

## **Innate knowledge**

### **CHOMSKY: INNATE KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGE**

In *Syntactic Structures*, the linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky has argued that our knowledge of language, or more accurately, *grammar* is innate. A key part of grammatical knowledge is whether a sentence is ‘allowed’ in a language, e.g. ‘The sleepy cat is on the mat’ is fine, but ‘The sleepy cat look there on the mat’ is not. To learn from experience, children would need to use memory, induction from examples, and inference to what grammatical rules best explained the examples of language they experience. Chomsky’s central argument, called ‘the poverty of stimulus’ argument, is that children learn linguistic grammar accurately so fast, and from very poor information, that their knowledge of grammar can’t have derived from experience. Children arrive at grammatical rules – not consciously, but in being able to construct and identify grammatically correct sentences – first, on the basis of far fewer examples than they can classify; second, many of these examples are ungrammatical – when speaking, we often say things like ‘The cat... look there – on the mat’, i.e. we speak in incomplete, interrupted sentence phrases; and third, the mistakes children make are not often corrected. And so children cannot be learning grammar from their experience of language. Instead, exposure to language triggers their innate knowledge of grammar.

However, philosophers have objected that Chomsky hasn’t identified a form of innate *knowledge*. The ability to classify and construct grammatically correct sentences, even if innate, isn’t a type of knowledge. If it were knowledge, then children would have to have (non-conscious) *beliefs* about grammar. But this doesn’t seem right. It is better to say they have an ability, and abilities aren’t knowledge (they are know-how rather than know-that, propositional knowledge).

However, we can reply that if the ability to classify grammatically correct sentences is innate, then this *generates* innate knowledge: the child’s knowledge that ‘the cat look there on the mat’ is incorrect has not been learned from experience. So there is innate knowledge – not the ability, but the knowledge the ability enables.

### **PLATO: PHAEDO AND MENO**

Many philosophers believe that, in the *Phaedo*, Plato defended the view that in judging that two sticks are of equal length, we are using an idea of EQUAL that we cannot have gained from experience. Nothing is *exactly* equal in experience, but only ‘almost equal’. But the concept ALMOST EQUAL contains the concept EQUAL. So where does *it* come from? If we do not learn our concepts from experience, we must already know them. This knowledge must come from *before* birth. (The main aim of the *Phaedo* is to argue that the soul is immortal, and Plato uses the issue of innate concepts to support this claim.)

Plato takes concepts to be a type of knowledge, and so his argument for innate concepts is also an argument for innate knowledge. We are able to classify our experiences, e.g. that two sticks are equal, by comparing them with our knowledge of what Plato calls the 'Forms'.

A Form is a perfect idea, which exists independently of us. Plato argues that all objects we experience through our senses are particular things (*The Republic*, Book V (476f.)). We don't ever sense anything 'abstract', but always some individual thing or other. For example, we only ever see this particular beautiful thing or that particular beautiful thing, but we never see 'beauty'. But, obviously, more than one thing can be beautiful. Beauty is a property that more than one thing can have. So, Plato claims, if many different things can be beautiful, then there is something they share in common, viz. beauty. So there must be something which is 'beauty', even though we never experience beauty itself through our senses. The Form of Beauty manifests itself in all the different things, in all the different ways, we call 'beautiful'.

But why should we agree that just because many different things can be beautiful, there is some *thing* which is 'Beauty'? Because, Plato goes on to argue, Forms exist independently of particular things. All particular beautiful things could also be destroyed, yet that won't destroy beauty itself. So beauty must be a separate thing, existing in its own right. So, he concludes, particular things 'share' or 'participate' in the Forms, but these exist independently.

To have the concept EQUALITY is to know what equality is, and this is to know the Form of equality. This is the knowledge we gained before birth. It is because we know the Form of equality that we can have the concept EQUALITY, which in turn allows us to classify experiences of sticks as 'equal' or not. We *remember* or *recollect* our knowledge of the Forms in applying concepts.

Plato demonstrates this idea of recollection in a famous example in the *Meno*. Socrates talks to a slave boy about a theorem in geometry. (The question is this: if you have a square and you want to create another square with twice the area, how do you work out the size (the lengths of the sides) of this second square?) The slave boy has not been taught geometry, and yet is able to discover the right answer in response to Socrates only *asking questions*. How is this possible? The boy didn't have experience of geometry, and wasn't taught it. It must be that Socrates' questions triggered the knowledge he had from before birth, but had forgotten.

### Objections

An empiricist can reply that, in fact, the concept ALMOST EQUAL does *not* contain the concept EQUAL. Instead, ALMOST-EQUAL is a simple concept derived from sense experience of comparing objects. Plato is talking about equal length; we have experiences of two sticks not being the same length. They always differ by some (possibly tiny) amount. We form the concept EQUAL (as in equal length) by *abstracting* from the experience of differing lengths – two sticks are equal when they differ by no length.

We can also ask how we come to have knowledge of the Forms in this life. Obviously, it can't be through sense experience. So there must be some other faculty through which – if Plato was right – we could ground and justify claims about the

existence and nature of the Forms. Plato thought this faculty was *nous*. Sense experience is about what is particular and concrete – *this* book, *this* rose. To know the Forms, we must turn towards what is abstract. Using pure reason, we move from one abstract idea to another, from one abstract truth to another.

But we can object that this is no explanation of *how* we come to know the Forms. We can explain how physical objects cause our sensory experiences through our five senses; we have no similar explanation of how abstract objects like the Forms cause abstract thoughts. At this point, we should remember that Plato supplements his theory of *nous* by an appeal back to nativism; the truths we discover using a priori reasoning and insight depend on the triggering of concepts that are innate.

To the slave boy example, we can respond that his knowledge was not innate, but gained through reasoning. However, an empiricist must add that this reasoning is working with analytic truths, otherwise one form of rationalism – nativism – is defeated only to be replaced by another, viz. the claim that we can acquire knowledge through reasoning alone.

### Nietzsche's objection

Friedrich Nietzsche argues that Plato's theory of reason and the Forms is completely mistaken. Plato takes his a priori reasoning to be something that reveals the truth. In fact, argues Nietzsche,

most of a philosopher's conscious thinking is secretly guided and channelled into particular tracks by his instincts. Behind all logic, too, and its apparent tyranny of movement there are value judgments, or to speak more clearly, physiological demands for the preservation of a particular kind of life. (*Beyond Good and Evil*, § 3)

Plato's entire metaphysical theory of the Forms is actually based on his desire to see good and bad as opposites:

The metaphysicians' fundamental belief is *the belief in the opposition of values*.

This is why they construct a theory about a world beyond this 'lowly, deceptive' world, a world of purity and certainty. But if we reject this opposition as fictitious, as no more than a fantasy expressing a wish, all of Plato's reasoning will not be convincing.

The same goes for any other attempt to establish truth without looking closely at experience and at the role our value judgments play in influencing what we think philosophically. Nietzsche agrees with Hume about the limitations of reason, but goes further when he argues that every great philosophy is founded on the personal value judgments of the philosopher.