

It is often said that Locke rejected the theory that some of the mind's ideas are innate. He did reject this theory but that is not the same as arguing directly against the existence of innate ideas. He argues against them, but only indirectly. He does this by means of arguing against the existence of innate knowledge. But proving the non-existence of innate knowledge, he does not think he has thereby proved the non-existence of innate ideas. Even if there were no innate knowledge, it does not follow that there are no innate ideas. Locke defines knowledge as

*The perception of the agreement or disagreement of two ideas*

So, given this definition of knowledge, if there were innate knowledge, there would have to be innate ideas. Locke's strategy is not to prove that there are no innate ideas on the ground that there is no innate knowledge. His strategy is to undermine the plausibility of the doctrine of innate ideas by showing that there is no need to infer their existence. Those who believed in innate knowledge argued that there must then be innate ideas since knowledge is impossible without ideas. Locke attacks the innateness question by trying to show that there is nothing for the doctrine of innate ideas to explain.

Locke is careful to acknowledge that rationalists like Descartes were correct in their claim that that there is a large class of truths that cannot be acquired from experience. The truths in this class have the properties of being universal and of being necessary. All of the truths of mathematics and Logic are of this sort.

Locke also acknowledged that there were some metaphysical truths of this type, such as that whatever begins to exist must have a cause of its existence and that qualities cannot exist apart from being in a substance. He even agreed that there are some propositions of Ethics that are of this kind, such as the proposition that one ought to seek good and avoid evil. Locke hoped to show that it is not necessary to infer that knowledge of these truths is born within us just because they cannot be directly acquired from experience.

Another reason that was given for the claim that we have some innate knowledge is that these propositions are obvious as soon as they are considered by the mind.

It was claimed by many defenders of innate ideas that the only explanation for their being obvious is that they are familiar and, so, must already exist within us.

Locke hoped to remove all plausibility for the theory of innate knowledge by showing how we are able to construct these true propositions from elements that are acquired from experience. He hoped to explain the obviousness and the necessity of these truths by their internal and intrinsic features. Because of the ways in which the ideas themselves are related to each other, one can immediately perceive that the proposition as a whole must be true when we combine or compare them.

Besides this general strategy, Locke also attacked the doctrine of innate knowledge by refuting what he took to be a number of other bad arguments for the doctrine.

In spite of Descartes and others, the idea of God is not familiar to everyone in all parts of the world.

If there were innate principles, we ought to be conscious of them. How can we have knowledge of a certain rule or principle and not be conscious of it in those moments when we are actually applying them? But even children are often capable of reasoning smoothly and easily about some things and they are not conscious of any such principles.

There are necessary truths, such as that red is not blue that are not known to people who lack the relevant sensory capacities.

If all necessary truths were innate, there would be no need to use Reason to prove anything. Proofs would never be needed for any necessary proposition to be known.

Practical (ethical) principles cannot be innate because not one of them is universally accepted.

Another of Locke's motives for attacking innateness is that the doctrine makes it so easy to persuade people to accept propositions as true and implanted in them by God simply because these propositions seem familiar, natural and obvious. Even though they have been instilled in us by our peers from early childhood and we have since forgotten how we learned them, the doctrine would tell us that they must be innate even if they are really learned. The doctrine thus gives the existing assumptions of society more authority than they deserve. It stops people from thinking for themselves. It promotes rivalry and conflicts between factions.