In order to understand the context in which the empiricist Locke has criticised the theory of innate ideas we need to understand the basic views of modern rationalist thinkers also with regard to the origin of Knowledge. We know that modern rationalist thinker Rene Descartes is regarded as the father of modern western philosophy. Descartes opposed the blind acceptance of truths as dictated by the Church during the medieval period. Descartes advocated for the freedom of thought and the role of reason in the acquisition of knowledge as against the dominance and dictates of Church of the medieval period. Descartes was of the firm conviction that only those truths should be accepted even in the field of philosophy which were as clear, distinct and certain as the truth of Mathematics. So Descartes wanted to liberate human mind and thought from the dominance of dogmatism spread by the priestly class and church. With this objective in mind Descartes attached prime importance to reason. Descartes was followed by other rationalists of the modern era like Spinoza and Leibnitz.

In the field of epistemology rationalism propounded the doctrine that only reason is the source of knowledge. The rationalists also hold that experience in not the source of knowledge. Thus, according to the rationalists, knowledge cannot be acquired through experience. To substantiate their doctrine the rationalists envisaged and advanced the the theory of innate ideas as their central thesis.
The rationalists including Descartes hold that knowledge is ingrained in us by birth. According to rationalists there are certain fundamental principles of reality, which are innate and recognised as true by reason or intuition. In fact rationalists hold that intuition is the higher and more subtle stage of reason where fundamental reality or truth is known or apprehended immediately. All other truths of the world are deduced from them.

So the source of our knowledge is innate ideas which are present in our mind by birth. In other words it is also said by the majority of the rationalists that God has ingrained or imprinted innate ideas in our mind at the time of birth. The ideas of causality, infinity, eternity, perfect Being of God etc. are the innate ideas. These ideas are clear and distinct and thus are regarded as the self-evident truths. These self evident truths are known immediately by the reason. Thus clearness and distinctness of the innate ideas are the test of their truth. Thus we can say that the innate ideas which are clear and distinct are known immediately by the reason. For example for Descartes the innate idea of Self being clear, distinct and self-evident are known by intuition and the existence of God and world are deduced from them by reason.

As said above the rationalists reject all knowledge derived by sense experience. For them the data furnished by the sense experience are not real. But we perceive things around us clearly and distinctly with the help of our sense experience. That is why Empiricism came as a reaction against rationalism and its theory of innate ideas in particular. The founder of empiricism John Locke vehemently opposed the Cartesian version of rationalism in his well known work *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and propounded the doctrine of Empiricism. Locke has tried to develop the understanding regarding the limit and extent of human knowledge within the
framework of his empiricism. So far as the criterion of knowledge is concerned Locke is not much different from Descartes as he has also said that knowledge is that of which man is certain. But according to Locke certainty is not merely a subjective belief or conviction of mind rather, according to him, it should be objective and logical necessity which cannot be questioned. Now in order to understand that what kind of knowledge can be regarded as objective Locke prefers first to discuss the source and origin of our ideas which constitute the contents of our knowledge.

If there are innate ideas not coming from experience but being derived from intuition then there range of knowledge will be very extensive and it can know things which are beyond the range of experience. But the certainty of such knowledge can always be questioned which have not originated from sense-experience.

The starting-point of Locke’s empiricism, therefore, is the denial of innate ideas. While expounding the doctrine of empiricism Locke has out rightly rejected the rationalist’s theory of innate ideas. Locke has advanced and employed many arguments for the denial of the existence of innate ideas. His arguments against the existence of innate ideas have empiricist dimensions. For example Locke says that if mind was endowed with consciousness then there cannot be anything in the mind of which it is not conscious from the very childhood and also during the later stages of life. If there were innate ideas of self, God, substance, causation etc then there would have been clear awareness of it to the common people also and not only to some philosophers. Because even all the philosophers are not unanimous on this subject and there is clear division among them on this view. Obviously no such ideas existed independently of experience. Locke says very clearly that the truth or falsity of any such ideas can only be established in the light of experience.
In this context Locke holds that prior to experience mind is like a clean or empty slate and nothing is imprinted on it by birth. He has called the empty state of mind *tabula rasa*. The source and origin of all our ideas lies in experience. There are only two sources from which they are derived and they are sensation and reflection. Through sensation understanding gets the knowledge of the external world. Reflection is its own operation to derive the knowledge of internal world like pleasure, pain etc. That is why it is also called introspection. The source of sensation is the five external sense organs and the source of reflection is mind itself. Ideas, therefore, are of two kinds, those derived from sensation and those derived from reflection. According to Locke mind is passive in receiving sensation. But it is active in comparing them with one another, combining them into complex ideas, and forming general ideas out of particular ideas. It can form complex ideas out of simple ideas.

Advancing his argument against the rationalists’ view of innate ideas Locke says that if there are innate ideas in mind they must be same in all the minds. But the innate ideas of self, substance, God, morality etc. differ in different people, different countries, different societies, different ages of civilization. For example the idea of the existence of God is not acceptable to the atheists. It means this innate idea of God differs in different persons. So this cannot be regarded as an innate idea. So far as the innate idea of morality is concerned as it also varies from individual to individual, society to society, in the same society at different ages it cannot be regarded as innate.

Actually what we call innate principle are, in fact, general truths. They are not the primary facts of knowledge, but generalization from particular facts, which we obtain from experience. We can understand this with the help of example. The child knows that sweet is sweet and that sweet is not bitter. These are particular facts
of his experience. Later he generalizes the Law of Identity and the Law of Contradiction from them. It means the so-called innate principles are derived from the experience. They are in fact empirical truths based on experience. They are not innate or intuitive knowledge. They are not a priori or prior to all experience. Thus Locke has rejected Descartes’ doctrine of innate ideas.

Locke has further expounded the role of experience even in case of those ideas which are present in all minds in order to disapprove their innateness. For example all persons have the same idea of fire. But it is not an innate idea. It is derived by all from experience. Thus Universality of an idea does not prove its innateness. Everyone has the same idea that the sun revolves round the earth, the earth is flat, the moon is flat, but they are neither innate nor true.

If there is no innate idea from the empirical parameters then there can be no innate principles. Principles or propositions are nothing but conjunctions of ideas. If ideas are not innate, principles cannot be innate. The universal and necessary truths, law of identity and law of contradiction, laws of morality, idea of God, idea of substance, Principles of mathematics are not innate. Thus Locke has rejected the views of the rationalists like Descartes, Spinoza and Leibnitz and has supported the empiricism. Actually Locke could not have formulated his empiricism without the complete demolition of the rationalists’ doctrine of innate ideas. He has laid the foundation of empiricism which assumed new shape in the empiricism of Berkeley and finally the purest form of it appeared in the scepticism of Hume. The outright rejection of reason as the source of knowledge and also the complete denial of the role deduction or inferential knowledge or relational knowledge within the framework of empiricism by Hume led to the questioning of the well established doctrine of causation. In fact Hume’s scepticism or his epistemological atomism
which denies the possibility of the establishment of relation between different sensations is the logical and consistent outcome of Locke’s empiricism. The pure and consistent empiricism of Hume also paved the way for the entry of Kant who has tried to reconcile the two contending and one sided epistemological theories of rationalism and empiricism. Hume’s consistent empiricism and his interpretation of the will established doctrine of causation have also opened the door for the 20th Century analytical philosophy. Thus the empiricism which was founded by Locke reached its zenith in the philosophy of Hume which in turn opened the avenues for many new ideas having the empiricism as their central thesis.

So although Locke commits some inconsistencies like he introduces a dual usage of the term idea and the inferential existence of substance when he inferred or derived the existence of substance as the substratum of qualities going beyond the realm of experience yet his empiricism which begins with the rejection of innate ideas of rationalism works as the fountainhead for the many subsequent philosophical doctrines.

Dear Students

On your request on my mobile phone I have prepared this study material in English. I have also taken the help of the books which I had recommended to you in the class room, for example ‘History of Philosophy Eastern and Western, Volume II by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and ‘Introduction to Philosophy’, Part I & II by Dr. Jaunath Sinha. So you may correlate the study material with those books. But those who are not having the books can depend on this study material and on some other books.

This study material is more or less confined to the Locke’s denial of innate ideas yet to some extent it has touched the other aspects of Locke’s Empiricism also.
You are advised to take the help of this study material while introducing rationalism also.

Typing error, if any, is regretted.

Dr. Shailesh Kumar Singh

Professor, Department of Philosophy

A. N. College, Patna