

John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*
and G.W. Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding*

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Enlightenment Epistemology

- Time focused on the idea of human progress → that humanity is ever working towards more perfect knowledge, more perfect political systems
- Advancements in natural sciences
- Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, 1687, attempts to bring together various physical occurrences into single system, such as planets and motion on earth
 - Stimulated intellectual thought and activity in the eighteenth century
 - Encourages European philosophers to think about nature as orderly and with consistent laws that are controlled by mathematics → we are able to know these laws and understand the world
- Conception of nature changes during this time → rise of modern science
- Enlightenment epistemologists tasked with participate in creating new knowledge of nature → create framework in which to interpret this new knowledge

Where does our innate knowledge come from?

- Descartes: two things we know for sure
 - God exists → God himself implanted it in our minds (innate idea)
 - I exist → cogito ergo sum (idea from rationality)
- John Locke (1632-1704): attacked innate ideas → During time that Descartes and other philosophers are trying to draw up lists of innate ideas (e.g. moral, religious, logic, mathematics)
- Both empiricists and rationalists interested in topic of innate knowledge
- Locke claims central tenet of empiricism is that all knowledge is acquired through experience
- Locke: knowledge requires language → must have language to know or articulate any principles
- Noam Chomsky (b. 1928): Universal Grammar → innate cognitive capacity for grammar and language → cognitive nativism or essentialism

Commonly held innate ideas

- Knowledge of mathematical principles and logic
- Knowledge of morality → Garden of Eden and original sin
- Knowledge of the existence of God
- Hardwired for grammar (Noam Chomsky)
- Instinctual knowledge of skills needed for survival (infants know how to suckle)

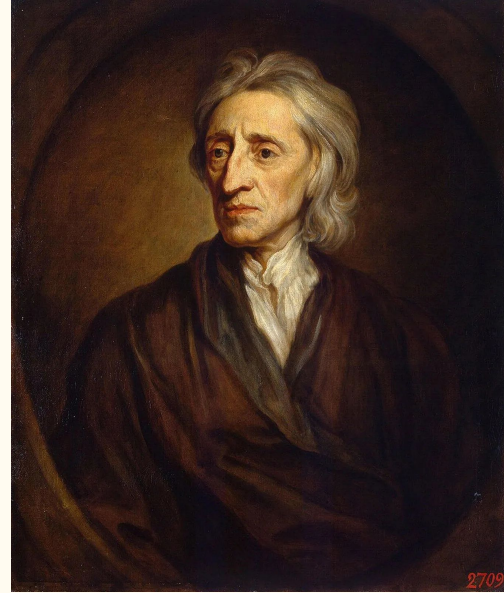


Knowledge comes from Experience

“It is an established opinion amongst some men that there are in the understanding certain innate principles, some primary notions, characters, as it were, stamped upon the mind of man, which the soul receives in its very first being and brings into the world with it. It would be sufficient to convince unprejudiced readers of the falseness of this supposition, if I should only show (as I hope I shall in the following parts of the discourse) how men, barely by the use of their natural faculties, may attain to all the knowledge they have, without the help of any innate impressions, and may arrive at certainty without any such original notions or principles” (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I.ii.1)

John Locke: There are no innate principles

- Argument: there are no innate principles hardwired into the human mind at birth
- Evidence: babies!
 - "If we will attentively consider new-born children, we shall have little reason to think, that they bring many ideas into the world with them."
- Rather, "by degrees, afterwards, ideas come into their minds; and...they get no more, nor no other, than what experience, and the observation of things, that come in their way, furnish them with."
- An attack on nativism, the doctrine of innate ideas (that we are born with certain characteristics or principles hardwired into our minds, essentialism)
- Fetuses have sensory experience and humans can acquire ideas before birth (e.g. colors or tastes)
- Sweetness: universal understanding of sweetness not innate idea but through exposure at early age



No universal truth

- Major argument against innate ideas: there is no universal truth to which all people agree
- Argued against propositions that rationalists offer as universal truth → e.g. the identity principle (the relation that each thing bears only to itself), children and ‘idiots’ are unaware of these claims and propositions
- Common counter argument against Locke: must develop rational faculties to understand already innate ideas
- Locke’s rebuttal: "by this means, there will be no difference between the maxims of the mathematicians, and theorems they deduce from them; all must be equally allowed innate; they being all discoveries made by the use of reason."

Leibniz, Reason, Experience, and Innate ideas

- Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716)
- *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1746) → chapter by chapter rebuttal of John Locke's earlier *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)
- Criticizes Locke's rebuttal against innate ideas
- Leibniz says there are innate ideas which require experience to bring them to light



Leibniz → We are born with the knowledge of God

“The question at issue is whether the soul itself is entirely void, like a tablet whereon nothing has yet been written (*tabula rasa*), as is the view of Aristotle and the author of the essay [i.e. Locke], and everything marked on it comes solely from the senses and experience, or whether the soul contains originally the principles of various notions and doctrines, which external objects simply recall from time to time, as is my view and that of Plato, [...] and of all those who attribute this meaning to the passage from St. Paul (Rom. ii. 15), where he says that the law of God is writ in men’s hearts”

New Essays in Human Understanding (1705, 1765)

What is Leibniz arguing against? What evidence does it bring in to support his argument at this point?

What we know from birth

“Logic also, together with metaphysics and morals, the one of which forms natural theology and the other natural jurisprudence, are full of such truths; and consequently proof of them can only arise from inner principles, which are called innate”

What does he mean by knowledge of natural theology? By natural jurisprudence?

What is reflection?

“Perhaps our gifted author [Locke] will not entirely dissociate himself from my opinion. For after having devoted the whole of his first book to the rejection of innate ideas, understood in a certain sense, he yet admits in the beginning of the second and in what follows that ideas whose origin is not in sensation arise from reflexion. Now reflexion is nothing but an attention to what is in us, and the senses do not give us what we already bring with us”

What does reflection mean to you? Does it involve the organization of previous experience? Or the tapping into innate ideas? Or something else altogether?

