

Feedback From A User

Post by "Cassius" of January 17, 2020 at 12:04 AM

Great question JLR, and of course I cannot answer it with certainty, but I can tell you the direction i think the answer will be found: anticipations, in the DEWITT model, not the Bailey / Laertius model.

I think DeWitt is clearly correct that anticipations cannot simply result AFTER experience, or else they would never have been called PRE-Conceptions (and for other reasons DeWitt mentions).

I think the physics rules out "universal concepts" as being possible, even from atomic origin. However as DeWitt argues (I think I recall in several places) it is valid to talk about "human nature" as the accumulation of something over large amounts of time, and I think the answer is in following that line of thought.

DeWitt's chapter on anticipations I think is one of his most important contributions.

I will also say personally that I think he occasionally goes too far in calling them innate "ideas." I do not think they constitute innate "ideas" but rather dispositions toward the formation of ideas, not ideas themselves.

I do not expect you to take the time to follow this suggestion, but in my own mind I associate this with a theory that I have seen asserted in a particular place in a particularly engaging way: Jackson Barwis' 1776 work: "Dialogues on Innate Principles" written in response to John Locke's theories (and the "blank slate" argument in general). It seems to me that Barwis is correct in distinguishing innate "principles" from innate "ideas" which is the thrust of that fairly short but very entertaining dialogue.

I am not sure how i came across that but I found it on Archive.org, and set up this website to make it easier to read: <https://jacksonbarwis.com> Each of his works is very well written, but "Dialogue on Innate Principles" makes an argument that I think Dewitt would have done well to follow. Strip away the obviously superficial references to a creator and religion in Barwis' work and I think the potential parallels to anticipations being an "innate" facility are obvious.

I also relate this in my mind to Thomas Jefferson's observation of a similar type as to there being an innate faculty that does not rest on "knowledge" or "Experience" but on something else, which is again not "divine" but a part of human nature:

Moral Philosophy. I think it lost time to attend lectures on this branch. He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler, if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science, there are thousands who are not. What would have become of them?

Man was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. **He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his Nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality, and not the [beautiful], truth, &c., as fanciful writers have imagined. The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree. It may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body. This sense is submitted, indeed, in some degree, to the guidance of reason; but it is a small stock which is required for this: even a less one than what we call common sense. State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules.** In this branch, therefore, read good books, because they will encourage, as well as direct your feelings. The writings of Sterne, particularly, form the best course of morality that ever was written. Besides these, read the books mentioned in the enclosed paper; and, above all things, lose no occasion of exercising your dispositions to be grateful, to be generous, to be charitable, to be humane, to be true, just, firm, orderly, courageous, &c. Consider every act of this kind, as an exercise which will strengthen your moral faculties & increase your worth.

[Quote from JLR](#)

This ability to categorize particular things as the "same thing" (horse, human, etc.) seems to point to universal concepts that are difficult to account for as strictly material (atomic) in origin.

So in sum I think your sentence there is very important, but that what you are observing does not point to "universal concepts" but to a human **faculty** - the faculty of anticipations, which disposes us in the direction you are looking - and gives us the disposition, which not all of us use, to exercise the ability to organize things into relationships, even though there is no divine order, no "essence," and no possibility of truly universal concepts.