

## Critically evaluate Locke's argument against the claim that the idea of God is innate

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(1482 words)

John Locke is a 17th-century British philosopher. He critically evaluated the claim that the idea of God is innate in his work "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding."<sup>[1]</sup> He opposed the notion that the concept of God is naturally inherent in humans and put forward several arguments to support his position. In this essay I will briefly describe his argument and my evaluation.

Locke gave crisis to the theory of innate idea on An Essay<sup>[1]</sup>. In Book I. Chapter 2, he said that, "No proposition can be said to be in the Mind, which it never yet knew, which it was never yet conscious of.", which said that human acquire knowledge from his ability not from innate or the time he was born. Then, the knowledge of god is not born with innate but acquire from experience. In his era, Descartes' theory of innate ideas was widely popular throughout Europe. However Locke disagreed with the idea and as we learn in class, he strongly believed that this obstructed people from acquiring more knowledge. The first time I saw his proposition, I was shocked that how can a human born with nothing. But to support his proposition, Locke gave out several arguments, which is in highly logical and nearly convince me.

Locke gave one of his essential argument on pointing out in the Volume I of Essay, that a

human baby's mind is like a blank paper (in his word, a tabula rasa), devoid of any knowledge or concepts. Then knowledge of god and knowledge of world will not be innate. He constructed this conclusion with three premise.

First of all, he believed that existence of widespread consensus did not exist, which was important in innate idea. Here Locke pointed out that because the concept of "exist" has never reached a total agreement. Also, children don't hold the concept of "exist". If the existence of widespread consensus exists, then these two problems will never exist. So the existence of widespread consensus did not exist ever. Here Locke attacked the idea effectively. He noted that different cultures and religions have different concepts of God, suggesting that the concept of God is not inherent in the human mind. If the concept of God were innate, then all people should have similar or identical concepts of God, which is not the case in reality. However from my prospective, I hold a problem that what if everyone can born with different understanding of concept, and concepts of "exist" can be different. So his attack may not hold.

Secondly, those who hold the concept of innate ideas believe that truth is engraved in the human soul, it is innate in itself, and the role of reason is merely to realize and activate it. Locke against this idea by telling that although reason is to realize truth, we can't imply that truth is innate. He proved that by using the concept of "maxim", he pointed out that idea needs language to express. Children will only know " $1+1=2$ " when he both has reason and knowledge of "=" and "2". Here Locke has strong logic, I used to think that babies may hold their idea without using language to express it. But then I realize that this is what Locke said: "Rationality is the ability to utilize known knowledge to comprehend unknown knowledge. If truth is innate, we cannot discover it through rationality." Here his premise and argument are well organized. Just like Kenneth(2018) said:" the question is not what chain of events leads

to the perception but rather in what alteration of the mind this perception consists".(P15)

Thirdly, Locke against that universally agree on propositions doesn't mean people hold innate idea. As far as I am concerned, we can let mathematical formulas serve as an example: people can easily agree with them, yet they cannot deduce them anew. Also, people should first learn language then idea. This is logical, since some children do know some of the basic knowledge of the world, they may not understand why. But another attack point I think, is on the understanding of the formulas. Imagine a formula need concept A and concept B to understand. What if the babies hold the concept A, but no concept B, so that they don't understand it, but still hold the innate idea? This may be true since babies may don't what love is, but they probably know their mother are taking care of them.

Above all three arguments, Locke deducted that baby's mind is blank. Since then, just like Kenneth(2018) mentioned, "Locke does believe that he can introspect all of these ideas and that, given the correct instructions"(P18). There is neither speculative principles like maths or physics, nor practical principles like virtue or religion. And by implementation, Locke said that the concept of god is not innate. People sense the god after they are born. This has a profound impact in history, since it's a breakthrough to the church.

However, if babies don't hold the mind of god, how did people acquire the knowledge of god? Locke then pointed out that the concept of God is typically acquired through experience rather than through innate intuition. He argued that individuals develop the concept of God gradually through sensation, experience, and reasoning, rather than it being innate. For example, a person might form the concept of God through observing the order and complexity of the natural world or through religious education and reading scripture. Therefore, Locke argued that the concept of God is based on individual experience and educational background

rather than being innate.

It is astonishing that in order to prove that god is not innate, Locke pushed out a new theory that nothing is innate. This must be a brand new idea at that time since Locke employed more sophisticated techniques to circumvent condemnation from the church without denying that god is existed. He built his idea with one argument to another, despite some gaps in his proofs, his arguments were clear and logically consistent, causing significant impact on the mainstream thoughts of his time. From a historical perspective, Locke provided the intellectual and theoretical foundation for the Enlightenment era and the revolution of liberal thought in the West.

But on the other hand, Locke was also constrained by the limitations of his era. Just like Ayers(1981) said: “When talking directly of miracles, Locke is, as we might expect in the circumstances of his time, distinctly cagey”.(P13) . Also, Locke has his own critical idea and logic and need us to investigate and evaluate them as deep as we can. Just like Pearce(2018) said:” Locke's inconsistency with regard to the likeness principles makes it difficult for critics such as Norris, Stillingfleet, and Astell to make their criticisms of thinking matter credible.”(P16)

Locke’s idea reminds me with one of the hot spot on Computer Science ---- Machine Learning. We put in millions of data into the machine and let it “understand” them by using the principle from mathematics and probabilistic theory. At first we can’t point out that the machine has the knowledge of the data, but then it “has” it by showing that it has the ability to predict data growing. There exist some discussion that some computer scientists think machine may hold some innate understand to the data. But by reading Locke’s argument, we can share more idea with them. It is obvious that human beings are not machine, but Locke's

ideas can indeed prompt further reflection, offering insights into our understanding of rapidly advancing artificial intelligence today. With the rapid advancement of AI like ChatGPT, we can still draw insights from Locke's epistemology to gain a deeper understanding of AI.

Above all, we have a deep look into John Locke's idea on against God is innate. We loop up into his three premise and think about them with questions. Locke has well organize structure and logic in building his idea, and inspire me to study more on philosophy.

### **Reference**

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