

Innatism, Empiricism and Mysticism (and “I”-Knowing)

Address to the Assembly of Kinlein
October 18, 2014

Fr. Paul Sullins¹
The Catholic University of America
Marriage and Religion Research Institute

The predominant belief today about human learning and memory is that we are born as a “blank slate,” in Latin “tabula rasa”, and we gain our knowledge and ideas only through new experiences and our memory of them. At birth the mind is like a dry sponge. This belief, known as Empiricism or Positivism, dates back to Aristotle and has supported by many prominent philosophers such as David Hume, John Locke and Francis Bacon.² The alternative theory, put forth most notably by Plato as his Theory of Forms and later by Descartes in his Meditations, is that the human mind is born with pre-existing ideas or knowledge. This view, called Innatism, exists in a strong form which holds, as did Plato, that all knowledge is innate, therefore all learning is a form of recollection, or in a more moderate form which holds, with Descartes, that some knowledge is innate but some knowledge is also learned through experience. Today most philosophers and scientists are empiricists, though there is a sizable and growing minority who are innatists, virtually all of the moderate kind.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Paul Sullins (M.Div.; Ph.D. Catholic University 1998), is Associate Professor of Sociology at the Catholic University of America; Director of the Summer Institute of Catholic Social Thought; Member of the Board of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists; Fellow of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies; Ignatius Loyola Fellow for Catholic Identity at the Center for the Advancement of Catholic Higher Education; Associate Pastor of the Church of Saint Mark the Evangelist, Hyattsville, Maryland; and a Fourth Degree member of the Knights of Columbus. He has authored two books and over 100 journal articles and research reports on issues of faith and culture, and has recently been named a Senior Fellow for Family Research at the Marriage and Religion Research Institute (MARRI), the research arm of the Family Research Council; his next book, Married Catholic Priests (Oxford), is coming out in early 2015. Formerly Episcopalian, Fr. Sullins is a married Catholic priest with an inter-racial family of three children, two adopted.

² Some material adapted from “Are We Born With Knowledge? » the Nerve Blog | Blog Archive | Boston University,” accessed October 12, 2014, <http://sites.bu.edu/ombs/2012/02/22/are-we-born-with-knowledge/>.

Where is the Kinlein philosophy on this question? The Kinlein approach, if I understand it correctly, clearly affirms the existence of innate knowledge. Talking about the realization that “there will never be a human being who knows everything” in the book *What Am I Doing with Who I am?*, Lucille Kinlein says: “And when did I know that I knew that? It must have been with me from the first moment of my being, my conception, that I was in a state of KNOWING.”³ For Kinlein, we begin life not just as learning beings, but also as knowing beings.

Both innatists and empiricists agree that an innate idea would have to be essentially the same for every human being; in other words, innate ideas would be universal ideas, and all universal ideas must be innate. For empiricists, this has generally been the most difficult problem with innatism, because most spheres of knowledge show nothing like a uniformity of ideas. Most of the debate on this point has been concerned with morality, where a resolution of the problem is the most urgent, since we can defer a conclusion in speculative matters or live with an incomplete conclusion in practical matters, but in moral matters we have to choose one way or the other, and so must resolve the question whether or not we believe in a universal, and therefore innate, morality.

John Locke, the formative tabula rasa empiricist of the modern era, refutes the claim (which Kinlein makes) that there is an innate idea of morality by pointing out that if this were true we would have a universal set of morals and practical principles that every human being agreed on. Furthermore, Locke argues, if we all had innate ideas we wouldn't need to use reason to discover them because they would already be present in the human mind. However it's evident that we often have very different moral and practical principles and that we appeal to reason to deduce the truthfulness of moral principles and to discover new principles. Therefore Locke

³ M. Lucille Kinlein, *What Am I Doing with Who I Am?* (Minneapolis, MN: National Center of Kinlein, 1995), 14.

rejects the notion that moral ideas—and on the same arguments, any ideas—are innate.⁴

Locke’s critique was devastating for the Platonic theory that all knowledge is recollection of pre-existent ideas. Since Locke’s time no philosopher has held that all ideas are innate. Subsequent innatists responded to Locke first by making more precise distinctions in the forms of knowledge and then by exploring more deeply the relation between innate knowledge and the use of reason.

Immanuel Kant, who was active a century after Locke (Kant died in 1804, exactly 100 years after Locke died, in 1704), disagreed with Plato that all knowledge was innate, and disagreed with Locke that no knowledge was innate, taking a kind of middle position that humans acquire new knowledge through experience but also possess some knowledge that is innate. To make this distinction Kant defined the now-familiar terms *a priori* and *a posteriori*, to distinguish knowledge that humans attain prior to and following after sense experience. Just as Locke focused on the limits of *a priori* knowledge, Kant focused on the limits of *a posteriori* knowledge. He points out that by making a rational argument against innatism, Locke is assuming that human beings have some sort of reasoning ability. By using sentences that argue if this, then that, for example, Locke assumes that there is a causal or logical order in rational argument that will be convincing to people. But why should Locke think this is the case? Locke cannot have acquired that idea that humans have the capacity for reason, or the ability to perceive causal order, from experience, because in experience people are often irrational and illogical. And what quality of sense experience itself leads Locke to think that experiences flow from cause to effect, or even flow at all? In making his arguments against innate knowledge, then, Locke assumes many innate ideas.

⁴ Some material adapted from pyramidofanubis, “Tabula Rasa vs Innatism: Are We Born with Ideas and Knowledge?,” *The House of Horus*, accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.thehouseofhorus.com/2013/06/23/tabula->

Kant called such ideas apodictic, which means that they are necessary axiomatic preconditions for experience. You cannot deny that they exist without assuming that they exist, and so they are clearly universal innate structures of the human mind. The most general principles of natural science are not empirical generalizations from what we have experienced, but *a priori* judgments about what we could experience, in which these concepts provide the crucial connectives. Kant called them the categories of knowing, and identified sixteen of them, four each under the four primary categories of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Modality,⁵ as shown in the table below:

Quantity	Quality
Unity	Reality
Plurality	Negation
Totality	Limitation
Axioms of Intuition	Anticipations of Perception
Relation	Modality
Substance	Possibility
Cause	Existence
Community	Necessity
Analogies of Experience	Postulates of Empirical Thought

Kant thus reasserted innatism, but with an important limitation. If innate knowledge only relates to the structures and conditions of experience, then how can we know whether reality itself is the way we experience it, or whether we experience it this way, because that's how our minds are structured, but reality itself is something different? How can we discern, in other words, between appearance and reality?

[rasa-vs-innatism-are-we-born-with-ideas-and-knowledge/](#).

Kant asserted, I think correctly, that this is a rationally insoluble problem. We can't reach a standpoint by which we can judge with rational certainty that our experience is an experience of reality, because in making that judgment we have to employ the very categories of thought that give rise to the problem. Kant concludes that all we can know is phenomena, and not things in themselves.⁶ Kant went on to argue that, since any thinkable experience must be understood in terms of the categories, we are justified in projecting this entire way of thinking outside ourselves, as the inevitable structure of any possible experience.

The main intellectual opponent of Kant the innatist, was David Hume, the Scottish philosopher who articulated the basis of modern empiricism. Hume agreed with Kant that we assume certain ideas about the world prior to experience, but he thought we are mistaken to do so because they cannot be proven. Take the idea of cause and effect, one of Kant's sixteen categories under the heading of Relation. According to Hume, all we can observe by sense experience is that two things occur, one before another, but no one has ever observed a cause or an effect. The reason why we mistakenly infer that there is something in the cause that necessarily produces its effect is because our past experiences have habituated us to think in this way. Because we have seen in the past that *B* frequently follows *A* and never occurs without it, our mind associates *B* with *A* such that the presence of one determines the mind to think of the other (see *Treatise*, Book I, Part III; first *Enquiry*, sec. IV-V). But we can imagine without contradiction a case where the cause does not produce its usual effect (e.g., we can imagine that a cue ball violently strikes another billiard ball and then, instead of causing the billiard ball to move, the cue ball bounces off it in some random direction), so there is no necessary connection

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) Each of the sixteen categories is discussed in a separate section of this book.

between our idea of the cause and our idea of the effect. It is always possible for nature to change, so inferences from past to future are never rationally certain. Thus, on Hume's view, all beliefs in matters of fact are fundamentally non-rational.⁷

Consider Hume's favorite example: our belief that the sun will rise tomorrow. Clearly, this is a matter of fact, based on our conviction that each sunrise is an effect caused by the rotation of the earth. But our belief in that causal relation is based on past observations, and our confidence that it will continue tomorrow cannot be justified by reference to the past. So we have no rational basis for believing that the sun will rise tomorrow.⁸

The problem identified by Kant and Hume's debate is that the basis of scientific certainty cannot be proven with scientific certainty. We must either, with Hume, remain unsure whether our knowledge relates to anything at all outside our consciousness, or, with Kant, begin by affirming non-rational truths that transcend experience.

Most of modern science, at least until recently, has sided with Hume in denying the possibility of ontological knowledge. The theory of Kinlein, however, sides with Kant in affirming knowledge that transcends experience. In *Moving That Power Within*, the exposition of the routes of knowing begins with the concept of "I"-Knowing", which is "a unique state which transcends all that is experienced and learned formally and informally."⁹ In the sentence immediately prior to this definition, Kinlein emphasizes the importance of not rejecting states of awareness that cannot be empirically proven—a key feature of innatism: "In the theory of moving in esca, the position is that the burden on Western Scientism is that it must move in light of what

⁶ Robert Pippin, *Kant's Theory of Form: Essays on Critique of Pure Reason*, First Edition (New Haven: Yale Univ Pr, 1982), chap. 7.

⁷ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Dover ed, Dover Philosophical Classics (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 2004), sec. V, part 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, sec. 4, part 1.

⁹ M. Lucille Kinlein, *Moving That Power Within: The Theory of Moving in Esca*, Expanded Edition (Minneapolis, MN: National Center of Kinlein, 1983), 59.

is, and not scoff, scorn or deny something which cannot be demonstrated conclusively and completely through scientific experimentation.”¹⁰

So far we have contrasted empiricism, which rejects innate ideas and accepts sense-experience, with innatism, which accepts both innate ideas and sense-experience. To help understand innatism in Kinlein’s theory, it may be instructive to also consider the third possibility, which is to accept innate ideas but reject sense-experience. This is the position of much mystical thought, which also begins by affirming a state of awareness which transcends all experience.

Three Epistemological Options for Relating Innate Ideas to Experience

	Empiricism	Innatism	Mysticism
Innate knowledge	No	Yes	Yes
Sense experience	Yes	Yes	No
Exemplar	Locke, Hume	Kant, Kinlein	Hindu Mystics (Dasgupta)

In his classic text on oriental mysticism, Professor S.N. Dasgupta introduces Hindu mysticism with these words:

Ordinary knowledge presupposes a difference between ourselves, our knowledge, and that of which we are aware. When I see a color, there is the "I" which sees, there is the knowledge of the color and also the color itself. When I smell, there is the "I" that smells and the smell; when I think, there is the "I" that thinks and that which is thought; when I speak there is the "I" that speaks and that which is spoken. No one would for a moment think of identifying these. [So far this is very similar to Kinlein’s exposition of the states of knowledge. But then he goes on:] But at this stage of the non-conceptual intuition of the self [*prajnana*]... all ordinary experiences are submerged and dissolved in this great, infinite, limitless, homogeneous experience ...where all duality has vanished: there is no person who knows, nor anything that he is aware of.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Surendranath Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism*, 1959 Printing (New York,: F. Ungar Pub. Co, 1926), 39–40.

Like “I”-Knowing, mystical thought, here represented by Hindu mysticism, speaks of a state that transcends ordinary knowledge, but *prajnana* is almost the exact opposite of “I”-Knowing. In “I”-Knowing, the self is discovered, reinforced and made stronger, but in *prajnana* the self is obliterated. In mystical thought, to “transcend” means to transcend by negating, but in the definition of “I”-Knowing the word “transcend” denotes a state of knowing or being that synthesizes and unifies other lower states of knowing. This is the sense in which the seminal German philosopher GWF Hegel used the word. In Hegel’s philosophy, all thought and experience leads to contradictions, which we eventually resolve or understand by attaining the perspective of a higher state of knowing. For Hegel, the acquisition of knowledge begins by positing a Thesis, which leads to the recognition of its opposite or contradiction, the Antithesis. Wrestling with this contradiction leads to a new, higher apprehension of truth, the Synthesis, in which the contradiction is resolved or overcome.

The mystics deny an innate knowledge of subject and object, of self and other, at the deepest level of awareness, whereas Kinlein affirms an innate awareness of self and other as the basis or substrate for all other forms of knowing. “[O]nly acceptance of that which is will maintain an internal equilibrium.” (Moving, 58) The Hindu mystic says the exact opposite; only the denial of that which is will maintain internal equilibrium. Just as we might say the fundamental expression of Christianity is in the phrase, Jesus is Lord, so the fundamental expression of Hinduism is in the phrase, That art Thou (Sanskrit: Tat Tvam Asi). Whatever you experience is also you; and whatever you are is also the universe.

In transcendence by means of denial of subject and object, Hindu mysticism leads to the rejection of all other forms of knowing, ending in a state of stillness or stasis, whereas in transcendence by means of the union of subject and object, “I”-Knowing in Kinlein leads to the

acceptance and encouragement of all other forms of knowing, ending in dynamism and movement. It is the theory of moving in ESCA, moving that power within.

-- -- --

Although today empiricism is the dominant theory among scientists, belief in innatism is growing rapidly, due (ironically) to a broad array of empirical evidence for the presence of innate knowledge in human beings. Piaget’s famous experiments with children demonstrated that the mind develops according to universal, internal stages of reasoning ability, not just as an aggregate of experiences. Chomsky’s studies of language acquisition gave evidence that all humans are born with an innate knowledge of the universal elements of grammar which enables them to learn a particular language without being taught.

Abundant recent research has reinforced this evidence. For example, American cognitive psychologists studying “intuitive physics” in the past decade have shown infants are born knowing the difference between a solid and a liquid, expect something released in midair to fall rather than float, and can discriminate quantity of objects and distinguish between an object and its background. They ask provocatively, “How is it that we cannot build a robot that navigates a cluttered environment as efficiently as a typical toddler?” Their conclusion is that “certain core principles about [solidity, continuity, cohesion, and property changes in physical objects] are present as early as we can test for them,” and thus appear to represent “primitive initial [i.e., innate] concepts that are elaborated and refined through learning and experience”.¹²

Likewise, in 2011 Swiss neuroscientists “discovered a synaptic organizing principle that groups neurons in a manner that is common across animals and hence, independent of individual

¹² Susan J. Hespos and Kristy vanMarle, “Physics for Infants: Characterizing the Origins of Knowledge about Objects, Substances, and Number,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science* 3, no. 1 (2012): 19, doi:10.1002/wcs.157.

experiences.”¹³ The groups of neurons, or cell assemblies, appear consistently in the neocortices of animals and humans; learning, perception, and memory appear to be a result of putting these cellular “Lego-like building blocks” together rather than forming new cell assemblies from “a tabula rasa”.¹⁴ “This could explain,” says the research’s director, “why we all share similar perceptions of physical reality, while our memories reflect our individual experience.”¹⁵

Whether or not future research continues to supply evidence for the existence of innate ideas, and despite the philosophical problems involved, innatist theories of knowledge, like that of Kinlein, will likely persist because of one key advantage they offer over the alternatives: they offer a better understanding of the human self.

Neither empiricism nor mysticism has been able to offer a coherent account of human selfhood. In mysticism, as already noted, the self is disintegrated by experience, according to a famous analogy presented by Dasgupta: “When a lump of salt is thrown into the sea, it is entirely dissolved in it; by no means can any part of the lump be recovered in its original form, but every part of the water tastes saline.”¹⁶ Likewise, Hume held that our idea of a persistent self is simply a result of the human habit of attributing continued existence to any collection of associated parts. The self is just a bundle of perceptions, like the railroad cars in a train; to look for a self beyond the ideas would be like looking for a train beyond the cars. Like our false idea of the necessary connection of cause with effect, belief in our own reality as substantial selves is empirically unjustifiable. The 20th-century empiricist psychologist B.F. Skinner also, like Hume, rejected the ideas of a mind or a self or even intentions as philosophical fictions which could not be proven by

¹³ Rodrigo Perin, Thomas K. Berger, and Henry Markram, “A Synaptic Organizing Principle for Cortical Neuronal Groups,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, no. 13 (March 29, 2011): 5419, doi:10.1073/pnas.1016051108.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5420.

¹⁵ “Are We Born With Knowledge? » the Nerve Blog | Blog Archive | Boston University.”

¹⁶ Dasgupta, *Hindu Mysticism*, 39.

experience, eventually rejecting any idea of human autonomy at all in his book “Beyond Freedom and Dignity”.

Innatism, on the other hand, is fully able to explain human selfhood as we both observe it in the world around us and experience it in ourselves. Since all of us have experience of others and ourselves, but since none of us can ever experience ourselves only objectively, from the outside, as it were, the idea of the self must be a product of both innate ideas and experiences. Unlike either empiricism or mysticism, innatist theories that accept both a priori and experiential knowledge, like those of Kant, Freud, Jung, Rogers and Kinlein, are able to explain and to advance our understanding of human selfhood and development in all of its commonality and variety.

For Further Reading

- “Are We Born With Knowledge? » the Nerve Blog | Blog Archive | Boston University.” Accessed October 12, 2014. <http://sites.bu.edu/ombs/2012/02/22/are-we-born-with-knowledge/>.
- Dasgupta, Surendranath. *Hindu Mysticism*. 1959 Printing. New York,: F. Ungar Pub. Co, 1926.
- Hespos, Susan J., and Kristy vanMarle. “Physics for Infants: Characterizing the Origins of Knowledge about Objects, Substances, and Number.” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science* 3, no. 1 (2012): 19–27. doi:10.1002/wcs.157.
- Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Dover ed. Dover Philosophical Classics. Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 2004.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Kinlein, M. Lucille. *Moving That Power Within: The Theory of Moving in Esca*. Expanded Edition. Minneapolis, MN: National Center of Kinlein, 1983.
- . *What Am I Doing with Who I Am?*. Minneapolis, MN: National Center of Kinlein, 1995.
- Perin, Rodrigo, Thomas K. Berger, and Henry Markram. “A Synaptic Organizing Principle for Cortical Neuronal Groups.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, no. 13 (March 29, 2011): 5419–24. doi:10.1073/pnas.1016051108.
- Pippin, Robert. *Kant’s Theory of Form: Essays on Critique of Pure Reason*. First Edition. New Haven: Yale Univ Pr, 1982.
- pyramidofanubis. “Tabula Rasa vs Innatism: Are We Born with Ideas and Knowledge?” *The House of Horus*. Accessed October 12, 2014. <http://www.thehouseofhorus.com/2013/06/23/tabula-rasa-vs-innatism-are-we-born-with-ideas-and-knowledge/>.