

A short rejection of the innate ideas of R. Descartes through the epistemological scope of D. Hume

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ABSTRACT

*Descartes's belief in innate ideas still looms, in one form or another, over the history of philosophy today. In typical Early-Modern, Rationalist fashion, Descartes presents readers with main arguments for his belief in these pre-packaged ideas, via appeals to God and the application of logical thinking techniques. That is, Descartes asserts that the so-called inherent idea of God derives from God and that the mind can establish this notion as well as the surety of its supposed innate ideas of immortality and identity. However, such ideas may appear alien to some, and even unfounded upon critique. First, this essay will present Descartes's philosophy of innate ideas by using his *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Next, this piece will then describe the philosopher Hume's Empiricist understanding of ideas and the problems of abstraction, and then challenge the Cartesian view that innate notions like God, immortality of the soul, and identity may not be so innate, or as precise as Descartes leads us to believe.*

Keywords: Hume; Descartes; Empiricism; Rationalism; Epistemology; Innate Ideas.

1. AN EXPLICATION OF MAIN ARGUMENTS BY DESCARTES SUPPORTING INNATE IDEAS

As presented in Descartes's *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, we readers encounter the argument that God is an innate idea of the mind, one which God itself establishes, in such a way that once we achieve a clear and distinct idea of God, we can be certain that such a Divinity embedded us with an inherent idea of itself.¹ One reason that leads Descartes to this conclusion is that because he is something rather than nothing, which derives from his inability to doubt his existence as a thinking thing, he may assert that he possesses the capacity for perfections.²

Now, by perfections, Descartes understands the mind's refinedness of which he can partake in, such as thinking, or intuiting, imagining, remembering, and even, to a degree, sensing.³ Moreover, Descartes notices that his awareness of his shortcomings leads him to recognize that others possess perfections, perhaps in a more significant proportion than himself.⁴ As such, Descartes envisions a perfect being, one by which we compare our perfections to, this being God.⁵ Finally, because this entity, or substance, God, affirms

¹ Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 18.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 74, 76, & 79.

existence to the highest degree, due to the Divine containing the utmost level of all perfections, we may continue to assert that God is without blemish or lack, and rather all-good, as well as all-powerful.⁶

Next, from the claim that God is entirely pristine, benevolent, and magnificent, we find that Descartes does not contend that God would ever prevent us from knowing the Divine. Instead, God would be defying God's all-goodness, if God used God's supreme power, to deceive us from knowing God.⁷ Accordingly, Descartes does not believe it so farfetched if God implanted in rational minds, like we humans', the very idea of God, and the ability to build up to this idea, naturally, or inherently.⁸ Thus, one way in which innate ideas come to the fore of Cartesian philosophy is through Descartes's establishment of himself as, ultimately, a derivative of God.⁹

However, let us note that in anticipation of criticisms to come, Descartes rejects the idea that he is arguing in a circle by establishing the innate idea of God as being from God.¹⁰ Now, by circular reasoning, we may understand the absurdity of establishing a conclusion that clarifies, while does not add to, or, at worst, is merely identical to, an essential premise used to ground that conclusion.¹¹ In his defense, we may assert that if Descartes was seeking to establish first principles, like God, and thus the reality of innate ideas, perhaps he believed he was adding to knowledge by grounding age-old traditions on something other than the dominant Aristotelian and Scholastic worldviews of his time.¹² However, we shall see how this so-called progress may be merely a clarification of ideas as proclaimed from a Humean perspective.

For now, let us account for another reason why Descartes professes the notion of innate ideas is due to his belief that he possesses an inherent idea of self since he explicitly states that even if his mind were separate from his body, he would still know who he is.¹³ In other words, Descartes, by being a thinking thing, possesses self-awareness, so that he knows his mind, by default, or as given by reality.¹⁴ Accordingly, we may claim that Descartes's innate idea of self, is a byproduct of his humanity, ultimately reducing back to the life granted to him by God.¹⁵ Lastly, Descartes employs this innate idea of the self as a way to argue for the immortality of the soul, another inherent concept Descartes believed, engrained in the very fabric of our minds.¹⁶

Regarding the immortality of the soul as an innate idea, we may begin Descartes's argument by taking note of his assertion that no matter how much he doubts, he cannot doubt that it is he who engages in doubt.¹⁷ Accordingly, since there must be a doubter from which

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹ Richard Popkin ed., *A Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press., 1999), 336-346.

¹² Copleston, Frederick. *A History of Philosophy Vol. IV: Modern Philosophy from Descartes to Leibniz* (New York: Doubleday., 1994), 9-10.

¹³ Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 49-54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Copleston, Frederick. *A History of Philosophy Vol. IV: Modern Philosophy from Descartes to Leibniz* (New York: Doubleday., 1994), 79-83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

the power of doubting issues, Descartes informs we readers, as mentioned above, that he is a thinking thing.¹⁸

Now, from his status as a thinking thing, Descartes expresses that because he can establish himself as participating in reality at the level by which he can clearly and distinctly conceive and perceive it, he is, to a degree, self-sufficient, and thus, a substance.¹⁹ Again, we find Descartes circularly arguing that because he discovered his innate ability to establish his inner identity, there results in the shining forth of the innate idea of himself *qua* substance.²⁰

Consequently, Descartes's essential substantiality, which he claims he can never doubt, or lose, indicates that something about him affirms existence, beyond material finitude, and instead, as an immortal, immaterial mosaic piece of infinite reality. In other words, Descartes's belief in the immortality of the soul links to his uncovering and understanding of himself as a substantiality, containing two paralleling substances, the mind, and body, of which he, again, knows the former more certainly, however now it is this same mind which continues in reality, potentially forever.²¹

2. AN EXPOSITION OF SOME MAIN POINTS OF HUME'S EPISTEMOLOGY AGAINST THE SO-CALLED TRUTHS OF REASON

As found in Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, we read a philosophy that is in stark contrast to the Rationalist leanings of Descartes. That is, Hume, working in the tradition of Locke's Empiricism, approaches philosophy from a different perspective than Descartes.²²

First, we find that Hume takes issue with the outlook that reason, and the ideas that it generates is the starting point for us to acquire real knowledge. That is because ideas truly rely on empirical perceptions.²³ Per Hume, we cannot deny what immediately impresses upon us from objects residing outside of ourselves, as we can ideas, or those less vivid and less meaningful derivatives of our capacity to perceive.²⁴ As such, our perceptions are more direct and of a greater surety than our rational ideas; they are the foundation on which those ideas depend.²⁵ Thus, to Hume, and in good Lockean Empiricist fashion, knowledge ought to be that which we regard as originating from our perceptions of the world.²⁶

Moreover, Hume believes that ideas are merely the collection of our perceptions, and accordingly, ideas are a problematic source of knowledge since they exist removed from direct perceptions. As such, we lose accuracy of what we are referencing our ideas to when we partake in the very language of ideas.²⁷ As another Empiricist before him, Berkeley,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁰ Richard Popkin ed., *A Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press., 1999), 336-346 & Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 61-63.

²¹ Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 31-32.

²² Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster., 1972), 659-660.

²³ Hume, David. Eric Steinberg ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 9-11, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster., 1972), 659-661.

²⁷ Hume, David. Eric Steinberg ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 4-6.

Hume also believes that ideas are indeed a product of abstraction, but that such abstraction is not as precise, all-inclusive, or comprehensive, as we may think it to be, upon first assessment.²⁸

In other words, if, for example, we encounter a car, what stops us from labeling, or naming that object of four-wheels, a motor, an engine, and a muffler before us, as being a “dog”? As envisioned by Hume and Berkeley before him alike, nothing; and, this provides we readers with evidence to believe that abstract ideas are not as definite as we think them to be.²⁹ Finally, let us now consider the lack of all-inclusiveness of abstract ideas, which will further help to debase the precision, or truth of such ideas. If we continue to consider abstract ideas like “car” we come to another crux, namely, who is to say what is more of a car, for example, a bright red Ferrari or a bright yellow Mustang? From Hume’s perspective, what would it require for us to say if a bright red Ferrari is more of a car than a bright yellow Mustang? Do not both cars share in the fact that they possess common features like a steering wheel, seats, headlights, and a radio? However, why do our direct perceptions enable us to distinguish that these two cars are not the same? Hence, to Hume, our abstract idea of “car” does not function as an indubitable standard applicable to all cars.³⁰ Thus, should we not let go of absolute trust in such abstract ideas? As Hume understood, we should abandon these ideas, for they are not as all-encompassing as we take them to be.

Next, we may also follow suit with Hume in declaring that abstract ideas are not as comprehensive as philosophers like Descartes would want us to believe. That is, if we take notice of the world around us and we see examples of something such as cats, we may declare that lions, tigers, and pumas fall under the umbrella category of cats, which are examples of mammals, which are examples of animals. However, if we reverse this process, we cannot surely say that all animals are lions, tigers, and pumas, or cats, and thus, our process of abstracting from examples of cats, the abstract idea of animals fails to be fully unproblematic. Lastly, let us now consider Hume’s distinction between the relation of ideas and matters of fact.³¹

As understood by Hume, there are those empirical facts which derive from perceptions and then those relations of ideas which deal in concepts, of which sometimes no experience ever correlates.³² That is, Hume finds that reason can go over the limits of sense, however never in a sure way.³³ For instance, if we take our ideas of something like God and immortality of the soul that Descartes draws light to repeatedly, Hume believes can never be declarable as objects of experience.³⁴ Thus, such abstract ideas, like God and immortality of the soul, as too far removed from perception, can never be accurate, let alone, reasoned about in a way that justifies their truth to the level of proof. Finally, this is one instance where readers may see how it is that Hume would not place absolute trust in reasoning by way of relating ideas to secure truth. That is because it is only those empirical impressions that we can assess best when trying to establish facts of existence.

²⁸ Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster., 1972), 661-662.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Hume, David. Eric Steinberg ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 15-22.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

Furthermore, we also find Hume taking on the Rationalists' project in the form of critiquing how it is that one person, a particular being, can ever discover a universal truth that is timeless, and unchangeable.³⁵ In other words, Hume finds that if universality existed, it would logically display no likeness to particularity, much like how it is that what is finite cannot be compatible with what is infinite, as Descartes would maintain.³⁶ That is, how can we, finite beings, which fade from existence, produce a truth that is of the duration of infinitude? From Hume's outlook, we simply cannot, and the starting point of Rationalists like Descartes, who believe that human reason alone can establish and discover all-applicable truths, is erroneous.³⁷ Lastly, let us now see how we can challenge Descartes's innate ideas via the further application of Hume's thought.

3. III. HUME'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSERTIONS AS A MEANS TO DEBUNK DESCARTES'S THEORY OF INNATE IDEAS

By entering a further consideration of Hume's epistemology, readers find ways in which Descartes's theory of innate ideas may be at further fault. First, let us remind ourselves once more of Hume's Lockean Empiricist inheritance, namely the theory of primary and secondary qualities.³⁸ Now, Hume, like Locke, would agree that those qualities which we can divorce from a thing, while that thing is still identifiable to us as being what it is, are those attributes we can refer to as secondary qualities.³⁹ At the same time, there are primary qualities or those characteristics of things that are integral to that thing being what it is.⁴⁰ In other words, primary qualities to Locke and Hume alike would be those qualities we recognize as being inseparable from an object, if we are to maintain that that object is what it is, as we witness it to be.

Thus, the initial challenge, to Descartes, via Hume, would be if Descartes wants to maintain the unchanging permanency of the human mind to access its inherent ideas like God and immortality of the soul, and even of selfhood, he cannot assert that any of these ideas are as unquestionable as he wants his readers to assert in accord. First, to Hume, the idea of God is never verifiable by anything in experience, since no one can view all of reality in all places, always, to perceive the universe as would God, to verify God as being a real thing.⁴¹

Likewise, the immortality of the soul to Hume is also problematic, for we can never perceive any precise impression of imperceptible or immaterial souls so that we can identify them as necessarily connected to the bodies they supposedly inhabit, beyond all doubt.⁴² Thus, to Hume, such "innate" or so-called pre-packaged ideas like Descartes's alleged inherent ideas of God and immortality of the soul are themselves deniable, and hence the very source, God, that Descartes professes granted him the innate idea of itself and his soul's capacity for eternity may be subject to at least a reasonable doubt.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 50, 74-75, & Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster., 1972), 654, 661.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster., 1972), 662-663.

³⁹ Ibid., 605-606.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Hume, David. Eric Steinberg ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 11-12.

⁴² Ibid., 13.

However, we should also explore Descartes's innate idea of self, and his identity, as a thinking thing, as something that Hume doubts through the application of the Lockean Empiricist Tradition's theory of primary and secondary qualities.⁴³ Now, as understood by Hume, if we are to assert something such as a stable identity, ego, or ideational self, that encompasses, or summarizes who we are, as an essential, unchanging totality, we fall into an issue. This problem is, namely, how can it be that we can maintain a logical consistency to the point of necessity between the sensible world of phenomenal flux and an unmalleable abstraction of the self that is ever-present and constant throughout life?⁴⁴

As understood by Hume, it would be better for Descartes to abandon his reliance on the supposed concreteness of the "I." For, that very innate notion of a permanent self falls into ungrounded subjectivity too, when we consider that because all that exists possesses changeable secondary qualities, the source of those qualities, an entity, and its primary qualities, must then be alterable too.⁴⁵ Accordingly, if we, like Descartes, wish to maintain the agreeableness or compatibility between a cause and its effect, then an effect cannot be less than its cause, and a cause cannot be other than its effect since there must be a likeness between a cause and its effect, for us to recognize them as conjoined.⁴⁶

In other words, Descartes's assertion that a cause equals or exceeds the power of its effect is wrong from a Humean point of view.⁴⁷ Instead, to Hume, a cause can only equal its effect, if Hume were to believe in causality at all. Consequently, we may claim that because the secondary and now primary qualities of beings and things are indeed malleable, we may assume that Hume would at least be skeptical toward something such as Descartes's indubitable belief in his innate idea of self *qua* substance, or as a self-sufficient being, registerable as an eternal and necessary truth, ultimately unerasable from reality.⁴⁸

Next, another issue Hume would take with Descartes's innate idea of identity is that Descartes is not so much adding something new to the knowledge he already possessed of himself; instead, Descartes is merely clarifying his idea of himself and claiming that it is a discovery of an afresh innate idea of a stable and permanent identity he possesses all his own.⁴⁹ One reason why Hume would find this Cartesian conclusion to be aporic is that Descartes's aim, to establish new knowledge that can forward the sciences, through his philosophy, defies how good scientific method works.

In other words, if we are to follow the scientific process of testing inputs to achieve knowledge of a new output deriving from some input, how can we claim that Descartes is asserting a new output when his input is almost the same as that output? From Hume's outlook, Descartes claims that he is establishing the truth of his innate idea of self when that

⁴³ Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster., 1972), 605-606.

⁴⁴ Hume, David. Eric Steinberg ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 23, 135.

⁴⁵ Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster., 1972), 651-655.

⁴⁶ Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 71.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 62-63 & Hume, David. Eric Steinberg ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 23, 135.

⁴⁹ Richard Popkin ed., *A Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press., 1999), 336-346 & Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 62-63.

innate self already existed before Descartes's supposed founding of it.⁵⁰ As such, we may claim that from Hume's gaze, Descartes was making an identity claim of "I=I," at best, and even that claim is further doubttable via Hume's philosophy.

One reason as to why an identity claim of "I=I" would be questionable to Hume, is that if we are to make advances in the sciences, as Descartes seeks for us to accomplish, then an abstract, or purely rational innate idea of the self cannot connect with physical, empirical existence, making such an idea outside of the domain of the sciences.⁵¹ In other words, to Hume, Descartes, by grounding the sciences in metaphysics, not only mistakenly ties the strictly conceptual to the purely sensory, but Descartes also faultily believes that science, as a human enterprise, must rely upon and begin in an allegedly unquestionable first principle, of God and then the self.⁵²

Accordingly, if Descartes wishes to establish the sciences indubitably, he must abandon reliance on an innate idea of a first principle, because as shown, such first principles are not all that indubitable. Finally, since first principles are deniable, there must be another grounding or way to understand and view the sciences rather than merely relying on metaphysical theories like that of innate ideas.

CONCLUSION

This essay aimed to unpack Descartes's doctrine of innate ideas and set the stage for the denial of such a theory via the Empiricist philosophy of Hume. First, we readers encountered Descartes's belief that his innate idea of God shines forth from his uncovering of God's reality.⁵³ Similarly, we found that Descartes adheres to the view that by establishing himself as a substantiality, he can at least adequately know that he possesses an innate idea of the self, one that is potentially immortal, after worldly demise.⁵⁴

Moreover, with an explication of Hume's beliefs, this piece helped readers to view a different brand of philosophy, one distinct from Cartesian Thought. As such, this piece continued to provide readers with a glimpse into how Descartes's philosophy's central tenets are not as epistemically secure as Descartes wished us to believe. That is because, upon entering the philosophical outlook of Hume, we find a trove of ways in which we can jeopardize the innate ideas of Descartes. Accordingly, this article closed with arguments against Descartes's support of the reality of innate ideas, by employing some main epistemological challenges that Humean Thought can provide us.

Finally, the ultimate purpose of this brief essay was to invite readers to question philosophical dogmas, like those of Descartes, and his theory of innate ideas, so that we may ironically follow Descartes's advice to never place rational belief into that of which we

⁵⁰ Hume, David. Eric Steinberg ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 23, 135.

⁵¹ Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 1 & Hume, David. Eric Steinberg ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 11.

⁵² Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 1 & Hume, David. Eric Steinberg ed., *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 23, 135.

⁵³ Richard Popkin ed., *A Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press., 1999), 336-346 & Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 21-22.

⁵⁴ Richard Popkin ed., *A Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press., 1999), 336-346 & Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 21.

cannot be sure.⁵⁵ Unfortunately for Descartes, his own advice prevents the reality of his assertion of innate ideas to ever be that which we can certainly know with the utmost surety. We may thank our application of Hume for that.

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⁵⁵ Descartes, René. Donald A. Cress trans., *Discourse on Method & Meditations on First Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 36-37.