Do we have any innate ideas? The question is at least as old as Plato and has attracted the attention of numerous philosophers since (Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz, to name a few). But in recent times, there has been a flurry of interest in the topic of innate ideas. After looking at some historical antecedents, this course will focus on the contemporary literature, examining the conceptual issues as well as the empirical evidence. Readings will be drawn from contemporary work in philosophy, as well as linguistics, psychology, and related disciplines.

Renewed interest in this topic in contemporary philosophical thought is due in large part to Chomsky’s work in linguistics, which suggested that human beings have an innate capacity to learn human languages. Among linguists and psychologists, it has become widely accepted that we have an innate disposition to acquire knowledge of some grammatical structures and not others. Linguists and philosophers have also postulated that some semantic knowledge is also innate, i.e. that some concepts and connections among concepts are innate. More recently, psychologists and cognitive scientists have proposed that our innate endowment goes further than either syntax or semantics, and may extend to such realms as our knowledge of spatial relations, solidity and permanence of objects, basic arithmetical relations, morality, social interactions, and so on. The existence of such innate concepts and capacities has been taken by some to explain the existence of purported semantic, cultural, and other universals in the human species. We will discuss what implications this might have for an account of human nature and for our self-conception as a species.

Among the philosophical questions to be discussed are the following. What is it for an idea or concept or belief or cognitive capacity to be innate? What kind of evidence is required for concluding that an idea or belief is innate? How strong is the evidence for the claim that some of our ideas and beliefs are innate? What is the difference between acquiring an idea on the basis of input from the environment and having an idea triggered by environmental input? Are all innate ideas tacit or are some of them explicit? Should our innate mental states be thought of as ideas and beliefs, or simply as capacities and constraints? Do innate ideas differ from learned ideas on the basis of their content or just the means by which they are acquired? Does it make sense to talk about dispositional ideas? In which domains do we have innate ideas? How far-ranging is our innate endowment? What implications does the doctrine of innate ideas have for the search for human universals and for our conception of human nature? Does it make sense to speak of innate mental contents, or does this rest on a mistaken view of the relation of nature to nurture?

Course Requirements

There will be a one-hour in-class exam on the date indicated on the Reading Schedule, worth 25% of the final grade. Later in the semester, you will be asked to write a 1500-word essay on one of a number of assigned topics, which will be worth 30% of your final grade. You will also be assigned a take-home final exam, due during the examination period, which will be worth 30% of your final grade. The remaining 15% will be allotted to attendance (5%) and participation (10%). Participation will be assessed partly on the basis of contributions to the online discussion board. Each student will be responsible for three comments per semester on dates to be determined in advance, concerning the readings for that week.
Late Penalties and Excuses

If you are unable to fulfill any of the requirements for this course by the announced deadlines, you must contact me as soon as possible and always before the deadline in question. If you have a legitimate excuse backed up by supporting documentation (e.g. a medical emergency), your penalties will be reduced or (in some cases) waived. The key is to contact me as soon as possible after a problem arises.

Plagiarism and Cheating

Plagiarism and cheating are serious academic offenses and will not be tolerated. All students are expected to abide strictly by standards of academic honesty. Please familiarize yourselves with the University Senate policy on academic dishonesty at the link below, and if you have questions concerning what constitutes plagiarism in specific cases, please consult with me:


Access and Disability

Students with health-related, learning, physical, psychiatric, or sensory disabilities who require reasonable accommodations in teaching style or evaluation methods should discuss their concerns with me as soon as possible so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

Reading Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Historical Antecedents (1)</th>
<th>Plato, <em>Meno</em> (80d-86c and 97e-98b)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 9</td>
<td>Descartes, <em>Meditations on First Philosophy</em> (Meditation III)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Language (1)</td>
<td>R. Jackendoff, <em>Patterns in the Mind</em>, Chapters 1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 30</td>
<td><em>In-Class Exam</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
F. Cowie, “Innateness and Language,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*


S. Laurence and E. Margolis, “Linguistic Determinism and the Innate Basis of Number,” in P. Carruthers et. al. (eds.), *The Innate Mind* vol. 3 (Oxford University Press, 2007)

| Week 8  | Morality | S. Nichols, “Innateness and Moral Psychology,” in P. Carruthers et. al. (eds.), *The Innate Mind* vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2005)

Sober, “Innate Knowledge,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Samuels, “Is Innateness a Confused Notion?” in P. Carruthers et. al. (eds.), *The Innate Mind* vol. 3 (Oxford University Press, 2007)

| Week 11 | Implications of Nativism | S. Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, Chapter 8
OR: S. Pinker, Precis of *The Blank Slate, General Psychologist* (2006)
R. Lewontin et. al. *Not In Our Genes*, selections