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**DARWIN MEETS SOCRATES:
EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY AND THE INNATE
IDEAS DEBATE**



A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Psychology
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STEVE STEWART-WILLIAMS

School of Psychology

Massey University

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Abstract

The underlying premise of this thesis is that evolutionary psychology and philosophy can exert a productive mutual influence on one another. To illustrate this, I focus on the innate ideas debate in philosophy. This debate concerns the origin and justification of our concepts and beliefs, and is intimately linked with the empiricist-rationalist debate of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The empiricists claimed that all ideas derive ultimately from experience, whereas the rationalists claimed that some ideas are innate. An evolutionary psychological perspective updates this issue in various ways. For instance, it provides a naturalistic explanation for the origin of any innate contributions to our mental representations of the world, and has implications for the subject matter and accuracy of these contributions. Not only does an evolutionary perspective have implications for philosophy, the philosophical literature contributes to an evolutionary psychological perspective on the innate design of the human mind. In particular, various suggestions for innate content can be drawn from the philosophical literature. Among these are the belief in other minds, belief in an objective and mind-independent external world, causal cognition, moral cognition, and elements of our understanding of space and time. Finally, an evolutionary perspective raises an important question: If certain aspects of our worldview are innate, does this provide any reason to think that these aspects accurately depict the world? The simple version of the argument for this conclusion is that if an aspect of mind is innate, it must be useful, and the best explanation for its usefulness is that it accurately depicts the world. Although there are important criticisms of this position, I argue that, in certain circumstances, it is reasonable to assume the approximate accuracy of some innate mental content.

Table of Contents

	Page
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>v</i>
 Introduction	 1
 Part I Evolution and Evolutionary Psychology	 11
1. Evolutionary Theory	13
2. Evolutionary Psychology	31
 Part II Evolutionary Psychology and the Innate Ideas Debate	 79
3. Innate Ideas after Darwin	81
4. Elements of an Evolved Conceptual Framework	111
5. Darwin and Descartes' Demon: On the Possible Evolutionary Origin of Belief in an External World	133
6. Silencing Roosters and Skinning Cats: The Evolution of Causal Cognition	151
7. Selfish Genes and Moral Animals: Morality as an Adaptation	175
8. Innate Content Related to Other Philosophical Issues	195
9. Innate Ideas as a Naturalistic Source of Metaphysical Knowledge	223
 Discussion	 259

<i>References</i>	267
<i>Appendix A: “Darwin and Descartes’ Demon” Publication</i>	307
<i>Appendix B: “Evolved Conceptual Framework” Publication</i>	317