such as “What is, is” (Locke, 8 ¶4), cannot be considered innate, because young children and the mentally challenged do not show any sign of knowing them (Locke, 8 ¶5); if such truths require one to have “come to the use of reason” (Locke, 9 ¶6), Locke argues, they are not innate, or “naturally imprinted” (Locke, 8 ¶5), but “acquired by thought and meditation, and a right use of their faculties” (Locke, 28 ¶15).

Throughout the rest of the first book, he also offers objections to more specific kinds and examples of innate ideas, including identity, God, and infinity. First, regarding the idea of identity, he argues the idea is not universally known clearly and distinctly enough to be considered a native impression (Locke, 24 ¶4). Second, and quite similarly, people of different cultures and social backgrounds seem to vary in their conceptions of God; therefore, Locke writes, even the “unity and infinity of the deity” (Locke, 28 ¶15), not held universally, seems not to be innate, but rather a social construct. Third, regarding the idea of infinity, Locke argues that the mind has the ability to take the idea of the finite dimensions of observed things or the finiteness of conceived numbers, and imagine the endless, limitless extension or addition of them (Locke, 86-87). In this way, the idea that people have of infinity can be explained without relying on an infinite being to grant the idea; the mind is capable, according to Locke, of generating the complex idea based on the data that it has from sensory experience. In this manner, the mind can acquire all ideas and knowledge that it typically needs from sensory inputs and its reflection upon them (Locke, 33 ¶2; see also 34-35), making innate ideas unnecessary. As Descartes suggests that those ideas whose origins cannot be explained
in terms of sensory inputs or of the mind’s creation are innate, Locke’s demonstration that the mind is capable of assembling such ideas, without the need to assume the innateness of ideas, seems to refute Descartes’ argument effectively.

However, the system that Locke suggests of acquisition of ideas does not always work. First of all, his aforementioned “children and idiots” (Locke, 8 ¶5) argument against innate ideas lies on a shaky ground. Young children whose mental capacities have yet to be fully developed, as well as people with mental challenges preventing their mental capacities from being developed to the fullest possible extent, lack the ability to browse their mind for innate ideas. Locke, by presenting the case of children and the mentally challenged, merely proves that not everyone can browse and find these ideas or concepts that may or may not be innate in the mind; this neither proves nor disproves the possibility of the very presence of innate ideas. One may argue, in support of Locke’s position, that if one has an idea, he or she must be aware of it. However, ideas may also exist hidden, or implicitly, within other ideas; anyone who has analyzed (by reason) a complex concept or idea knows that ideas, in fact, are often found to be embedded or implied in one another. It is quite clear that a person may not necessarily be aware of all ideas that he or she possesses.

Moreover, had the mind been an entirely blank slate (tabula rasa), as Locke claims it to be, it would not be capable of synthesizing any information, hence incapable of learning. In other words, empirical methods of acquiring knowledge may grant the mind bits and pieces of what is in the outer world that it perceives, but the mind must have in advance the ideas of what it cannot perceive directly through the senses, in order to assemble those pieces to get such ideas as infinity and causality. In the case of infinity, Locke argues that one can reach the idea by considering a limitless addition or extension of finite numbers already known. However, one cannot decide to continue adding numbers infinitely without having the idea of infinity, or what it aims to do, making Locke’s logic seriously question-begging. If the mind knew nothing about the destination, it could not begin
the journey toward a goal beyond its immediate range of sight. This is precisely why Descartes maintains that “this power we have of starting from a given number and adding to it indefinitely provides us with a proof that we are not the causes of ourselves, but depend on a being who surpasses us” (Beyssade, 182; emphasis added).

Another example of the limitation of Locke’s argument has to do with his explanation of how we get the idea of causality. Locke argues that we acquire the idea of cause and effect through observing “the operations of bodies on one another” (Locke, 132 ¶2) that result in the change in the latter’s ontological status. According to him, we observe one thing causing another to come into existence, change its shape or position, or otherwise undergo a change, thus forming the notion of cause and effect. However, this example, also, assumes the pre-existing idea of causality already present in the mind. Without the idea, one could establish the idea of correlation, or that of \textit{subsequence}, from observation. However, the concept of \textit{consequence}, one thing being \textit{caused} by another, is drastically different from it, since the causation itself is beyond what one can perceive through the senses. Although Locke does acknowledge that we “bring into the world … inherent faculties” (Locke, 8 ¶2ff), it is evident that there must be more in the mind than mere faculties that it inherently contains. The mind must contain some innate ideas that it cannot immediately acquire through experience, since no mind can make such leaps as ones from a very large, yet finite, number to infinity or from correlation to causation, without such ideas. These ideas must exist in the mind to serve as marked destinations, as the mind goes through the process of synthesis of experience-based ideas and knowledge.

So far, I have described Descartes’ argument for innate ideas and Lockean objection to it, and argued that Locke fails to sufficiently overthrow the former’s argument. Not only does Locke base his argument on a shaky ground, failing to completely eliminate the possibility of innate ideas that require the activation through the use of fully developed reason, but he, in attempting to grant
the mind the power to acquire all knowledge through sensory experience and its reflection on it, makes a leap that can only be explained through the existence of innate ideas, making his argument against them circular and questionable.
Works Cited and Consulted


Descartes, René, Meditations on First Philosophy, with Selections from the Objections and Replies [1641 and 1642], ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).


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• All in-text references to Descartes’ Meditations use the standard pagination according to the original Adam-Tannery edition, referred to as ‘AT’
  e.g. “VII 1” referring to the first page of the seventh volume of the A-T edition.