

1. We need innate ideas in order to know the world. Show how this argument has been developed from Plato to Descartes and whether it is still tenable (Plato, Descartes, Nagel).

In the ancient world, long ago, the study of philosophy began the long quest to uncover the truth. In the fifth to fourth century BCE, the famous philosopher Plato wrote about discovering the truth of Being and knowledge. Plato's writings about ascertaining the truth rely on his main notion: innate ideas. Throughout history, many philosophers have debated the theory of whether or not innate ideas exist. However, innate ideas remain to be tenable in today's modern world.

Plato asserts that the knowledge of the world is controlled by his concept of innate ideas and the idealistic Forms. According to Plato, the world is not in the material sphere; instead it lies within the ideal, which asserts his dualism theory. This means that one cannot know the world as physical objects, but one must realize that the world is a reflection of the ideal Forms. For example, a cat is not truth within itself; however, the cat is simply the likeness to the ideal cat. The only way to know that ideal world is to *come out of the cave*.

But where does knowledge come from? Plato proclaims that knowledge is innate and is transferred between people by the soul passing from one to another; and the only way to retrieve truth is by reawakening the soul. Yet, one does not automatically *know* what the truth is – instead, the body, which does not know, confuses the soul, and the only way to understand is to reawaken the soul through the study of philosophy.

One of the best examples is the theory of law. Law exists in all cultures, no matter how separate the cultures may be. As two separate cultures exist at the same time – for example, ancient Rome and the Americas: they are unconnected in everyway. The distance and the two cultures are very different, however, law exists in the two separate places. Plato explains this mystery by using his innate ideas.

Centuries later, Descartes continues this tradition of innate ideas. His theory is not quite like Plato, however, it is similar. Descartes seems to share Plato's conception of the Forms: what the *Forms* are for Plato, Descartes simply labels them *ideas*. Descartes writes in his discourse, *Meditations*:

[...] What, then, were those ["wholly certain and manifest" things, "which yet I afterward found to be doubtful.]"? They were the earth, the sky, the stars, and all the other objects [that] I was in the habit of perceiving by the senses. But what was it that I clearly (and distinctly) perceived in them? Nothing more than [...] the ideas and the thoughts of those objects [that were] presented to my mind. [...] ¹ (Descartes, *Meditations*, "Meditation III: Of God: That He Exists," 3).

In this section, Descartes asks, "What was it that I clearly (and distinctively) perceived" in objects? He answers by stating that he perceived the ideas and thoughts of the objects, which were presented to his mind. Descartes points out that before, he thought he was certain about all kinds of things, however, now they are cast into doubt. These doubted things, are all captured by the senses, and he goes on to assert that he did not perceive the things themselves, but the *ideas* of these things. He goes on to even say that ideas can be innate:

¹ Descartes, *Meditations*, "Meditation III: Of God: That He Exists," 3, Oregon State Online, accessed on 26 February 2014, <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/descartes/meditations/Meditation3.html>.

But among these ideas, some appear to me to be innate, others adventitious, and others to be made by myself; for, as I have the power of conceiving what is called a thing, or a truth, or a thought, it seems to me that I hold this power from no other source than my own nature [...] (Descartes, *Meditations*, “Meditation III: Of God: That He Exists,” 7).²

Yet, Plato and Descartes *do* share one view: the principle of dualism. Descartes agrees with Plato that the mind and body are two different entities. Descartes states that the body is the container of the mind, and the mind controls the body. These two philosophers agree about the *aprior* view of philosophy: where the mind is the tool for knowledge and the body is the result of the mind. Since the mind is not material, the mind is *ideal*. In finality, Descartes’ idea of innate ideas rests in the fact that he believes that the ability to think is natural and innate.

In more recent times, Nagel has continued this tradition. Nagel writes in his *The View from Nowhere*, as quoted in *Other Minds*:

The beginning of an objective concept of mind is the ability to view one’s own experiences from outside, as events in the world. If this is possible, then others can also conceive of those events and one can conceive of the experiences of others, also from outside. To think in this way we use not a faculty of external representation, but a general idea of subjective points of view, of which we imagine a particular instance and a particular form. So far the process does not involve any abstraction from the general forms of our experience. We still think of experience in terms of the familiar point of view we share with other humans. All that is involved in the external conception of the mind is the imaginative use of this point of view – a use that is partly present in the memory and expectation of one’s own experience (*Other Minds*, 258).³

Nagel asserts that humans begin with a general conception and expand our minds through experience and then we are able to relate it to others. This general conception, Nagel argues, is innately given. His case for innate “knowledge” is different than Plato and Descartes: Nagel later writes that there is no innate knowledge of the truth. However, we have the capacity to generate what the world is like, based on experiences. Nagel pronounces that our innate knowledge is our capacity to think about the world, rooted in our general conception of minds.

This argument of whether or not there are innate ideas is still debated today. The most tenable argument, from these three philosophers is not one, but rather a mixture of all three. Plato asserts that there are the *perfect forms* and our souls possess the true knowledge. His argument about laws is the perfect example. Also, language is also a suitable example: take the two ancient civilizations again: America and Rome. The two were separated and never had any connections, however, they both have the idea of language. The two languages may not be the same; yet, the *idea* of language is present in these two very different cultures. However, these ideas have to be triggered, as Descartes would say. One does not wake up one day and suddenly realize something without experience and previous knowledge. Finally, Nagel’s idea of basing the view of the world on one’s capacity to generate ideas is also tenable. One can guess what something will be like based on one’s own past experiences.

² Descartes, *Meditations*, “Meditation III: Of God: That He Exists,” 7, Oregon State Online, accessed 26 February 2014, <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/descartes/meditations/Meditation3.html>.

³ Anita Avramides, *Other Minds*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 258.

All three – Plato, Descartes, and Nagel – make rational arguments about innate ideas that have lasted up to the present day; and this argument will continue on into the future: do innate ideas exist or do they not.



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