

THE EARLY MODERN DEBATE ON INNATE IDEAS:

A BRIEF TOUR OF DESCARTES, LOCKE, LEIBNIZ, AND HUME

Sukjae Lee
OSU Dept. of Philosophy
Feb. 26, 2010

I. Caveats & General Comments

- a. what mental items the nativist—the proponent of the view that there is something innate about us—are innate. Ideas? Knowledge? Principle or truths? Capacities or dispositions?
- b. What is meant by the term ‘innate’?

II. Focus on Innateness:

- a. Central issue: the relation of the mental items in question and experience.
- b. Broadly construed, how are mental items tied to experience?
 - i. Are all relevant mental items derived from experience? That is, do all relevant mental items depend on experience?
 - ii. Empiricist: All relevant mental items are derived from (depend on) experience.
- c. Notions of ‘Dependence’
 - i. Causal dependence: are the mental items in question causally dependent on experience? That is, is experience causally required for the mental items in question? Or do some of the mental items in question not require experience as part of their causal makeup?
 - ii. Explanatory dependence: are all of the relevant features of the mental items in question explained or explicable by episodes or features of our experience?
 - A. The representational nature of our ideas (the ‘objective reality’ of our ideas, in Cartesian terms)
 - B. the necessity of certain truths
 - C. the universality of certain concepts

III. Medieval Scholastic Detour

- a. Medieval Scholastic Empiricism and the ‘Transmission of Forms’ (TF) theory of perception
- b. Perception is just another instance of the general model of efficient causality: e.g. warm body heats a cold body by transmitting the form of heat that the former possesses and the latter had lacked
 - a process of ‘contagion’ or ‘infection’ or *transmission*
- c. In perception, the perceived object transmits its (sensible) form through a medium (light, in the case of vision) to the perceiver’s sensory organ, and this form eventually makes it to the mind. So the mind comes to have all ideas by literally coming to have the forms that were possessed by the objects of perception.
- d. The overlapping of causal dependence and explanatory dependence: particularly the representational nature is well accounted for by causation.

IV. Descartes

a. Background

- i. Critical Attitude toward Scholastic Conception and its Reliance on Forms
- ii. New Conception of Physical World: mechanical and geometrical. A world governed by pushpin mechanics and contact collision, consisting of matter exhaustively characterized by the qualities of size, shape, position, and motion (or rest).

b. All our ideas are innate!

- i. Our ideas of ‘secondary qualities’ and the failure of the TF model
- ii. Our ideas of ‘primary qualities’ and the lack of similarity or resemblance in terms of representational content.
- iii. All ideas are innate! (‘innate’ in the sense that they are not TF caused)
Quote from *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (AT VIII B 358-9)

c. Still, non-negligible fact of strong correlation and *involuntariness* of sensory ideas – a possibly different model of causation (some type of necessary connection or strong correlation)

d. **Special set** of innate ideas: there are some ideas that are not connected to sensory ideas in this way, i.e. ideas that do not require sensory stimulation; and they have features that sensory stimulation cannot explain. E.g. idea of God.

V. Locke

a. Very much reminiscent of Scholastic Empiricism.

- i. All of our ideas come from experience.
- ii. The first and principle source of our ideas is sensation of physical objects.
- iii. The only other source is reflection: our awareness of the operations of our own mind, but even this operation is dependent on sensation
- iv. Operations on simple ideas resulting in complex ideas.

b. Locke’s wariness about TF model.

- i. He explicitly denies to speculate about the physical causal processes involved in perception, or to examine “by what motions of our spirits or alterations of our bodies we come to have any *sensation* by our organs, or any *ideas* in our understanding” (Introduction Sec.2)

c. A lot of agreement with Descartes.

VI. The Disagreement: all of our simple, nonsensory ideas are ideas of reflection.

a. Locke: yes (all our simple, nonsensory ideas arise from “our observation employed ... about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves.” *Essays* II.i.2)

b. Descartes: no

c. So the central question is what are among the representational contents of ideas (of God) are really like. What can our ideas represent?

d. Are there ideas the contents of which we cannot attribute to sensory stimulation nor awareness of mental operations?

VII. Deciding the issue

a. What resources does Locke have?

b. What resources does Descartes have?

VIII. Hume & Leibniz

- a. Hume's 'Copy Thesis' and the missing shade of blue
- b. Leibniz's Mill