

E Content for MA 1 English, Cultural Studies

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Topic:

Nature vs nurture Debate: An analysis of Locke and Leibniz

Introduction:

The nature-nurture debate is an old and still ongoing argument in Philosophy which has immense ramifications in the context of cultural studies as well. The debate originated in medieval France and is founded in the argument as to whether ideas and human thoughts are innate or acquired through learning. The rationalistic Cartesian view propounds the theory of innateness of ideas and sees the human mind as a repository of knowledge that is passed on. The archive is present and available to human beings from birth according to Descartes and his followers and therefore, learning is only the honing of that which is already available as a faculty. Learning and experience in life are then only means of bringing those ideas to light which are already existing and which make the human essentially so. In reaction and argument to this view of innateness, the empiricists suggest that the human mind is a “tabula rasa” (blank slate) at the time of birth and acquires knowledge through experience. This brings us to the seventeenth century debate between John Locke and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. While the former offers an empiricist view, the latter advances the Cartesian understanding of human ideas. Their debate becomes an interesting starting point to understand the working of a society and its culture.

Significance in Cultural Studies:

Cultural studies is a discipline that analyzes cultural, social, political, economic, behavioural, mediatic and pedagogical processes, among many others, to gauge how culture is formed and how it advances. Culture, which is variously defined as the “best that has ever been thought or said” (Arnold) and “ordinary” (Williams), is constantly changing and it is relevant to understand who holds the reins of this change. Human ideas, social knowledge and thereafter social consciousness are definitely relevant moments in the development of culture and as an originating point, human ideas and their formation is the foundation of culture. On this debate of nature and nurture, rests the entire argument of culture and power.

Link to powerpoint presentation on “Nature vs Nurture Debate”:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1B9Pr_zhsNb5kXZRC5mPm_4eDeXsttM9E/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=112893465225146066849&rtpof=true&sd=true

Further questions to probe:

- What is the current status of the nature vs nurture debate?
- Can you understand the link between the debate and its ramifications for the culture industry model offered by Adorno and Horkheimer?

- Can a link be established between this debate and the following areas?
 - Discourse theory
 - Humanism and anti-humanism
 - Resistance culture
 - Ecological criticism and the human position in the pyramid of life power
 - Posthumanism

Suggested reading list:

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I (T. Tegg and Son, 1836)1-48.
2. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Book I (Cambridge UP, 1996) 69-108.
3. Helen Thomas, “Culture/ Nature”, *Core Sociological Dichotomies*, ed., Chris Jenks (SAGE, 1998)110-122.
4. Michael Ryan, *Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction*, (Wiley Blackwell, 2010).