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VARIETIES OF PLATONIC INNATISM:
AN INTRODUCTION THROUGH
EARLY MODERN PARALLELS

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It is well-known, and mostly agreed upon, that Plato holds a theory of innatism in the *Meno's* (81c-86c), *Phaedo's* (72e-77a), and *Phaedrus'* (243e-257b) discussions of recollection.¹ But what Plato takes to be innate in each of these dialogues, and in what manner or way he takes it to be innate, is the subject of increasing debate.² In this paper, I aim to clarify the conceptual space of different types of innatism by making some of the existing categories more precise, introducing some new ones, and arguing that others are incoherent or unhelpful for framing the nativist discussion in Plato.

While there are dozens of different types of nativism, my strategy in this paper is to focus on the various nativist views attributed to Plato by contemporary scholars, whether implicitly or explicitly.³ Through a happy historical accident, every «live option»⁴ for Plato's nativism – every interpretation that people should take seriously today – has

¹ The main dissenter, to my mind, is Gail Fine 1992, 2014, and 2021a, but also see Franklin 2009, 360.

² In the last twenty years, for example, see Williams 2002, Dimas 2003, Franklin 2005, Scott 2006, Rawson 2006, Kahn 2006, Fine 2007, Fine 2014, Iwata 2018 (on the *Philebus*), Bronstein and Schwab 2019, Castagnoli 2019, Fine 2021a, and Shepardson 2022.

³ This paper thus omits discussion of varieties of nativism absent from Plato scholarship.

⁴ For this terminology, see James 1956, 2-3.

a parallel in an early modern view. I thus introduce the nativisms relevant to interpreting Plato through an analogous early modern writer and briefly explain their views as a segue into the different varieties of Platonic innatism. I do this for three reasons: first, it is historically interesting to see how similar ancient and early modern figures are, depending on how one interprets them; second, this procedure can help to clarify various interpretations of Plato's innatism, since early modern discussions of nativism are typically more detailed than Plato's own and his interpreters'; and third, seeing the potential connections between, for example, Plato and Leibniz with respect to nativism encourages further questions about the relationship between Plato and Leibniz elsewhere. Accordingly, this should make this paper a topic of interest for anyone working on nativism in early modern philosophy, in addition to scholars of ancient philosophy.

Section 1 begins with an implausible variety of innatism that no one attributes to Plato, what I call "explicit content innatism". Similar to the position Locke critiques in the first book of the *Essay*, explicit content innatism posits innate mental contents that are explicit rather than latent, meaning that we have the current ability to become aware of our innate contents at birth. As we will see, Locke himself provides good reasons for rejecting this view. But I discuss it nevertheless for the sake of comparison. For, as explicit content innatism holds that content is innate and that we are aware of it at birth, what I call "dispositional innatism" denies the existence of any content in the soul at birth. Instead, it posits innate dispositions to later acquire such content. On the other hand, what I call "latent content innatism" accepts innate content, but denies that it is explicitly available for consciousness at birth. These latter two views are discussed in sections 2 and 3, and associated with Descartes and Leibniz, respectively.

Section 4 discusses the view that constructivist concepts are innate and is accordingly called "constructivist innatism". Constructivist nativist interpreters of Plato frequently allude to Kant in explaining their position, so I introduce it with a brief discussion of Kant's categories and his view on space and time. And section 5 discusses what we can call "transcendent innatism," which is analogous to Malebranche's claim that we «see all things in God».

These latter four varieties of innatism have been attributed to Plato by various scholars. And though I myself opt for latent content innatism, I consider all four of them “live” possibilities in the literature, insofar as there are no glaring problems with any of them. In contrast to these, I turn in section 6 to what has recently come to be known as “condition innatism” in the literature. In this section, I provide some reasons for thinking that condition innatism cannot be usefully distinguished from latent content innatism.

Having explained the different *ways* something can be innate in sections 1-6, section 7 turns to the various possible types of innate objects. As we will see, one can be a latent content innatist (or dispositional innatist) about knowledge, belief, or any number of other objects. I thus hope to introduce new readers to the current debates about innatism in Plato, helping them orient themselves in the discussion through the early modern parallels, and to frame the debate for future discussions of innatism in Plato.

1. Locke’s critique of explicit content innatism

John Locke attacks a famous, but implausible, type of innatism in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. This incorrect type of innatism, Locke claims, asserts that

there are certain Principles both *Speculative* and *Practical* [...] universally agreed upon by all Mankind: which [...] the Souls of Men receive in their first Beings, and which they bring into the World with them, as necessarily and readily as they do any of their inherent Faculties (I.ii.2).

Locke critiques this view throughout Book 1, and his critique gives us an opportunity to better understand the type of innatism he has in mind. In contrast to these naïve nativists’ claims, Locke maintains that if there were something innate, it would be known by everyone in whom it was innate. So, if certain propositions were innate in all humans (e.g., *whatever is, is*), then all humans would know that proposition. But all humans do not know that proposition for the simple reason that most

people, i.e., people outside of philosophy departments, have never considered it. So, that proposition is not innate in everyone, and this result is generalizable to every principle the naïve nativists deem worthy candidates for innateness (I.ii.5; cf. I.ii.1-4).⁵

As we will see below, however, nativists usually mean something different when they speak of innate principles. But we can still construct a type of nativism based on Locke's critique. He seems to be describing a view according to which certain propositions are literal things existing within the mind. That is, the type of innatism attacked by Locke posits some sort of innate content.⁶ Importantly, these propositions are in no way "hidden" or inaccessible; rather, the mind has immediate access to them upon birth. The mind is capable of explicit, conscious contemplation of them right away. I thus call this "explicit content innatism." For there is some content "in" the mind (the propositions or principles), and the humans in whom that content is allegedly innate have access to it right away; they can make it explicit in their occurrent consciousness whenever they like.

Since Locke speaks of innate *principles*, we can be more specific about this view and call the position he is attacking "explicit content innatism *about principles*". But if one thought these principles were *beliefs*, it would also be explicit content innatism *about beliefs*; and if the principles were thought to constitute innate knowledge, it would be explicit content innatism about knowledge, and so on for various other objects.

Although this view is interesting, and Locke presumably has someone in mind who held it, it is a very implausible type of innatism.⁷

⁵ The argument here requires an «awareness principle» to go through, such that anything within the mind must be an immediate object of awareness. For discussion of this principle, and a critique that it leads to begging the question against Locke's nativist opponents, see De Rosa 2004.

⁶ Note that Locke's principles are propositional; he is not speaking of, say, *archai* in the pre-Socratic sense. With the majority of contemporary philosophers, I take it as uncontroversial that propositions have some content (see, e.g., Bengson 2015, 709, n. 2). Locke agrees with the contemporary view. He thinks propositions are composed of ideas, which, for him, are intentional objects of the mind – mental contents.

⁷ See Rickless 2007 for a good survey of Locke's position and the contemporary Church writers he might have had in mind. For more discussions of Locke's innatism,

For, as Locke explains, no one is born with any principles as readily accessible as this type of innatism requires. Thankfully, no one has attributed this position to Plato, but I addressed it here nevertheless for the sake of comparison with the next two views: dispositional and latent content innatism. As we will see, it is helpful to think of these three views as generically similar, insofar as they are each framed around the presence or absence of mental content and its accessibility if present.

2. *Cartesian dispositional innatism*

While Descartes sometimes suggests a different type of innatism,⁸ I here discuss several passages in which he seems to opt for a dispositional innatism, where what is innate is a capacity, disposition, or potentiality. The main idea of this dispositional innatism is that there is no *content* actually present in the soul at birth:

First, by “innate ideas” I have never meant anything other than what the author himself [of the work Descartes is responding to], on page six of the second pamphlet, explicitly asserts to be true, *viz.* that “there is present in us a natural power which enables us to know God.” But I have never written or even thought that such ideas are *actual*, or that they are some sort of “forms” which are distinct from our faculty of thinking. Indeed, there is no one more opposed than I to the useless lumber of scholastic entities [...]. (*Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, CSM I, 309).

[T]hese ideas, along with that faculty, are innate in us, i.e., they always exist within us potentially, for to exist in some faculty is not to exist actually, but merely potentially, since the term “faculty” denotes nothing but a potentiality (*Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, CSM I, 305).

see Barnes 1972 and the relevant works in the bibliography of Samet 2008.

⁸ For texts closer to latent content innatism, see his response to Gassendi in the *Fifth Set of Replies* (CSM II, 258 and 262). We see a similar ambiguity between dispositional and latent content innatism in Leibniz below. Clarifying whether Descartes and/or Leibniz is, on balance, a dispositional or latent content nativist is beyond the scope of this paper.

And indeed it is no surprise that God, in creating me, should have placed this idea [of God] in me to be, as it were, the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work – not that the mark need be anything distinct from the work itself (*The Meditations*, CSM II, 35).

I take Descartes' denial in these passages that the innate object is *actually* innate as a denial of actual content in the soul, rather than a denial of the content being *explicit*. For he denies that innate ideas are forms distinct from the faculty of thinking; they are not «entities». Instead, he seems only to countenance an innate capacity or potentiality here, which is not «distinct» from the mind itself.

Though there are some differences, this sounds like a *tabula rasa* approach to innate ideas: ideas are innate in the same way that a blank sheet of paper innately has the capacity to receive a string of letters or a drawing. In fact, it sounds so much like the empiricist view that Locke criticizes it at length as being «only a very improper way of speaking; which whilst it pretends to assert the contrary, says nothing different from those, who deny innate Principles» (I.ii.5, 23-26).

Leibniz responded in the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, a commentary on Locke's *Essay*, with a famous image for thinking about dispositional nativisms: the veined statue. This is a useful metaphor for thinking about the difference between dispositional nativisms and ordinary empiricism, and is thus worth quoting at length:

[To explain this type of nativism] I have also used the analogy of a veined block of marble, as opposed to an entirely homogenous block of marble, or to a blank tablet – what philosophers call a *tabula rasa*. For if the soul were like such a blank tablet then truths would be in us as the shape of Hercules is in a piece of marble when the marble is entirely neutral as to whether it assumes this shape or some other. However, if there were veins in the block which marked out the shape of Hercules rather than other shapes, *then the block would be more determined to that shape and Hercules would be innate in it*, in a way, even though labour would be required to expose the veins and polish them into clarity, removing everything that prevents their being

seen. This is how innate ideas and truths are innate in us – as inclinations, dispositions, tendencies, or natural potentialities, and not as actualities; although these potentialities are always accompanied by certain actualities, often insensible ones, which correspond to them (*NECHU*, 52, my emphasis).

Now, as we will see in the next section, I treat Leibniz as a latent content innatist in this paper.⁹ But he here provides an extremely useful analogy for understanding dispositional innatism. There is something innate that helps ideas, concepts, beliefs, etc., form in a specific way, and this is what differentiates it from empiricism.

More recently, some scholars have attempted to explain how dispositional nativism differs from empiricism by picking up on Leibniz’s theme of “determination”. According to them, the empiricist thinks the formation of our ideas, beliefs, etc. are general or undetermined; they do not imply a particular result. On the other hand, the dispositional innatist is thought to posit special faculties that determine a particular outcome. Hunter and Inwood, for example, explain dispositional nativism as positing innate *determinate* capacities or potentialities, whereas empiricism posits innate *indeterminate* capacities or potentialities.¹⁰ So the difference comes down to how determined or specialized the innate capacity, potentiality, or disposition is. If it is undetermined, it is empiricism; if it is determined, it is what we can call “dispositional nativism”.

One important thing to clarify about dispositional innatism is that it should be taken in terms of first potentialities, not second potentialities. In the second and fifth chapters of *De Anima* II, Aristotle distinguishes between first and second potentialities and actualities (412a21-8 and 417a21-b2).¹¹ When a child is born, they have a first potentiality to learn a language. When they do learn a language, that first potentiality is

⁹ See n. 8 above on Descartes’ ambiguity between dispositional and latent content innatism, and §3, with n. 13, on Leibniz’s. The last sentence’s talk of «insensible» «actualities» that correspond to the dispositions sounds to me like latent content innatism.

¹⁰ Hunter and Inwood 1984, 429-30. See Scott 1995, 92-93 and Cowie 1999 (chs. 1-3) for similar distinctions and more discussion. Cf. Fodor 1983.

¹¹ See Bronstein 2016 for a lucid summary of this distinction.

actualized and becomes a first actuality, which is now equivalent to a second potentiality. They then have a second potentiality to *use* the language, which becomes a second actuality when they do so use it. This is important because “disposition” is sometimes used to refer to a *second* potentiality – as in saying, “a French speaker is disposed to understand French” – but this is not the way I am using the term here. Throughout this paper, and most other discussions of innatism, “dispositional innatism” refers to innate first potentialities, not second potentialities. For an innate second potentiality is indistinguishable from the next type of innatism (§3), latent content.

So, when Plato says we have knowledge or true beliefs in us (two contenders, among others, for the innate object in the *Meno*), is he emphasizing that we have an innate capacity or disposition that helps us acquire knowledge or true beliefs in some way? While I do not myself think this view is correct, an impressive line of scholars have either accepted or flirted with dispositional nativism as Plato’s variety in the recollection dialogues.¹² So we should consider it a very “live” option in the literature.

3. *Leibnizian latent content innatism*

Like Descartes, Leibniz seems to sometimes opt for a dispositional view, as we saw above in his famous “veined statue” analogy. Here, however, I focus on a different strand in Leibniz’s discussions of innatism, one in which he seems to think that content is innate. But unlike the view Locke critiqued, this content is not explicitly available or accessible at birth. Instead, it is latent, and some people will never become aware of this content within them.

On Leibniz’s view,

the whole of arithmetic and of geometry should be regarded as innate, and contained within us in an implicit way, so that

¹² Vlastos 1965, Hunter and Inwood 1984, Fine 1992, Fine 1993, Fine 2003, Gentzler 1994, Dancy 2004, Rawson 2006, Charles 2006, and Franklin 2009. Note that Vlastos, Hunter and Inwood, Gentzler, and Dancy all seem to sometimes imply content innatism instead of dispositional innatism, just like Descartes and Leibniz.

we can find them within ourselves by attending carefully and methodically to what is already in our minds, without employing any truth learned through experience or through being handed on by other people. Plato showed this, in a dialogue where he had Socrates leading a child to abstruse truths just by asking questions and without teaching him anything (*NECHU*, 77).

While Leibniz does seem to take a dispositional approach elsewhere, he here seems to instead be saying that actual contents are innate.¹³ He is not saying here that the mind contains dispositions to form ideas of mathematical truths, but that the truths themselves, all of them, are actually present in the mind, only waiting to be “found”.

Like Leibniz, and a number of contemporary scholars, I too think Plato holds something like this view in the *Meno*, as well as the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*.¹⁴ I call this position “latent content innatism”. Unlike dispositional innatism, there is actual content within the soul; but unlike explicit content innatism, that content is not explicit or accessible at birth. Like explicit content and dispositional innatism, a variety of different sorts of objects can be innate. So one can have latent content innatism about true beliefs, about concepts, about knowledge, etc. But it is worth asking what it *means* to say that beliefs or knowledge, etc., are

¹³ In truth, I think the veined statue analogy is the anomaly, and that Leibniz is himself closer to a content innatist than dispositional innatist, all things considered (cf. n. 12 above). But this view is controversial, and I cannot defend it here. For one brief consideration, however, note Leibniz’s claim that the soul has no «doors and windows». On such a view, if there is not something *already in the soul*, nothing could ever be known. For Leibniz on the windowless soul, see §26 of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, which also cites Plato’s theory of recollection. For discussions of Leibniz’s innatism, see Jolley 1990 and the relevant references in the bibliography of Samet 2008.

¹⁴ Moravcsik 1971; Scott 1987, 1995, 2006; Kelsey 2000; Caston 2001, 42; Williams 2002, 149; Bobonich 2002; Butler 2006, 24-25; Wolfsdorf 2011, 60; Bronstein and Schwab 2019; and Shepardson 2022. Note that whether Scott is a latent content innatist is controversial. Fine 2014 and Bronstein and Schwab 2019, for example, see him as a condition innatist, but since I do not think this distinction makes conceptual sense, as I explain below, I deny this claim and place Scott here among latent content innatists. Also note that my “latent content innatism” is different from Bronstein and Schwab’s “content innatism”.

innate in the sense of content. At minimum, positing innate knowledge *as content* would imply a radically different theory of knowledge from the sort we are used to.

A related question concerns how thick or precise the content is. For one can have content corresponding to every proposition or, as Leibniz notes elsewhere, certain «primary truths» from which numerous others can be derived.¹⁵ On the latter view, the primary truths would be innate in the sense of content and all the others would be innate dispositionally, since they can be inferred or deduced from that primary content. Alternatively, perhaps it is only the content of special objects, like Platonic Forms, that is innate for Plato. If we choose this view, we would need to decide whether it is a precise definition of the Forms that is innate, or a basic meaning sufficient for use in ordinary language and reasoning.¹⁶ We can call the former “strong” or “sophisticated” latent content innatism, and the latter “weak” or “rudimentary” latent content innatism.

4. *Kantian constructivist innatism*

Unlike the previous two views, the next two options have not been named in the literature, and there has been no detailed discussion of them. I accordingly aim to describe the views here and show that they are both live options, despite my disagreement with both. The first has a strong parallel in Kant.

Kant holds that we need certain a priori concepts, called categories, for the possibility of experience and thought. While one can acquire the concept of “dog” or “table” empirically, the concepts of “unity” or “cause and effect”, for example, cannot be so acquired:

¹⁵ See Leibniz’s essays «On Primary Truths» and «Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas». I discuss the thickness of the innate content in the *Meno* in Shepardson 2022.

¹⁶ This latter distinction is similar to Locke’s nominal vs. real essences, the nominal essence of gold being “yellow, hard, metal, etc.” and the real essence being something like “substance with atomic number 79” (see Fine 2014 for this analogy). Scott 1987 and 1995 has famously argued that recollection is only about more advanced cognitive learners, i.e., that recollection is not responsible for the five-year-old’s grasp of “equality”.

Now this [Table of Categories] is the listing of all original pure concepts of synthesis that the understanding contains in itself *a priori*, and on account of which it is only a pure understanding; *for by these concepts alone can it understand something in the manifold of intuition*, i.e., think an object for it (CPR, A80/B106, my emphasis).

The reason for this is that experience already presupposes the concepts in question. We cannot have an experience without unity; prior possession of the category of unity is necessary for seeing an object as unified in the first place. Accordingly, Kant holds that the category of unity, and the other eleven, are *a priori*.

Regardless of whether Kant is a nativist, a number of Plato scholars have associated Plato's nativism with the Kantian view above.¹⁷ These interpreters take Plato to be making a similar point: just as thought and experience are impossible without the *a priori* categories for Kant, they think thought and experience are impossible without innate concepts for Plato. Since, on this view, innate concepts are necessary for *constructing* experience, I call this "constructivist nativism".

This type of innatism, then, holds that concepts are innate, but that these concepts somehow construct or structure experience. But latent content innatism can also be about concepts, so I want to spend some time differentiating latent content innatism about concepts from constructivist innatism. How do the two differ? Those who attribute innate concepts to Plato sometimes just mean that some sort of information is innate, typically, information about the Forms. Possessing the concept of "beauty" innately, for instance, is sometimes parsed as possessing a rough definition of beauty, or understanding how the word is commonly used. One can use the word because one already contains the information about its use. As we sometimes say, they "have

¹⁷ Whether Kant is a nativist is controversial (see, e.g., Zoeller 1989, Falkenstein 1990, Callanan 2013, and Vanzo 2018). As a referee points out, it is worth noting that Kant denies being a nativist in the *Inaugural Dissertation* (§8, *KGS* II: 395), though we must be careful not to assume that Kant was considering all the varieties of innatism discussed today. Thanks to an anonymous reader for *Thaumazein* for the reference.

the concept". This is latent content innatism about concepts, and it can be understood similarly to latent content innatism about beliefs.¹⁸

But sometimes those who attribute innate concepts to Plato mean something stronger than the above. Kenneth Dorter, for example, says that certain concepts are «presupposed by experience».¹⁹ Michael Morgan suggests that concepts are innate and that Plato's argument for this is «transcendental in the Kantian sense».²⁰ And Charles Kahn says that 249b-c of Plato's *Phaedrus* «is best understood as an allegorical anticipation of the Kantian view of a priori concepts as giving unity and structure to sensory experience».²¹ Unlike the previous paragraph, these scholars seem to be speaking of concepts as innate ways of structuring the world. As Kant is often thought to say that space and time are a priori forms of intuition that allow us to perceive the world as spatially and temporally ordered, or that certain categories are necessary for the possibility of experience, they think Plato is saying that innate concepts help *construct* or *shape* the way we experience the world. This view is thus not saying that a specific content is innate, latently or explicitly, but that we have innate cookie-cutters, if you will, for structuring reality.

One problem with this view is that it is perhaps more difficult to understand what it means regarding some of the concepts Plato speaks of, rather than Kant's categories and the a priori forms of intuition, space and time. What exactly is the constructivist concept (of the Form) of beauty? Perhaps the thought is that we would not be able to judge that Helen is beautiful unless we had that concept through which to make the judgement? Similarly, we could not judge that two sticks are equal (in, e.g., length) unless we had an a priori concept of equality through which, or with which, we make that judgement. Though the boundaries between this and latent content innatism are fuzzy, we can perhaps say

¹⁸ E.g., my belief that the cat is on the mat is similar to me having the concept of the cat being on the mat [Moravcsik 1971, 69].

¹⁹ Dorter 1972, 201. Constance Meinwald makes a similar point, noting that her interpretation gives recollection a «Kantian' Flavor» [2016, 127].

²⁰ Morgan 1984, 248.

²¹ Kahn 1996, 367. Note that this and the previous 2 notes have been from scholars working on the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*. Constructivist nativism is less popular in the *Meno*.

that constructivist nativism focuses more on what we *do* with innate concepts, or how we use them, whereas latent content innatism focuses on how the innate content helps us understand what things are.

At any rate, though I do not agree with it, constructivist nativism seems like a live option in the literature, and one we should think of as distinct from content innatism about concepts.

5. Malebranchian transcendent innatism

Malebranche was not a nativist, but the fifth type of innatism is somewhat similar to his position that we “see all things in God”. When in a literary mood, Malebranche sometimes describes this idea as a «transportation» to another realm:

While our body walks in the material world, our mind for its part is ceaselessly transported into an intelligible world which touches it and thereby becomes sensible to it (*Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, 1.5, 9).

It is a lot, Aristes, to know how to leave one’s body when one wishes and to elevate oneself mentally into the land of intellects (*Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, 3.1, 31).

So the idea is that the mind has an ability to access another realm, the realm of intelligible objects. In fact, the mind *must* do this, Malebranche thinks, because it does not contain general ideas. Anytime one thinks “this is a tree in front of me”, one’s mind is passively receiving the sensory content of the visual experience, simultaneously accessing the general form “tree”, which is “in God”, and hoping that God “occasionally” synthesizes the two.²²

The nativism I discuss in this section is similar in that it takes Plato to be saying that the mind directly accesses another realm in certain types of thoughts. This is a common description of Plato’s view of knowledge, since he frequently describes knowledge as a “vision” of

²² It is not difficult to see the potential influence on Kant here! For helpful discussions of Malebranche on vision in God, see Jolley 1990, Schmaltz 2000, and Pessin 2006.

the Forms (*Symp.* 210c3-e1, 211d8-212a7; *Rep.* 484c5-d2, 490a8-b6, 500b7-c2, 532e2-a3, 596b6-9).²³ Everyone agrees that Plato is being metaphorical here, since the mind does not literally “see”, but there is a disagreement about what the metaphor means. Some take it as indicative of Plato supporting a type of intellectual vision, or noetic intuition, akin to direct realist accounts of perception.²⁴ Though the mind does not literally see, the metaphor implies that the mind makes a type of immaterial “direct contact” with its objects. On the other side of the debate, some scholars think the visual language is a metaphor for a representational, indirect, or mediated type of contact between the mind and its objects, akin to indirect or representational accounts of perception.²⁵

The latter, representational position will not concern us here. But if one takes the direct access view and combines it with the view that knowledge is innate, one might be led to think that what is innate is an ability to access the realm of Forms. I thus call this view “transcendent nativism”, since it claims something is innate – a bridge or portal, if you will – and that this innate item leads to the possibility of accessing a realm of transcendent objects.²⁶

²³ These seeming statements of the visual account of knowledge in the *Republic* and *Symposium* should be contrasted with other middle-period approximations of it, like those in the *Phaedo* (64e-67b, esp. 64c5-d1, 66a2-4, 66d5-e2; cf. 79d1-2) and perhaps the *Cratylus* (438e3-439b6), in that the former two sets of passages are fairly clearly references to embodied intuition, whereas the latter two are not (or, in the case of the *Cratylus*, not unambiguously) about embodied intuition, but (might) instead refer to a disembodied period of the soul’s existence.

²⁴ See Bengson 2015 for an analysis of intuition modeled on direct realist accounts of perception.

²⁵ In favor of taking the visual language of noetic direct contact literally, see Bluck 1956, Teloh 1981, and Gonzalez 1998. Against this, see Cross 1955, Gosling 1973 (the chapter entitled «Knowledge as Vision»), Fine 1978 and 1992 (to name a few), and Butler 2006 and 2007.

²⁶ I am hesitant to introduce further distinctions with so many in place already, but this view is technically a type of dispositional innatism, since it posits an innate ability, capacity, or disposition. We can distinguish it from the previously discussed dispositional innatism because that leads to the soul acquiring something *within it*, whereas, on this transcendent nativist view, the soul’s ability leads to it accessing something *external* to it.

A number of commentators have made use of this visual model of knowledge in their descriptions of recollection, such that recollection's end goal is a direct, unmediated vision of the Forms. But this alone does not mean they accept the transcendent view. Dominic Scott, for example, says that, when the slave boy recollects in the *Meno*, he is «venturing (back) into the intelligibile world».²⁷ However, since Scott unambiguously thinks there is some content actually present in the soul at birth for Plato, he is not a transcendent innatist (see n. 14 above). But other scholars, to my mind, do seem to intend this transcendent nativist position:

Here I only want to emphasize that recollected knowledge of the Forms is visual: the Forms appear or manifest themselves to us in complete purity. [...] Forms are intersubjective entities in that they are accessible to whomever achieves philosophical vision.²⁸

Tout processus d'apprentissage [as recollection] trouve son terme dans une connaissance qui est une intuition s'apparentant à une vision.²⁹

[Plato fails] to inform us whether, when the Ideas are recollected, our souls are still incarnate *or* are fully discarnate (along some analogue to astral projection) *or* a bit of both. Plato does not answer the question “where are we when we think?” despite the spatial metaphors which permeate his metaphysics and epistemology.³⁰

Henry Teloh and Luc Brisson, then, both seem to accept the transcendent nativist view (assuming they both think knowledge is innate), whereas Richard Mohr is on the fence between it and a representational view.³¹

²⁷ Scott 2015, 92, n. 15. Cf. Gulley 1962, 111.

²⁸ Teloh 1981, 104 and 108.

²⁹ Brisson 2007, 201.

³⁰ Mohr 1984, 35.

³¹ Mohr's position is more complicated (and interesting) than I am letting on here. He more or less goes through the horns of this quotation and argues that the soul makes a direct acquaintance with «Ideal memory traces» that have «the same status as the Ideas themselves» [1984, 40].

So, while I do not think anyone has carefully argued for this nativist position, I do think some scholars hold the view, others metaphorically (and perhaps misleadingly) suggest it through their terminology, and that others consider it a live possibility.³²

6. *Condition innatism?*

The sixth and final type of innatism I want to discuss is “condition innatism”. In this section, I briefly explain what condition innatism is and argue that it is difficult to differentiate it from latent content innatism.

Gail Fine describes the distinction between it and content innatism in the following way:

When we ask whether Socrates took himself to have knowledge, we are speaking of knowledge in the first way [as a cognitive condition]. When we speak of the sum of human knowledge, we are speaking of it in the second way [as a cognitive content].³³

The difference is not entirely clear, but I believe condition innatists posit innate propositional attitudes paired with the contents, and content innatists posit only innate content. The current explicit state of belief that p has two components: the content p , and the attitude or condition of “believing” (some sort of taking-to-be-true propositional attitude directed towards p).³⁴ Condition innatism, I think, posits *both* the content and the attitude latently, innately directed towards that content, whereas content innatism posits only the innate content.

To see this, consider how Bronstein and Schwab describe condition innatism:

³² Gosling 1973, 120-39 argues against the direct contact interpretation of Plato’s visual metaphors, but thinks it might be present (if it is present anywhere) in the *Phaedo*’s notion of comparing the sensibles to the Forms.

³³ Fine 2014, 141.

³⁴ Rowett 2018 and Fine 2021b give this as the basic sense of “belief”.

Human beings are born in the cognitive condition of knowing, in the sense that human embodied souls possess latent innate states of knowledge. The goal of recollection is to make one's latent knowledge explicit.³⁵

On the other hand, this is how they explain content innatism:

Human beings are born with innate cognitive contents, in the sense that human embodied souls innately possess truths that can be the contents of states of knowledge but do not exist innately in the soul as the contents of such states. The goal of recollection is to take up these contents in such a way that one knows them (again).³⁶

If “cognitive state” means something like “content + propositional attitude directed towards it”, the condition innatism seems like what I described it to be above.

I have two main reasons for my skepticism about this view. First, no one has, in my view, clearly defended condition innatism as an interpretation of Plato's innatism. And second, I find the position makes it difficult to differentiate condition innatism about belief or knowledge from latent content innatism about belief or knowledge. I will now treat these points in turn.

Both Fine and Bronstein and Schwab discuss the view, but they do not endorse it. However, they both think that condition innatism is the dominant view in the literature.³⁷ So why do I say no one has argued for the view? Consider the scholars they cite as finding condition innatism in Plato's theory of recollection.³⁸ Though I have not checked all of these references, those I have say nothing about innate propositional attitudes or how we should construe the innate knowledge they discuss. Bluck, for example, simply speaks of latent knowledge: «Socrates then answers Meno's objection to search for something “unknown” by showing that it is possible that we have *latent* knowledge, which may be aroused into

³⁵ Bronstein and Schwab 2019, 393.

³⁶ Bronstein and Schwab 2019, 394.

³⁷ Fine 2014, 146-47 and Bronstein and Schwab 2019, 393.

³⁸ See Bronstein and Schwab 2019, 393, n. 2.

our consciousness by association of ideas». ³⁹ And Lesley Brown says only that,

en opposition à Irwin et à Vlastos, je montrerai que Platon affirme qu'il y a un savoir inné dans l'âme (voir ci-dessous p. 615). Je montrerai également que, selon Platon, l'âme n'a jamais été consciente de ce savoir: il s'agit, en effet, d'un savoir ou d'une connaissance virtuelle. ⁴⁰

Neither of these, and none of the other references I have checked, gives us a reason to suppose that the *condition* of knowing is innate (a special propositional attitude of knowing), instead of a *content* that just happens to be called “knowledge” by Plato. ⁴¹ But, admittedly, there is nothing stopping us from interpreting these scholars as positing innate propositional attitudes or *conditions*, either.

One thing that Bronstein and Schwab, and perhaps Fine, might mean by condition innatism is the view that verbs, or mental acts, are posited as innate instead of (or in addition to) cognitive contents. Many of the texts Bronstein and Schwab cite, both in Plato and the secondary literature, use the verbs “know” and “knowing” or “believe” and “believing” instead of the nouns “knowledge” and “belief.” Bronstein and Schwab associate the verbs with the *conditions*, and the nouns with the *content*. ⁴² But regardless of their reasons for thinking this, and regardless of whether they are right that Plato often obeyed this distinction, it obviously does

³⁹ Bluck 1961, 9. The reference to 272 is somewhat closer to their «condition innatism», but still does not need to be construed in that way. For this speaks of knowledge as latent «perfect apprehension». But it is not clear how strictly Bluck intends this phrase, i.e., whether he means to imply an innate latent *attitude* over, or in addition to, an innate latent *content*.

⁴⁰ Brown 1991, 604. Neither page 605, which Bronstein and Schwab cite, nor 615, which Brown cites, say anything about innate propositional attitudes or how we should understand this innate *virtuelle savoir* or *connaissance*.

⁴¹ I do wonder if Cornford 1952, 49, who seems to imply that a *sense of certainty* is innate, would opt for condition innatism. But it is far from clear that Cornford actually thinks this, his position is not discussed by Fine or Bronstein and Schwab, and there is little reason to think Plato is concerned with an innate sense of certainty in any of the three main discussions of recollection.

⁴² Bronstein and Schwab 2019, 404-07.

not follow that all of the other cited scholars obeyed it. One who says “knowing is innate” does not necessarily mean that a cognitive attitude is innate over some content called knowledge being innate. Indeed, it is difficult to see what an innate cognitive attitude could even mean.

John Searle, in a paper on the difference between conscious and unconscious mental states, has argued that unconscious propositional attitudes cannot be differentiated from each other.⁴³ The nature of *hope* or *belief* or *fear*, etc., only makes sense at the level of consciousness; when unconscious, there is nothing for these states to be:

The notion of an unconscious intentional state is the notion of a state which is a possible conscious thought or experience. There are plenty of unconscious phenomena, but to the extent that they are genuinely mental they must in some sense preserve their aspectual shape even when unconscious, but the only sense that we can give to the notion that they preserve their aspectual shape when unconscious is that they are possible contents of consciousness.⁴⁴

Unconscious mental states have no nature in themselves, but only a forward-looking nature as possible conscious states. But if that is true, then there is no way to differentiate condition innatists about different objects besides appealing to what they happen to be *called*. The innate condition of belief is just content that is called *belief* that can one day become the content of a conscious, explicit, occurrent state of belief. The innate condition of knowledge is just content that is called *knowledge* that can one day become the content of a conscious, explicit, occurrent state of knowledge. And that means that there is no difference between condition and content innatism. Thus, like explicit content innatism, I do not consider condition innatism to be a live option either.

⁴³ Searle 1991, esp. 56-57.

⁴⁴ Searle 1991, 57.

7. *Varieties of innate objects*

So far, I have said little about the possible innate objects in Plato's theory, instead discussing the different *ways* things can be innate. I will now briefly discuss the various possible types of innate objects. The most commonly proposed innate objects in Plato's theory of recollection have been knowledge, beliefs, and concepts.⁴⁵ But it is not difficult to see the problem in merely stating that Plato thinks knowledge is innate without specifying what conception of knowledge we are working with, especially given the history of post-Gettier epistemology. Would, then, true belief, justification, and an extra, Gettier-appealing feature all be innate? What would the latter look like, innately, and how should we construe innate justification? Or is knowledge in the sense of acquaintance innate, and if so, what is that?

Similar problems arise with regard to beliefs and concepts (which, although not as well-known as analyses of knowledge, are just as interesting and controversial). For beliefs can be construed as mental representations (particulars that can be in one's mind without one being aware of them), as occurrent behaviors (datable events that occur

⁴⁵ The following commentators argue for innate knowledge in the theory of recollection: Cornford 1952, 50; Bluck 1955, 8; 1961, 9; Scott 1987; 1995; 2006; Brown 1991; Dimas 1996, 29; Gonzalez 1998, 272-274; Matthews 1999, 62-63; Sheffield 2001, 25; Ionescu 2006, 164; Ebrey 2014, 18-19; Bronstein 2016, 14.

These scholars argue that Plato is committed to innate true belief: Gulley 1954, 194; Moravcsik 1971, 59; Bedu-Addo 1983, 230; 1984, 5; Gentzler 1994, 281, with n. 14; Cowie 1999, 14-15, with n. 9; Bobonich 2002, 549, n. 6. Dancy [2004, 231-34] seems to think both knowledge and true beliefs are innate.

And here are some scholars who have upheld a theory of innate concepts: Dorter 1972; Morgan 1984; Bostock 1986; Osborne 1995, 228; Kahn 1996, 162-64 and 367.

Others have not specified what specific object they think is innate, but have emphasized that content is innate [Caston 2001, 42; Williams 2002, 137; Wolfsdorf 2011, 60].

Finally, some have specified that no object is innate, or that just a disposition or potentiality is innate (e.g., Fine 1992).

It should go without saying that these scholars may be working with drastically different conceptions of knowledge, belief, concepts, innatism, etc., when they merely say that one of these is innate.

at a moment in time), or as dispositions to undergo these behaviors.⁴⁶ And concepts can be construed as mental representations (similar to the representational view of beliefs), as “third-world” entities (Fregean senses or Russellian concepts), or, as we’ve seen, as a sort of experience-shaping hardware.⁴⁷

The different types of innatism can thus be paired with different types of innate objects, and the different types of innate objects can be construed in various ways. One can opt for constructivist nativism, for example, and call that “innate knowledge”, or one can attribute “innate beliefs” to Plato and mean something like innate dispositions to believe things. Unfortunately, most commentators have used these terms so loosely that it is hard to see which sense they intend by them.⁴⁸ So it is accordingly unclear what the many people in the literature have meant by attributing to Plato a theory of innate knowledge, beliefs, or concepts.

The work in this field is therefore, to my mind, just beginning. We need to figure out what objects are innate in each dialogue, *and* what way they are innate. Then, if our answers differ from one dialogue to the next, we must ask why, and try to construct a theory explaining it. But these are tasks for other scholars, in other works. My main goal in this paper has been to introduce new readers to the various types of innatism in Plato scholarship, to formally articulate constructivist and transcendent innatism (distancing the former from latent content innatism about concepts), to critique condition innatism, and to discuss the various types of innate objects. With these distinctions in place, the real work can now begin.

⁴⁶ See Jolley 1990 for something similar to these three types of beliefs (though Jolley speaks of «ideas»). There are, of course, many other conceptions of belief as well. See Schwitzgebel’s *SEP* article [2006] on ‘Belief’ for further discussion.

⁴⁷ The first view would be innate concepts *as* latent content, and the third view would be innate concepts as constructivist nativism. The second view would be concepts as Forms. Like belief, there are also additional conceptions of concepts. See Margolis and Laurence’s *SEP* article [2005] on «Concepts» for some additional considerations. Helmig 2012 provides a survey of different views of concepts throughout the history of Platonism.

⁴⁸ When I say «most», note that there are hundreds of passing references to «innate knowledge» or «unconscious knowledge» in the literature that are not cited in this paper.

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Keywords

Plato; innatism; recollection; knowledge; epistemology

Abstract

This article considers six types of Platonic Innatism and compares them to the nativisms of early modern writers. I first dismiss a type of innatism similar to the target of the first book of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* and then discuss four types of innatism that might be considered "live options" for the one Plato employs in his theory of recollection: a Kantian "constructivist" innatism, a Cartesian "dispositional" innatism, a Leibnizian "content" innatism, and a Malebranchian "transcendent" innatism. Finally, in closing, I discuss "condition innatism". Though this last position is frequently referenced in Platonic scholarship, I argue that the position is incoherent.

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