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#### LOCKE ON INNATE IDEAS

# Rationalism vs. Empiricism

- Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz
- Prefers reason over sensory experience
- A priori

Locke

 Reliance on sensory experience to build knowledge: the empty cabinet

A posteriori

## Arguments for innate ideas

- 1. Everyone agrees that p if and only if p is innate.
- 2. If everyone agrees that p, then p is innate.
- 3. If p is innate, then everyone agrees that p.
- Each will be refuted by Locke
  - 1 is the combination of 2 and 3

### Universal consent

- Locke argues that universal consent does not exist
  - Children and idiots
  - Goldbach's conjecture
- Universal consent doesn't imply p
  - Colors

### Improbability of discovery

 "... it seeming to me near a contradiction to say that there are truths imprinted on the soul which it does not perceive or understand – imprinting, if it signifies anything, being nothing else but the making certain truths to be perceived." (AW 319)

• Phaedo, Plato

# **Positive Project**

- Attempt to prove that all we know is from experience
  - Contrasted to the negative position that only outlines arguments against innate ideas
  - Supplants an explanation a positive model of the process of acquiring knowledge
    - "Our observation employed either about external sensible objects or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking." (AW 323)

# Two means of acquiring knowledge

- "All ideas come from sensation or reflection." (AW 323)
- Sensation: the source of our ideas, our interpretation of sensory perception translated into understanding
- Reflection: inspires ideas that "the mind get s by reflecting on its own operations within itself" (AW 323)
  - Perception, thinking, doubting, believing, etc.

# Kinds of knowledge

- Actual knowledge: the present thought process that reconciles ideas in the brain – the process
- Habitual knowledge: remembrance of actual knowledge – not having to repeat the process (AW 387)
  - "For our finite understandings being able to think clearly and distinctly but on one thing at once, if men had no knowledge of any more than what they actually thought on, they would all be very ignorant; and he who knew most would know but one truth, that being all he was able to think on at one time." (AW 388)

## Knowledge of mathematics

- Relies not on innate ideas but on intuition and demonstration
  - Intuitive: seeing the process each time one thinks about a problem
  - Demonstrative: chain of logic is bypassed; one remembers only the end point, having once understood each step
    - Demonstrative knowledge is more imperfect

### Questions

- What distinguishes innate ideas from capacities?
  - Poverty of stimulus argument
- Does Locke believe in universal truths? If not, does it matter?
- Does tabula rasa, or the empty cabinet, imply that all men are equal?

# THE END