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To Infinity and Beyond, again

1. *What is Locke's critique of the Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas? How might Descartes respond to one or more of the arguments? Do you agree with Locke's criticisms? Why or why not?*

This essay will outline Locke's critique of the Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas, that there are some ideas which are imprinted on the human mind from conception which are known through reason alone. His critique is separated into four parts, namely, that they are epistemically unnecessary, that the argument from *General Assent* is flawed, that it employs a mistaken notion of *reason*, and that these innate ideas are nowhere to be found in the places where they ought to be. It will then consider a Cartesian response: that we can only have an idea of God as an infinite being if we accept innate ideas. Finally, it will conclude in favour of the Lockean picture of our grasp of the infinite, that since we can neither picture it, nor play with it in our minds, it is in fact a negative idea; and his empirical method, which leads us to a more reasoned conclusion with the help of centuries of scientific advancement, thus taking a stance sympathetic to Locke's criticisms.

Locke's critique begins with the observation that we come to acquire all of the knowledge we have by the use of our natural faculties. Why ought we presume, he asks, that something like an idea of colour would be innate, when God has given us eyes such that we could perceive colour from external objects (Locke §1. 9). Given that we have the faculties required to ascertain all ideas through these means, it would be superfluous to add an additional category, namely this one of innate ideas.

Locke then moves on to critique the fact that the general justification given for innate ideas, the argument from *General Assent*, is flawed both in its assumption and its conclusion. That is to say, there are neither principles that are universally assented to by everyone; nor, if there were, would that prove them innate.

Firstly, Locke asks us to consider the maxims "Whatsoever is, is" and "it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be" (Locke §4. 9). Locke takes these two statements to be the kind of truths that, were there universal assent to any knowledge, it would seem odd that they should not be included in that set of ideas. And yet, he remarks, these propositions are in fact not universally known, because they are not known by children or 'idiots' (§5. 9). Locke asks how this could be the case if these ideas were innate: how could it be that children and idiots, who have souls, do not understand truths that are allegedly imprinted in them (§5. 10)? If we want the property of 'being in the understanding' to connote anything meaningful, we would have to hold that to be understood is also to be perceived as understood (§5. 10). Yet, these ideas are not perceived by children or idiots, so they cannot be in their minds; and if they are not imprinted in their minds, then they could not be innate.

Locke then responds to the claim that the use of *reason* as a mode of ascertaining certain ideas shows these ideas to be innate. This, Locke says, would entail one of the following situations: either these ideas come to be known as soon as one begins to employ this faculty, or the use of reason assists in the discovery of these ideas shows them to be innate (Locke §7. 11). Yet, it appears that although we do use this faculty to come to certain ideas, this process is incompatible with their being innate. Locke asserts that it would be a contradiction in terms to claim that certain ideas are imprinted on the mind, and yet are not known until some other

faculty of the mind is born: “it is in effect to say, that men know, and know them not, at the same time” (§9. 11).

Nor does it seem to be the case that we are made aware of any of these ideas as soon as we develop our faculty of reason. This is demonstrated firstly by the observation that children make use of reason long before they claim knowledge of supposed innate maxims; and secondly by the existence of adults that make use of reason, but have never thought of these maxims (§12. 12). Thus, Locke argues, that the role of *reason* has been misunderstood in its association with innate ideas, and an appeal to it does not add anything to support the position.

Finally, Locke points out that, were there innate ideas, we would naturally expect to find them in the places where other kinds of ideas are absent. Locke posits that those whose minds are unadulterated by custom or education ought to display the clearest knowledge of these supposedly innate ideas (Locke §27. 20). Yet, this category is composed, again, of “children, idiots, savages, and illiterate people”: precisely those who do not display an apprehension of the abstract maxims that are supposedly innate (§27. 21). On the contrary, mathematics and the natural sciences are in fact found in the halls of universities, institutions with the sole purpose of molding “native thoughts” (§27. 20).

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Let us now turn to some replies that might be levied against Locke’s critiques. Descartes could reply that Locke has, for the most part, misunderstood the claim he was making. The innateness of certain ideas does not come from them being apprehended on first utterance, but rather due to their epistemic properties. That is to say, the claim was never that tautological truths were innate. Rather, there are certain kinds of complex ideas of which the terms could not be known unless they were innate. Neither the child nor the idiot have an understanding of

"Whatsoever is, is" because it is learned through experience in the world, and thus an adventitious truth - this is uncontroversial. The Cartesian picture does not necessitate that children and idiots know of these truths, so Descartes would say that our inability to find them does not contradict his doctrine. Instead, the claim is that it would be impossible for *anyone* to have an idea of God, unless it was innate.

In this, Descartes would take issue with Locke's allegation that innate ideas are unnecessary. Descartes argues that he has a clear conception of what God is, but since He is immaterial, this idea cannot be caused by some external sensation (Descartes 18-1). Nor can it be an invented idea, because the infinite nature of God requires the idea of Him to be caused by something with an infinite existence, and our finite nature does not allow for this (15). This leads to the conclusion that the only way we could have such an idea is if it were innate in us, like a "mark of the workman" (19). Thus, Descartes would reply to Locke, we both accept the infinitude of God (Locke §35. 211), but how could it be that we come to this idea if we cannot find it by any of the means available to us?

The point of inflection here is this notion of infinity, and how we come to know it. Descartes believes that our idea of infinity is not one borne of negation (Descartes 16), and that we have some actual notion of it. Contrastingly, Locke believes that positive notions of infinity are merely examples of mental hubris (Locke §21. 141). Since both thinkers want to include this premise of infinite being in their conception of God, the question of who holds the stronger position becomes one of who has the correct notion of how we come about this idea of infinity.

On this point, I find myself more sympathetic to Locke's view that we do not have a positive idea of infinity. That is to say, when I conceptualize infinity, it is not that I have some clear image in my mind of what an infinite object or being is or looks like, but rather I have some

notion of the properties it may possess. For example, I do not so much have in my mind an image of an infinite line, as I have an intuitive grasp of the concept of a finite line who's length can be, in principle, continuously doubled. In fact, the concept of infinity is one that I would regard as among the least clear and distinct in my mind, so much so that it almost seems incongruent to posit that it could be innate.

Moreover, my idea of infinity is different not just in its lack of mental imagery, but also in my mind's access to it. For example, it is true that I may not have a mental image of a chiliagon, but one would be remiss to conclude that this makes it a negative idea. The key difference, then, between my concepts of infinity and of a chiliagon, rests in their malleability in my mind. That is to say, I can conceive of a point immediately before a chiliagon: a polygon with 999 sides; and a point immediately after: a polygon with 1001 sides. However, this move is not available to me when considering infinity: the terms infinity + n, and infinity - n are meaningless. And further, this does not seem like a lack of mental fortitude on my part, but rather as a part of the concept in of itself. The fact that I cannot do this indicates to me that my idea of infinity does not stand on its own; it only exists in relation to some other idea i.e. the finite.

Finally, it is difficult to square the Cartesian picture with the now prevalent atheistic conception. Were it the case that the idea of God was innate, it seems natural that, if not necessarily present in all peoples of a reasonable nature, that it should at least be affirmed by all these peoples when they come to it. And yet, this idea seems to have lost its force in the academy, the sphere where Locke indicates abstract thought is to be found. If we are to be serious about innateness as a quality of our idea of God, it seems to me absurd that once we remove social pressures to affirm it, it drops precipitously from our psyche. Yet, should it's

innateness not ensure its survival even after we are released from threat of punishment for believing its negation? While Locke himself wants to give us a proof of the existence of God through his empirical means, he alleges only human arrogance in protest of the view that we are the product of mere chance (Locke §6. 475). Yet, I am of the opinion that three hundred years of scientific advancement, and a theory of evolution, would lessen the force of this criticism. While we are forced to reject Descartes doctrine out of principle, we may keep Locke's method and adjust the conclusions given more recent discoveries.

To conclude, Locke takes issue with doctrine of innate ideas on the grounds that he finds it unnecessary, undemonstrated, and unjustified. Although Descartes can reply quite strongly to his criticisms, Locke makes takes a more convincing position based on his explanation of our grasp of infinity. This, coupled with the lack of necessity for God in his method, leads me to agree with his criticism of innate ideas. However, after we have ruled against the doctrine of innate ideas, I find that one question still lingers: how is it that we even have this idea of God? In the abstract, it seems patently absurd that one should believe in an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being, and yet it seems to grip our minds and hearts differently than any other idea. So much so, that in times of crisis we often choose to turn to it for solace; as the old adage goes, there are no atheists in a foxhole. It seems to me unique in this power, and while my sympathies lie with Locke, I can understand the want to attribute some special quality to this idea. Thus, perhaps there is still room to explore what exactly this idea of God is, and how it is that it has such a power over us, to where it seems innate.

Works cited:

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