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INNATE IDEAS

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TO JUDE

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Where Do Our Ideas Come From? —Descartes *vs.* Locke

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The innatist-empiricist controversy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is one of the most tangled and obscure, as well as one of the most famous, of philosophical debates. The issues are clouded by metaphorical talk about impressions on wax tablets and images in a *camera obscura,* and often were not clearly understood by the participants in the debate. It is not easy to see what—if anything—they were really disagreeing about.

In this essay I shall try to expose and clarify one disagreement between innatist and empiricist philosophers, and especially between Descartes and Locke, which seems to me to have been, in relation to the concerns of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy, the central disagreement in the controversy. It is a disagreement that can be expressed by saying that one party held that some (or all) of our ideas are innate, and the other party held that all our ideas are derived from experience. But that is not very informative. Both of the key terms—"derived from experience" as well as "innate"—need interpretation. It turns out that each of them is best understood in relation to doctrines that were stated with the use of the other term. In seeking the correct interpretation I believe it is most helpful to trace the development of the controversy, beginning with a pre-Cartesian empiricism.

In the first section of the paper I try to explain the sense in which Aristotelian scholastic empiricism held that all our ideas are derived from experience. In the second section I discuss why Descartes rejected Aristotelian empiricism, and

in what senses he held that all and some of our ideas are innate. Locke partly revived, and partly abandoned, Aristotelian empiricism; this is discussed in the third section, and a disagreement between Locke and Descartes is defined. It is in large part a disagreement about what sorts of things our ideas can represent. Locke holds, and Descartes was committed to deny, that all our ideas either are, or are composed of, ideas of properties of bodies which we have experienced in sensation, or ideas of mental operations which we have experienced in ourselves. This disagreement has been thought important because philosophers have seen in such Lockean empiricism a basis for metaphysical economy, and in the opposing innatism a basis for metaphysical generosity. In the fourth section of the essay I note this point and argue that Lockean empiricism about ideas provides at most a very weak basis for empiricist metaphysical economy.

I shall be talking only about innate *ideas:* I shall not have anything to say about innate *beliefs* or innate *knowledge.* I do not claim that the issue to be discussed in this paper is the only interesting issue about ideas which was in dispute between innatists and empiricists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There are other disagreements between them about the ways in which concepts are formed which have attracted a good deal of attention lately,[1] but I will not be discussing them.

I

One point at which to begin in trying to understand the innatist-empiricist controversy in modern philosophy is the abandonment of the Aristotelian theory of perception. (When I say "Aristotelian" in this essay, I have chiefly in mind the Aristotelian scholasticism of the Middle Ages, which was familiar to seventeenth-century philosophers, rather than Aristotle himself.) The treatment of perception was an integral part of the fabric of Aristotelian natural science, an application of a very general theory of causality. According to this theory, efficient causality is a transaction in which a form is transmitted by something which has the form to something which did not have it, but had only the potentiality for it. Thus in the

heating of a cold body it was thought that the form, heat, is transmitted from a warm body (which has it) to the cold body (which did not yet have it). Causality was regarded as a sort of process of contagion, in which one thing was, so to speak, infected with the properties of another.

Perception was interpreted as a transaction in which a form (the sensible form) is transmitted from the perceived object to the perceiver. Typically a medium (light, in the case of vision) is required, through which the form can pass on its way from the object to the perceiver. On reaching the sense organ (in the case of vision, the eye) the form transmitted from the object informs the organ, and is eventually received in the mind. This is a greatly simplified statement of the Aristotelian theory of perception. For our present purpose the most important point to grasp about it is that one and the same form, originally present in the object, is present also in the medium, the sense organ, and the mind. There is something (the sensible form) which literally comes into the mind from the object.

This theory of perception is the basis for the Aristotelian empiricist answer to the question, how we get our ideas. Platonist and Stoic doctrines, according to which certain ideas are in our minds since birth or before, are rejected. The human mind, at the beginning of its existence, is like a blank tablet. It has no ideas—that is, in Aristotelian scholastic terms, none of the sensible and intelligible forms by virtue of which it perceives, imagines, and understands things. Such forms first come into the mind from outside, in sense perception. These are, in the first instance, the sensible forms—for example, the forms by having which the mind is aware of sensing heat and cold, softness and hardness, and colors. But intelligible forms (such as those of body, apple, dog, and being) also come into the mind from outside, *in* the sensible forms. They are "abstracted" from the sensible forms by the intellect, and thus we understand things that we sense.

It is sometimes added that there are forms which neither come into the mind from outside nor are present in the mind from the beginning. These are the forms of the mind's own operations, of which it becomes aware as they occur. The mind is indirectly dependent on sensation for its possession of

even these forms. For they are not actually present in it until it begins to operate, and it does not begin to operate until sensation provides it with other forms from outside, which are the first objects of its operation.[2]

It is important to see that in its Aristotelian context empiricism is a theory that is meant to have explanatory force. It is assumed that when the mind knows something, it does so by having in itself a likeness of the object—or more precisely, a form that is also present in the object. Then an explanation is needed for the presence of this form in the mind. On Aristotelian views of causality, the form must have come from something that had it. The empiricist theory, that all our ideas are (or are composed of) forms that first entered our awareness in experience of objects that had them, is an attempt to explain our possession of ideas in accordance with Aristotelian conceptions of causality.

II

Descartes agrees that the presence of an idea in one's mind requires an explanation. In fact he holds a causal principle very similar to that of the Aristotelians.

> But in order that an idea should contain some one certain objective reality rather than another, it must without doubt derive it from some cause in which there is at least as much formal reality as this idea contains of objective reality.[3]

The form or likeness of the thing known or thought about, as it exists in the mind, is what Descartes calls the "objective reality" of the idea by which we think about the thing. The thing or property represented, as it exists in the object independently of being thought about, is the corresponding "formal reality." Descartes makes an important modification in the Aristotelian principle. He does not demand that *the same* form be found in the cause of the idea as in the idea—in his terms, he does not demand that *the same* reality exist formally in the cause of the idea as exists objectively in the idea. What he demands is that *at least as much reality* exist formally in the cause as exists objectively in the idea. (We need not worry here about what is supposed to determine the quantity of

reality.) One reason why Descartes is obliged to make this modification is that he believes that some of our ideas (for instance, the idea of a perfectly straight line) do not in fact derive their form or objective reality from something that has the same reality formally, but only from something (God) that has more reality formally. In spite of this modification, however, it is clear that Descartes retains an interest in tracing the form (or objective reality) of an idea to a source.

But he rejects the Aristotelian theory of perception, and with it the Aristotelian account of how we get our ideas. He says that "any man who rightly observes the limitations of the senses, and what precisely it is that can penetrate through this medium to our faculty of thinking must needs admit that no ideas of things, in the shape in which we envisage them by thought, are presented to us by the senses."[4] This position arises from Descartes's abandonment of the Aristotelian scheme of explanation in terms of infection by properties, in favor of a scheme of mechanical explanation. In Cartesian science all sensation must be explained in terms of the impact of other bodies (normally minute particles) on the organ of sensation, and the purely mechanical transmission of an impulse, by motions of the nerves, to the seat of consciousness (the pineal gland). At this point arises, of course, the famous Cartesian problem of how the motions of the pineal gland, or any other motions in the central nervous system, could cause the occurrence of ideas in the mind; but that problem need not concern us in the present argument.

The distinction between primary and secondary qualities is more important for an understanding of the argument. Like Galileo and Locke, Descartes believed that there are no properties of bodies which resemble our sensory ideas or perceptual images of colors, sounds, tastes, odors, heat and cold, softness and hardness, and tangible textures (the secondary qualities). In Aristotelian science it was supposed that there are properties of bodies which resemble our sensory ideas of these qualities. For in sense perception—in perception of secondary qualities as well as of primary qualities—a sensible form that is also present in the object of perception is present in the mind and is the image in the mind which represents the

thing perceived. But the new physics of the seventeenth century had no use for properties of bodies which resemble our sensory ideas of secondary qualities. Everything in bodies was to be explained in terms of the sizes, shapes, positions, and motions (primary qualities) of portions of matter. The perception of secondary qualities was to be explained in terms of the size, shape, and velocity of particles striking the sense organs, and in terms of the motions of parts of the perceiver's body which transmit the signal to the brain. In the body perceived, the secondary quality is nothing but the power that it has, by virtue of its primary qualities, to cause certain ideas to occur in the mind of a perceiver; it is nothing that resembles those ideas. The form of our sensory idea of a secondary quality is present, therefore, neither in the body perceived nor in the intermediate causes between the body perceived and the perceiving mind. (For the intermediate causes are only motions.) Our sensory ideas of secondary qualities are not forms that enter the mind from outside in sense perception.

Descartes does not deny that bodies have properties that resemble our sensory ideas of their primary qualities. But he does deny that the motions in the body of the perceiver, which are the immediate corporeal cause of his sensory ideas, resemble the ideas of primary qualities which they cause. He concludes that the forms of our ideas of primary qualities, not being present in their immediate corporeal causes, do not come into the mind from outside in sense perception.

If our ideas of the primary and secondary qualities of bodies do not enter our minds from outside in sense perception, presumably no ideas enter that way at all. How do we get our ideas, then? Descartes can see no answer but that they must all be innate.

> . . . in our ideas there is nothing which was not innate in the mind, or faculty of thinking, except only these circumstances which point to experience—the fact, for instance, that we judge that this or that idea, which we now have present to our thought, is to be referred to a certain extraneous thing, not that these extraneous things transmitted the ideas themselves to our minds through the organs of sense, but because they transmitted something which gave the mind occasion to form these ideas, by means of an innate faculty, at this time rather than at another. For nothing reaches our mind from external objects through the organs of sense beyond certain corporeal movements . . . ; but even these movements, and the

figures which arise from them, are not conceived by us in the shape they assume in the organs of sense, as I have explained at great length in my *Dioptrics.* Hence it follows that the ideas of the movements and figures are themselves innate in us. So much the more must the ideas of pain, colour, sound, and the like be innate, that our mind may, on the occasion of certain corporeal movements, envisage these ideas, for they have no likeness to the corporeal movements.[5]

It is clear in this passage, of course, that what Descartes thinks is innate, or born in us, in the case of ideas of sensible qualities, is not the actual awareness or thought of the quality, but a faculty or dispositional property of our minds. We are born with such a constitution that when our bodies are affected with certain motions we will become aware of an idea of red, when our bodies are affected with certain slightly different motions we will become aware of an idea of orange, when our bodies are affected with certain other motions we will become aware of the idea of a triangular shape, and so forth. Given the Cartesian theory of perception, it is not enough to suppose that man is born with a general faculty of receiving sensible forms from sensible objects—a faculty that could be compared with the famous blank tablet on which nothing has yet been written, ready to receive whatever forms the sensible objects may impart to it. For according to Descartes, no forms come to the mind from sensible objects. The mind must innately have, not a faculty of receiving sensible forms in general, but specific predispositions to form, on appropriate stimulation, all the ideas of sensible qualities which it is capable of having.

There is an apparent contradiction in what Descartes says about innateness of ideas. In the passage we have been considering, he argues that all our ideas are innate. But he commonly distinguishes innate ideas from others that he calls "adventitious," and from still others that he calls "fictitious."[6] I believe the contradiction here is only apparent. If an adventitious idea is an idea that comes into the mind from outside in sensation, Descartes does not believe that we have any adventitious ideas. But he calls some ideas adventitious, meaning that their occurrence in our minds is occasioned (or that we judge it to be occasioned) by the action, on our sense organs, of bodies that we perceive. Fictitious ideas are ideas that the mind forms (or could have formed) voluntarily by combining

simpler ideas that do not imply each other. Descartes holds that all our ideas are innate in us in the sense that we are born, not with a capacity to receive them from outside, but with a power to form each of them without receiving them from outside. He commonly calls some ideas innate in a narrower sense, however, meaning that we need neither any particular sensory stimulation, nor simpler component ideas, in order to form them. (They are neither adventitious nor fictitious.) Such ideas he evidently regarded as being part of our natural constitution in a more basic or fundamental way than others. It is with this narrower sense of "innate" that we shall be primarily concerned.

III

In many ways the resemblance between Locke's empiricism and Aristotelian scholastic empiricism is striking. Locke denies that we have any innate ideas. He compares the human mind, at the beginning of its existence, to "white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas." Whence, then, does the mind get its ideas? "From EXPERIENCE," Locke answers.[7] The first and principal source of our ideas is sensation of physical objects. The only other ultimate source of our ideas is our awareness of the operations of our own mind; Locke agrees with Aquinas that this source of ideas (which he calls *reflection)* is dependent on sensation in that our minds do not have any operations for us to be aware of until sensation has provided them with ideas to operate about.[8] Locke does not claim that *all* of our ideas come to us directly from sensation or reflection. What he claims is that all of our *simple* ideas come directly from sensation or reflection, and that all of our other ideas are formed from simple ideas by the mental operations of compounding, comparing, and abstracting. A doctrine of *abstraction,* whereby more general ideas are said to be extracted from the ideas directly received in sensation and reflection, plays as prominent a part in Locke's theory of the understanding as it did in Aristotelian theories.

In all this Locke reproduces, in somewhat more modern terminology, the structure of Aristotelian scholastic thought.

But in Locke the structure lacks its foundation in the theory of perception. Much of Locke's language is misleading on this point. He often speaks as if he thought of the simple ideas of sensation as forms that have literally come into the mind from outside, from physical objects that have them. The senses are said to "convey" ideas into the mind from external objects, which are said to "furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities."[9] But these are metaphorical expressions. Locke's explicit explanation of what he means by saying that the senses "convey" ideas into the mind is plainly consistent with the view that what the senses transmit from physical objects to the mind is not a form that exists both in the object and in the mind, but only an influence that causes the idea to occur in the mind.

> And thus we come by those *ideas* we have of *yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet,* and all those which we call sensible qualities; which when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean, they from external objects convey into the mind what produces there those perceptions.[10]

And on a larger view it is clear that it is not Locke's doctrine that ideas, or sensible forms, literally come into the mind from outside in sense perception. Consistency would obviously require him to deny any such doctrine in the case of secondary qualities. For like Descartes, and unlike the Aristotelians, Locke denies that there is in bodies anything that resembles our sensory ideas of secondary qualities.[11]

He maintains, however, "that the ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves."[12] But he is not in a position to hold that the forms of primary qualities literally travel from the bodies perceived to the mind (although he cannot definitely deny it as Descartes does). He advances no views about the question whether the forms of primary qualities perceived are present in the intermediate stages of the precess of perception, between the body perceived and the perceiving mind. For he explicitly declines to speculate about the physical causal processes involved in perception, or to examine "by what motions of our spirits or alterations of our bodies we come to have any *sensation* by our organs, or any *ideas* in our

understandings."[13] I take it to be Locke's position, therefore, that the forms of our sensory ideas of secondary qualities do not literally come into the mind from external material things because they are not present in external material things at all, and that he is not committed to the doctrine that the forms of our sensory ideas of primary qualities literally come into the mind from external material things because he is not committed to any theory about the physical causal process of sensation.

Seeing that Locke does not mean that sensible forms enter our minds from outside in sensation, we may well wonder what he does mean when he says that experience is the source of all our ideas. Is he asserting anything that Descartes would deny? There is an obvious analogy between Locke's classification of ideas as simple and complex, and of simple ideas as ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection, and Descartes's classification of ideas as fictitious, adventitious, and innate. Descartes's fictitious ideas correspond to Locke's complex ideas. Both are characterized as ideas that the mind forms out of other, simpler ideas with which it is already supplied. Descartes's adventitious ideas correspond to Locke's ideas of sense. Both are characterized as being caused to occur in the mind by appropriate sensory stimulation, although they are not believed literally to come into the mind from outside. But Descartes's innate ideas do not correspond at all closely to Locke's ideas of reflection. An important disagreement between the two philosophers is revealed at this point.

In order to understand this disagreement more clearly we can formulate a thesis that Locke maintains and Descartes would deny: "All our simple, nonsensory ideas are ideas of reflection." For purposes of argument, let us ignore any differences there may be between Locke and Descartes about what an idea is, what a simple (nonfictitious) idea is, and what a sensory (adventitious) idea is. And let us ask what is being said about simple, nonsensory ideas when it is claimed that they are ideas of reflection.

This looks like a claim about the *causes* of such ideas. And so it is, in part. But if Locke were to say that (the first conscious occurrences of) all our simple, nonsensory ideas are caused by operations of our minds, that would be a trivial, uninteresting claim. For presumably every conscious occurrence of any idea is caused, at least in part, by some operation of the

mind. Locke means to say more than that, however. He holds that all our simple, nonsensory ideas arise from "our observation employed . . . about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves."[14] It is not just *some* operation of the mind which is needed as a cause of such ideas, but reflection, self-awareness, *observation of* the operations of our own minds. Locke holds that present or previous introspective awareness of a certain operation of one's own mind is a necessary condition (presumably a causally necessary condition) of any conscious occurrence of a simple, nonsensory idea.

Locke's claim is also a claim about the *content* of simple, nonsensory ideas. What is the operation of which one must have been (or be) aware in one's own mind in order to have such an idea? The operation that is represented by the idea, of course—the operation *of* which it is an idea. Indeed Locke's empiricism about ideas can be summed up in a thesis about the content of our ideas, as follows: "All our ideas are either simple or composed of simple ideas, and we cannot have a simple idea which is an idea of anything but a property of bodies which we have experienced in sensation or a mental operation which we have experienced in ourselves." That is certainly something which Descartes would deny.

Descartes held that we do have simple ideas that represent things that we have not experienced in sensation or self-awareness. The idea of God provides an important example. Descartes and Locke agree that men have an idea of God as an infinite substance, a being possessed of infinite degrees of admirable and desirable qualities such as knowledge and power. Descartes, however, holds that this idea is innate, and that the idea of the infinite is not formed from that of the finite but is prior to it.[15] For Descartes, the idea of infinite power is a simple idea, although obviously infinite power is neither a quality that we have experienced in bodies in sensation nor an attribute that we have experienced in our own minds in self-awareness. This account of the idea of God is inconsistent with Locke's empiricism about ideas. Locke is obliged to analyze the idea of God as a complex idea, formed by compounding our idea of infinity with our ideas of knowledge, power, etc.[16]—and to analyze the idea of infinity as compound-

ed of the idea of repetition with that of the negation of stopping.[17] He makes quite explicit that his empiricism about ideas imposes restrictions on him with respect to the kind of idea of God he can allow that we have.

> This further is to be observed, that there is no idea we attribute to God, bating infinity, which is not also a part of our complex idea of other spirits. Because, being capable of no other simple ideas, belonging to anything but body, but those which by reflection we receive from the operation of our own minds, we can attribute to spirits no other but what we receive from thence: and all the difference we can put between them, in our contemplation of spirits, is only in the several extents and degrees of their knowledge, power, duration, happiness, etc. [18]

IV

I believe that it is this issue, about what sorts of thing our ideas can represent, which has usually seemed to philosophers to be the most important issue in the controversy between empiricism and innatism about ideas. For it has commonly been supposed that empiricism would lead to metaphysical economy and innatism would facilitate metaphysical generosity. Locke's empiricist doctrine might be found to constitute a reason for denying that we have any ideas at all of some things that some philosophers (and perhaps not only philosophers) have believed in (or somehow thought they believed in). And that in turn might be a reason for denying that we can talk intelligibly about such things. But if one holds an innatist doctrine about ideas, then one can consistently maintain that one has ideas of things even if those ideas neither are, nor are analyzable into, ideas of sensible properties of bodies or ideas of mental operations which one has experienced in oneself.

This view of the controversy between empiricism and innatism about ideas, and of its relevance to metaphysical inquiry, is quite clearly to be found in eighteenth-century sources, such as the following passage of Hume.

> We have establish'd it as a principle, that as all ideas are deriv'd from impressions, or some precedent *perceptions*, 'tis impossible we can have any idea of power and efficacy, unless some instances can be produc'd wherein this power *is perceiv'd* to exert itself. Now as these instances can never be discover'd in body, the *Cartesians*, proceeding upon their principle of innate ideas, have had recourse to a supreme spirit or deity,

whom they consider as the only active being in the universe, and as the immediate cause of every alteration in matter. But the principle of innate ideas being allow'd to be false, it follows, that the supposition of a deity can serve us in no stead, in accounting for that idea of agency, which we search for in vain in all the objects, which are presented to our senses, or which we are internally conscious of in our own minds. For if every idea be deriv'd from an impression, the idea of a deity proceeds from the same origin; and if no impression, either of sensation or reflection, implies any force or efficacy, 'tis equally impossible to discover or even imagine any such active principle in the deity. . . . All ideas are deriv'd from, and represent impressions. We never have any impression, that contains any power or efficacy. We never therefore have any idea of power. [19]

I do not mean to say that empiricism about ideas is the only (nor perhaps even the most important) foundation of classical empiricist claims that we cannot talk intelligibly about certain putative things. There is also the Berkeleyan principle (important also to Hume, and more important than Lockean empiricism about ideas to Berkeley) that an idea cannot resemble anything but an idea. It is clear, nonetheless, that empiricism about ideas has been an important basis of empiricist metaphysical economy (or stinginess, depending on your point of view).

In its Lockean form, however, it is a somewhat shaky basis, because of the nature of the argument on which Locke has to rely for the establishment of his empiricist principle about ideas. In some way Aristotelian empiricism about ideas may have been in a stronger position, by virtue of its explanatory force and its connections with a general theory of causation. To the question, "Why can't we have ideas which neither are nor are composed of ideas of things which we have experienced?" the Aristotelian empiricist could reply, "Because ideas are sensible and intelligible forms which we must get from things that have them, and we do that by experiencing things that have them." Whether or not this would prove in the last analysis to be a very powerful argument, it is unavailable to Locke. Having abandoned the Aristotelian theories of perception and causation, and refusing to speculate about the causal process of sensation, he has in effect stripped his empiricism about ideas of its explanatory force, and must find other arguments to support it.

Locke doubtless believed that he had provided support for

empiricism by refuting innatism. If we assume that our possession of ideas must be explained in terms of the natural powers of the human mind (and not, say, occasionalistically, in terms of the miraculous intervention of God), then it follows that a doctrine of innate ideas (in a certain sense of "innate ideas") is the only alternative to empiricism about ideas. This follows, however, only because "innate idea" can be defined as meaning, in effect, an idea that we have a natural ability to form in ways other than those that are countenanced by Lockean empiricism about ideas. An innate idea, in this sense, is one that satisfies the following three conditions. (1) It is an idea that we have a natural ability to form. (2) The exercise of the ability to form it does not depend on any particular sort of sensory stimulation, nor is the idea formed from other ideas whose occurrence does depend on some particular sort of sensory stimulation. (3) The formation of the idea does not depend on the occurrence in one's own mind of a mental operation that is the object of the idea, nor is the idea formed from other ideas whose occurrence does depend on the occurrence of their objects in one's own mind. This definition of "innate idea" does not do violence to the history of the term. The sense that it gives to "innate idea" is at least very similar to the sense in which, as we have seen, Descartes commonly spoke of some (but not all) of our ideas as innate—though I would not claim it is exactly the same sense.

If Locke can prove that we have no ideas that are innate in the sense that they satisfy the three conditions stated in the previous paragraph, that would strongly support his empiricism about ideas. But in this form the doctrine of innate ideas is not clearly envisaged, let alone refuted, by Locke. He may have refuted some other form of innatism. Perhaps he has succeeded, in Book One of the Essay, in showing the implausibility of the doctrine that there are some ideas of which all men have been conscious since birth. That doctrine, however, is obviously not the only alternative to Locke's empiricism about ideas. We may have the power to form ideas in ways other than those in which Locke thinks we can form them, even if there are no ideas of which we have always been conscious.

Against the theory that we have ideas that are innate

only in the sense that we have a natural power to form them in ways other than those admitted by Lockean empiricism, I do not see that Locke has any argument except the claim that all our ideas can in fact be accounted for on his principles. And in defense of this latter claim he really has nothing to say except that he has not found that men have any ideas which his empiricism cannot account for. Locke himself seems to recognize that this is the state of his argument. "I must appeal to experience and observation whether I am in the right," he says, with reference to the justification of his empiricism about ideas. [20]

> To deal truly, this is the only way that I can discover, whereby the *ideas of things* are brought into the understanding. If other men have either innate ideas or infused principles, they have reason to enjoy them; and if they are sure of it, it is impossible for others to deny them the privilege that they have above their neighbours. I can speak but of what I find in myself, and is agreeable to those notions, which, if we will examine the whole course of men in their several ages, countries, and educations, seem to depend on those foundations which I have laid, and to correspond with this method in all the parts and degrees thereof. [21]

We can see now why Locke's theory of the origin of our ideas provides only a shaky basis for empiricist metaphysical economy (or stinginess). If he is confronted with someone who claims to have an idea which (it is agreed) cannot be accounted for on Lockean principles, Locke is not in a position to reply, "You don't really have such an idea, because I've proved you can't." In order to defend his principles Locke must determine independently that no one has such an idea. If his only justification for the empiricist principle is that he has not found any idea that fails to satisfy it, then the principle stands in danger of being refuted by the first counterexample, and cannot be used to prove that people do not really have ideas they think they have.

Perhaps it is not quite fair to say that Locke's theory stands in danger of being refuted by the first counterexample. If Locke has made careful investigation, and has found hitherto no idea in human beings which cannot be accounted for on his empiricist principles, that may be taken as evidence of some weight for the claim that his principles express universal laws of nature according to which all human ideas are formed. And

it is sometimes reasonable to reject the claim that a counterexample has been found, in preference to giving up a theory about the laws of nature for which one has good evidence.

But this observation still leaves Locke with a weak basis for argument. His empiricism lacks explanatory force, as we have noted. It does not follow from more general theories about the workings of nature, but presents itself as an inductive generalization. Such simple generalizations (if they include a claim of strict, exceptionless universality) are more liable than most other theories to be overthrown by counterexamples—and rightly so. There are, after all, many generalizations that hold true about the world for the most part, but have a few exceptions. If there should be even one idea that cannot be accounted for on Locke's empiricist principles, but which most men who have thought carefully about the matter believe they have formed, surely then the conclusion that would be warranted by the evidence would be that while most ideas that men have may be such as can be accounted for on Lockean principles, there is at least one exception.

If there are only a few metaphysicians who claim to have a certain nonempirical idea, it may be reasonable for the Lockean empiricist to refuse to accept their claim. But it will not be the weight of evidence for empiricism that justifies his skeptical attitude. It will rather be that he agrees with the innatist that all men (of roughly similar intelligence) have basically the same abilities with regard to the formation of ideas. If, then, he finds that he, and many others whom he consults, seem to be unable to form a certain idea, that is a reason for suspecting that those who claim to have it are making some mistake. But in this case each of us must examine himself (with as little prejudice as possible) concerning each putative nonempirical idea, to determine whether he has that idea or not. And we cannot appeal to Lockean empiricist principles to settle the issue. Epistemologically, those principles are not prior but posterior to the question whether I have such an idea. If there is a nonempirical idea that it seems to most of us, after careful reflection, that we have, then we can reject Lockean empiricism about ideas with some confidence. [22]

NOTES

1. See, e.g., in this anthology, the essays by Chomsky, Putnam, Katz, and Harman.

2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, qu. 87, a. 3.

3. Descartes, Meditation III: *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 163 (hereafter cited as HR I).

4. "Notes Directed Against a Certain Programme": HR I, 442. As appears in a subsequent passage which I shall quote next, Descartes is not denying that we have sensory ideas (ideas occasioned by sensation). He is denying that the form of any of our ideas is preserved and transmitted in the corporeal process of sensation.

5. Ibid., HR I, 442-443.

6. For instance, in Meditation III: HR I, 160.

7. *Essay*, II. i. 2 *(An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A. C. Fraser, Vol. I [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894], Book II, chapter i, section 2).

8. Ibid., II. i. 23-24.

9. Ibid., II. i. 3, 5.

10. Ibid., II. i. 3.

11. Ibid., II. viii. 15.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., Introduction, section 2. The "spirits" mentioned here, of course, are not incorporeal, but are subtle fluids in the body which figured in earlier theories of perception.

14. Ibid., II. i. 2.

15. See Meditation III: HR I, 166, 170 f.

16. *Essay*, II. xxiii. 33-36.

17. Ibid., II. xvii.

18. Ibid., II. xxiii. 36. "Spirits" here obviously is meant to refer to minds.

19. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), pp. 160-161. Hume says that the question whether all ideas are derived from impressions "is the same with what has made so much noise in other terms, when it has been disputed whether there be any *innate ideas*, or whether all ideas be derived from sensation and reflection" (ibid., p. 7).

20. *Essay*, II. xi. 15.

21. Ibid., II. xi. 16.

22. I am indebted to Marilyn McCord Adams for helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.