

## 2 Locke's Polemic Against Nativism

In the 17th century, there was a lively debate in the intellectual circles with which Locke was familiar, revolving around the question whether the human mind is furnished with innate ideas. Although a few scholars declared that there is no good reason to believe, and good reason not to believe, in the existence of innate ideas, the vast majority took for granted that God, in his infinite goodness and wisdom, has inscribed in human minds innate principles that constitute the foundation of knowledge, as well in practical as in theoretical matters. It was in opposition to the latter group, which included Descartes, leading Anglican divines, and the Cambridge Platonists, that Locke directed his attack upon innate ideas in the first book of the *Essay*.<sup>1</sup>

In the minds of those who weighed in on one side or the other, the importance of the controversy related to epistemological, moral, and religious doctrines. At the epistemological level, innatists (or, as I will also call them, nativists) held that all knowledge of the natural and supernatural world available to humans is based on fundamental “speculative” axioms, theoretical principles that neither require nor are capable of proof. These principles, such as the causal principle – that nothing comes from nothing – or the principle of non-contradiction – that nothing can both be and not be at the same time, were taken to be both universal and necessary, and hence impossible to derive from experience. To the mind of an innatist, if these principles are not based on experience and are not (as chimerical ideas were thought to be) constructed out

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotelian scholastics (including the logicians Burgersdicius and Sanderson, with whose works Locke was familiar – see W IV: 449) agreed with the purveyors of innate ideas that some principles (which they called “maxims” or “axioms”) are foundational. But in accordance with the famous scholastic dictum, *nihil est in intellectu quod prius fuerit in sensu* (i.e., nothing is in the understanding that was not earlier in the senses), they denied that these maxims are innate.

of simpler elements by acts of volition, then they are neither acquired nor constructed, and hence must be built into the mind *ab initio*. At the moral and religious level, nativists held that knowledge of our duties is founded on innate “practical” axioms, the absence of which seemed to make room for moral disagreement or relativism profound enough to destabilize entire societies.

So the stakes could not have been higher when Locke first penned his anti-nativist polemic. It was held on all sides that any advance in the speculative or practical realm depends on the resolution of the controversy over innatism. It is therefore something of a pity that more philosophical effort has not been expended on gaining a clear understanding of the debate and of Locke’s contribution to it.

The purpose of this essay is to shed light on Locke’s polemic and the intellectual circumstances that prompted it. The basic interpretive questions to be addressed are these. First, who were Locke’s opponents? What sorts of nativist doctrines did they hold? What reasons did they give in defense of nativism? Second, what are Locke’s anti-nativist arguments in the *Essay*? Third, how successful are Locke’s arguments, on their own and in the context of the *Essay* as a whole? Do they succeed in undermining nativism itself, the arguments therefor, or neither? Do some or all forms of nativism escape Locke’s criticisms, or does Locke emerge victorious in the end?

It has long been held that Book I of the *Essay* is, to put it mildly, not one of Locke’s best philosophical efforts. Some think that Locke’s opponent in Book I is nothing but a straw man, others that his arguments are singularly ineffective. In the end, as I will argue, Locke successfully undermined naïve versions of nativism and shifted the philosophical burden onto the shoulders of those who defended a more sophisticated version thereof. Armed with a better appreciation of the historical context of the *Essay* and a clear reconstruction of Locke’s anti-nativist arguments, we will see that Book I repays close attention and that Locke deserves significant philosophical rehabilitation on the relevant issues.

## **1. Locke’s Opponents**

Of Locke’s immediate predecessors, those who defended some version of nativism may be divided into three groups: (i) Descartes, (ii) prominent members of the Anglican Church,

notably Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, and (iii) a number of Cambridge Platonists, including Henry More and Ralph Cudworth.

### Descartes

Descartes, with whose views Locke was intimately familiar, holds that all ideas are either adventitious, constructed, or innate (Descartes 1984: II:26 and III:183).<sup>2</sup> Among adventitious ideas, i.e., ideas occasioned by (brain) images received from the senses, Descartes counts the ideas of primary and secondary qualities, as well as “the idea we commonly have of the sun.” Among constructed ideas, Descartes counts chimerical ideas, such as ideas of sirens and hippogriffs, as well as scientific constructs, such as “the idea which the astronomers construct of the sun by the reasoning.” By contrast, Descartes holds that his understanding of “what a thing is, what truth is, and what thought is, seems to derive simply from [his] own nature,” and also counts as innate “the idea of God, mind, body, triangle, and in general all those which represent true, immutable, and eternal essences.”

Descartes’s claim that some ideas (most notably, those that represent true and immutable essences) are innate was explicitly challenged by Thomas Hobbes (in the Third Objections) and by Pierre Gassendi (in the Fifth Objections). “When M. Descartes says that the ideas of God and of our souls are innate in us,” objects Hobbes, “I should like to know if the souls of people who are in a deep, dreamless sleep are thinking. If they are not, they do not have any ideas at the time. It follows that no idea is innate; for what is innate is always present” (Descartes 1984: II:132). So Hobbes thinks there can be no innate ideas, because (i) innate ideas are always present, i.e., conscious, and yet (ii) there are times when the mind is not conscious of any idea (e.g., during deep, dreamless sleep). As it happens, (ii) is something Descartes denies, in holding that the mind is a substance whose whole essence is to think (Descartes 1984: II:18). In response, Gassendi echoes Hobbes’s criticism: “I want to stop here and ask whether, in saying that thought cannot be separated from you, you mean that you continue to think indefinitely, so

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<sup>2</sup> Every one of the works of Locke’s contemporaries and predecessors mentioned in this essay appears in the library that was part of Locke’s estate upon his death see Harrison and Laslett 1971.

long as you exist...[This] will hardly convince those who do not see how you are able to think during deep sleep or indeed in the womb” (Descartes 1984: II:184).<sup>3</sup>

In response to Hobbes’s “dreamless sleep” objection, Descartes writes (Descartes 1984: II:132): “Lastly, when we say that an idea is innate in us, we do not mean that it is always there before us. This would mean that no idea was innate. We simply mean that we have within ourselves the faculty of summoning up the idea.” Expanding on this point, Descartes tells Regius that ideas are innate in “the same sense as that in which we say that generosity is ‘innate’ in certain families, or that certain diseases such as gout or stones are innate in others: it is not so much that the babies of such families suffer from these diseases in their mother’s womb, but simply that they are born with a certain ‘faculty’ or tendency to contract them” (Descartes 1984: I:304). Descartes therefore holds that an idea that is neither constructed by an act of will nor prompted by the receipt of sense-impressions is something of which the mind need not be conscious.<sup>4</sup>

Descartes’s brand of nativism is rather sophisticated. Unlike a more naïve innatist who holds that maxims are actually, and not merely potentially, in the mind, Descartes does not require that the ideas of which these maxims are composed be more than potentially there. Call

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Locke criticizes Cartesian nativism on just these grounds (E II.i.9-19: 108-116). Locke remarks that “it is an Opinion, that the Soul always thinks...and that actual thinking is as inseparable from the Soul, as actual Extension is from the Body” (E II.i.9: 108). (In the French translation of the *Essay*, Coste makes clear that the philosophers holding this “opinion” are “Les Cartesiens.”) In response, Locke claims that “’tis doubted whether I thought all last night, or no” (E II.i.10: 109), and thus “every drowsy Nod shakes their Doctrine, who teach, That the Soul is always thinking” (E II.i.13: 111).

<sup>4</sup> In response to Gassendi’s “deep sleep” objection, Descartes claims that the fact that we do not remember having any thoughts when we were infants or in a deep sleep does not show that we were not thinking at those times. For, as Descartes argues, it is necessary for the formation of (corporeal) memories that physical traces be “imprinted on the brain,” and hence, since the brains of infants and those in a deep sleep are “unsuited to receive these traces,” it is possible that such individuals have conscious thoughts without being able to remember at any later time that they had these thoughts (Descartes 1984: II:246-247). Locke himself criticizes this gambit of Descartes’s in II.i.14-16. His main objections are two: first, that Descartes’s hypothesis would have the absurd consequence that “[Socrates’s] Soul when he sleeps, and Socrates the Man consisting of Body and Soul when he is waking, are two Persons” (E II.i.11: 110 and E II.i.15: 112 – Locke expands his discussion of the point in E II.xxvii); and second, that “if [the Mind] has no memory of its own Thoughts” then its power of thought is “idlely and uselessly employ’d,” a result that contradicts the assumption that “nature never makes excellent things, for mean or no uses” (E II.i.15: 113).

the naïve innatism just described “Occurrent Nativism” and the sophisticated innatism of Descartes “Dispositional Nativism.”<sup>5</sup> One of the questions I will be raising below is whether Dispositional Nativism is better able than Occurrent Nativism to withstand Locke’s anti-innatist attacks.

### Anglican Churchmen

In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes had argued that there are no incorporeal substances and hence, since God is a substance, that God is a body (Hobbes 1994: 540). Hobbes’s materialism was widely thought to entail atheism, since it would seem impossible for bodies to be perfect, yet God was held to be perfect by definition. Numerous members of the Anglican Church felt it necessary to respond to what they perceived to be Hobbes’s atheistic materialism. Perhaps the most intellectually gifted and prominent of these divines was Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester.

Stillingfleet gained fame with the publication of *Origines Sacrae* (1662), a book with which Locke was familiar. There Stillingfleet attempts to confute atheism by providing three main reasons for belief in God’s existence, the first of which is that “*God hath stamped an universal character of himself upon the minds of men*” (Stillingfleet 1662: 383).<sup>6</sup> Stillingfleet then provides two reasons for accepting this result, the first being “because the whole *world hath consented* in it.” The argument here is that “*no sufficient account can be given of so universal a consent, unless it be supposed to be the voice of nature,*” for “*a common and universal effect must flow from some common and universal cause*” (Stillingfleet 1662: 384). Thus, if we find that human beings all agree that God exists, this must be the result of “*a natural propensity to Religion* implanted in them, and founded in the general *belief* of the *existence* of a *Deity*” (Stillingfleet 1662: 389).

So one of Stillingfleet’s main arguments for God’s existence relies on the claim that the idea of God is innate, a claim he defends on grounds of universal consent. In his own defense, Stillingfleet notes that he is not the first to have taken such a position. He refers in particular to

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<sup>5</sup> Here I adopt terminology introduced by Kim 2003.

the Epicurean and Stoic arguments for God's existence in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*. There, Velleius the Epicurean claims that it is "a necessary *Prolepsis* or *Anticipation* of *humane nature*...that *nature* its self had *stamped* an *Idea* of *God* upon the minds of men." As Stillingfleet puts it, Velleius then argues that "since the *belief* of a *Deity*, neither *rise* from *custom* nor was *enacted* by *Law*, yet is unanimously *assented* to by all *mankind*; it necessarily *follows* that there must be a *Deity*, because the *Idea* of it is so *natural* to us" (Stillingfleet 1662: 365-366). And Lucilius the Stoic claims that "if there were no God, the belief [in a deity] would not endure with such stability, it would not be strengthened by lapse of time, nor could it have become fixed as the ages and generations of men advanced" (Stillingfleet 1662: 384 – Latin translation by Francis Brooks).<sup>7</sup>

In saying that innate ideas are akin to Epicurean or Stoic "prolepses," Stillingfleet allies himself with Dispositional, rather than with Occurrent, Nativism. A prolepsis may (without excessive distortion) be identified with an innate disposition to form an idea. And, as Stillingfleet sees it, it is only in this "proleptic" way that the idea of God counts as innate. As he puts it: it is "not that there is any such *connate Idea* in the *Soul*, in the sense which *connate Idea*'s are commonly understood; but...there is a *faculty* in the *Soul*, whereby upon the free use of *reason*, it can *form* within its self a settled *notion* of such a *Being*"(Stillingfleet 1662: 369).<sup>8</sup>

### Cambridge Platonists

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes had written that, in the state of nature, "the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have...no place," and "[w]here there is no common power, there is

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<sup>6</sup> Note that Locke uses the word "character" to describe the innatism he goes on to attack (see E.I.ii.1: 48).

<sup>7</sup> Stillingfleet's argument for innatism on grounds of universal consent was also anticipated by Lord Herbert of Cherbury. In *De Veritate* (1624), Herbert claims that "universal consent [is] the final test of truth...[and] the beginning and end of theology and philosophy" (Herbert 1937: 117-118). Those propositions to which all humans (apart from the mad and the weak-minded) assent, Herbert calls "common notions." These common notions are not "conveyed by objects themselves," and hence Nature must have "inscribed them within us" (Herbert 1937: 126).

<sup>8</sup> Like Stillingfleet, Herbert understands common notions to be latent, rather than occurrent. As he puts it: "It is the law or destiny of Common Notions ... to be inactive unless objects stimulate them" (Herbert 1937: 120).

no law; where no law, no injustice” (Hobbes 1994: 78). To members of the Anglican church, the idea that humans are not bound by a moral law promulgated by God was anathema. Anglican divines, such as Benjamin Whichcote, the father of Cambridge Platonism, pointed in particular to a well-known passage from *Romans* 2.15 in which the moral law is described as being “written on the hearts” of Gentiles. Whichcote and his brethren interpreted this passage to mean that there is a sense in which moral principles are “connatural”: they are, in Whichcote’s words, “truths of first inscription” that are “known to be true as soon as ever they are proposed.” Thus when a human being flouts moral rules, he “confounds his own principles...and must necessarily be self-condemned” (see Whichcote 1901: 4-5).

Whichcote was more of a preacher than he was a philosopher. It was left to his philosophical descendants, particularly Henry More (and also Ralph Cudworth – see n. 10), to clarify the sense in which practical and speculative principles are innate, and to provide philosophical (as opposed to merely scriptural) arguments for nativism.

In his *Antidote Against Atheisme* (1653), More argues, in opposition to the Aristotelian claim that “*the Soul of man [is] Abrasa Tabula, a Table book in which nothing is writ,*” that the Soul has “*some Innate Notions and Ideas in her self*” (More 1653: 13). More’s conception of innateness is dispositional rather than occurrent:

[In saying that the mind has innate ideas] I doe not mean that there is a certaine number of *Ideas* flaring and shining to the *Animadversive faculty*, like so many *Torches* or *Starres* in the *Firmament* to our outward Sight, or that there are any *figures* that take their distinct places, & are legibly writ there like the *Red letters* or *Astronomical Characters* in an *Almanack*; but I understand thereby an active sagacity in the Soul, or quick recollection as it were, whereby some small businesse being hinted unto her, she runs out presently into a more clear and larger conception (More 1653: 13).

More compares the formation of innate ideas in the Soul to the recollection of an entire song upon being presented with two or three words of its beginning. It is in this way that “the *Mind* of *man* being jogg’d and awakened by the impulses of outward objects, is stirred up into a more full and cleare conception of what was but imperfectly hinted to her from externall occasions” (More 1653: 14).

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Lord Herbert is the only one of Locke’s nativist opponents to be mentioned by name in Book I of the *Essay*. For more on the nature of Locke’s criticisms of Herbert, see below, n. 18.

In arguing for nativism, More concentrates on speculative, rather than practical principles. More provides three reasons to accept Dispositional Nativism. First, when geometrical figures are first presented to the senses, the mind can “straightway pronounce” that all perfect versions of these figures have certain properties. For example, when it has been proved in the case of a particular sensible triangle that its three angles are equal to two right ones, the mind immediately knows that this is true of all (perfect) triangles (More 1653: 14-15). Second, there are “*Relative Notions or Ideas*” that are not “the impresses of any materiall object from without,” and hence “are the naturall furniture of the humane understanding.” Suppose, for example, that objects A and B are alike in color, but that B is then whitened. A is now unlike B, even though A has not been “touch’d or medled with.” It follows that the idea of being unlike is “not any *Physicall affection* that strikes the corporeall Organs of the Body,” but rather “the Souls own active manner of conceiving those things which are discovered by the outward Senses” (More 1653: 15-16).<sup>9</sup> Third, there are “severall complex Notions...which are true to the soul at the very first proposal,” truths to which the soul “will certainly and fully assent,” which “must therefore be concluded not fortuitous or arbitrary, but Natural to the Soul.” Among such complex notions, More lists: “*The whole is bigger then the part,*” “*If you take Equall from Equall, the Remainders are Equall,*” “*Every number is either Even or Odde,*” and “*The three angles in a Triangle are equal to two right ones*” (More 1653: 17-18).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Though More does not accept Plato’s Doctrine of Recollection, according to which the souls of humans exist before they are born, notice the way in which More’s argument from geometrical figures resembles the point made in favor of the Doctrine in Socrates’s examination of the slave-boy in the *Meno*, as well as the way in which More’s argument from relative notions resembles Socrates’s argument for the Doctrine at *Phaedo* 74 ff.

<sup>10</sup> In *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, which was not published until 1731, but with the contents of which Locke was almost certainly familiar, Cudworth provides a kind of master argument for holding a version of Dispositional Nativism. According to this argument, there are many ideas that are not imprinted in the soul by means of the senses; and since what does not come from without must be excited from within, it follows that these ideas “must needs spring from the active power and innate fecundity of the mind itself” (Cudworth 1996: 83). As Cudworth sees it, the mistake of the anti-nativist is to infer from the fact that these ideas are first excited in the mind when the senses are stimulated that the ideas are “stamped upon the soul from the objects without.” Rather, these ideas are merely awakened or occasioned, but not conveyed or transmitted, by the senses.

Ideas that could not possibly be conveyed by the senses include (i) “ideas of cogitative beings, and the several modes of them” (Cudworth 1996: 101), such as the ideas of volition, cogitation, and sense, as well as the

In arguing against innatism, Locke therefore faced a vast array of rationalist metaphysicians and Anglican divines. Apart from Hobbes and Gassendi, Locke had few anti-innatist friends. Still, the friends he had were not inconsequential. Before turning to Locke's own objections to nativism, let us look briefly at the sorts of objections put forward by Samuel Parker.

In *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie* (1666), Parker, an Oxford don who was elevated to the Bishopric of Oxford in 1686, gives short shrift to the argument from universal assent. Taking as his paradigm the "Maxime, That the whole is greater than its parts," Parker claims that the fact that "all men assent to it at the first proposal" is not to be explained by supposing it innate, but rather by the fact that "they are presented with innumerable instances thereof, every visible thing in the world being a whole compounded of parts sensibly smaller than it self." Furthermore, Parker argues that there would be no reason for Providence (or for God) to imprint such "maxims" on the soul from the beginning of its existence, since they are self-evident. As Parker pithily puts the point: "A man that has animadversive Faculties, has as little need to be minded of such obvious and apparent Certainties, as a man that has Eyes in his head, has to be taught that there is a Sun in the Heavens." And finally, Parker argues that even if there were such "congenite Anticipations," it does not follow from a principle's being

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ideas of wisdom, prudence, knowledge, truth, virtue, honesty, justice, and their opposites (Cudworth 1996: 83); (ii) "all the logical and relative notions that are" (Cudworth 1996: 86), such as the relative ideas of cause and effect, means and end, similitude and dissimilitude, equality and inequality, symmetry and asymmetry, whole and part (Cudworth 1996: 84), and the logical ideas of essence, existence, thing, substance, something, and nothing (Cudworth 1996: 104); (iii) ideas of perfect geometrical objects (Cudworth 1996: 107-111); (iv) general ideas, such as "the idea of a triangle in general," which are not ideas of any particular thing (Cudworth 1996: 111); and those ideas of sense that do not resemble anything in the objects that occasion them, such as ideas of secondary qualities (Cudworth 1996: 112).

Like More, Cudworth does not think of intelligible ideas as "flaring and shining to the Animadversive faculty." Rather, "native and domestic" ideas are "inward anticipations" or "preconceptions" that are only "awakened by ... passive impressions" (Cudworth 1996: 98). In much the way that More compares the formation of innate ideas to the recollection of a song based on the hearing of a few notes, Cudworth compares the excitation of innate ideas to the recollection of a man's face based on the perception of a few "lines drawn with ink upon a piece of paper" (Cudworth 1996: 106). As Cudworth sees it, there is no explaining one's recognition of the man's face given the paucity of information derived from the senses without supposing that one's idea of the face is latently "pre-existent," waiting to be awakened by suitable stimulation. It is in this sense, and in this sense only, that Cudworth treats intelligible ideas as innate.

“congenite” that it is true. After all, Parker writes, “’tis not impossible but the seeds of Error might have been the natural Results of my Faculties, as Weeds are the first and natural Issues of the best Soyles” (Parker 1985: 56).

Here then was the state of the debate when Locke first thought of entering it on the anti-innatist side. Locke faced a number of philosophers who favored Dispositional Nativism, some on grounds of universal assent (Lord Herbert), some on grounds of universal assent “upon the free use of reason” (Stillingfleet), and some on grounds of universal assent “at the very first proposal” (Whichcote and More). In addition, Locke faced Dispositional Nativists who argued that there are ideas (notably, relative, logical, and geometrical ideas) that “must needs spring from the active power...of the mind itself” because they could not be conveyed to the mind through the senses (More – and also Cudworth). Occurrent Nativism had already come under attack by philosophers who thought it inconsistent with the fact that fetuses and those in a dreamless sleep do not think (Hobbes and Gassendi). But it had also been pointed out that Dispositional Nativism is immune from this sort of criticism, since the latent ideas posited by Dispositional Nativists need not be conscious (Descartes). And finally, some anti-innatists had argued (a) that nativism is not the only plausible explanation for the widespread acceptance of certain principles, (b) that the self-evidence of many of the principles commonly thought innate made it unnecessary for God to imprint them on human minds, and (c) that a principle’s being innate does not entail that it is epistemically trustworthy (Parker).

## **2. Locke’s Anti-Nativist Arguments**

In arguing against nativism, Locke adopts a two-pronged strategy. First, Locke attempts to undermine reasons that have been given in support of nativism. Second, Locke provides reasons for thinking that nativism is false. Most of these arguments appear in Book I of the *Essay*. As we’ll see, the arguments belonging to the first prong are addressed, in systematic fashion, to the nativist arguments provided by Locke’s immediate predecessors. It follows that the charge that Locke commits the straw man fallacy is without merit. As we’ll also see, arguments belonging to one prong of the strategy are interwoven with arguments belonging to the other. Since Locke does not always make this interweaving explicit, some commentators,

mistakenly thinking that a consideration that is part of one prong is part of the other, have charged Locke with the fallacy of affirming the consequent. These interpretive errors have contributed to the inadvisable lowering of Book I in the esteem of Locke scholars, and of historians generally. Once the dialectical structure of Locke's anti-nativist reasoning becomes clear and the interpretive errors are cleared away, we can see Book I for what it is: a reasonable attempt to demolish Occurrent Nativism and shift the burden of proof onto the shoulders of Dispositional Nativists.

Before analyzing and evaluating the arguments themselves, it is important to clarify exactly what Locke takes himself to be arguing against. As Locke puts it, his nativist opponent holds that "there are in the Understanding certain *innate Principles*; some primary Notions, *Κοιναι εννοιαι* [common notions], Characters, as it were stamped upon the Mind of Man, which the Soul receives in its very first Being; and brings into the World with it" (E I.ii.1: 48). So Locke's target holds that there are innate principles. This much is clear. But what is less obvious is that this is not the only position Locke's target accepts.

First, Locke writes that his opponents hold that innate principles are "the foundations of all our other knowledge" (E I.ii.21: 59), that God (or Nature) has imprinted these principles on human minds "in indelible Characters, to be the Foundation and Guide of all their acquired Knowledge, and future Reasoning" (E I.ii.25: 62).<sup>11</sup> Packed into these quotes are the following theses: first, that God (or Nature) is the author of innate principles; second, that innate speculative principles serve an epistemically foundational role with respect to acquired speculative propositions and that innate practical principles serve as a guide to human action; and third, that the point or purpose of God's having imprinted them on human minds is that humans might thereby come to know what can be known and recognize what needs to be done in order to achieve happiness.

As will become clear below (particularly in our discussion of the Argument from Universal Consent upon the Use of Reason – see I.ii.8), Locke assumes in addition that his

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<sup>11</sup> Locke also takes his opponents to declare "That God has imprinted on the Minds of Men, the foundations of Knowledge, and the Rules of Living" (E I.iii.14: 76).

innatist opponents deny that all ideas are innate. In particular, as Locke sees it, self-respecting nativists should accept that at least some propositions, including most notably the theorems – as opposed to the axioms – of arithmetic and geometry, are not innate. Here it must be admitted that Locke is on shaky ground. It is true that *occurrent nativists*, committed as they are to the principle that a proposition's being innate requires that it be actually perceived and to the obvious fact that mathematical theorems are not actually perceived at birth, are *ipso facto* committed to the view that mathematical theorems are not innate. But the same is clearly false of nativists belonging to the dispositionalist persuasion. All of Locke's dispositionalist opponents (including most notably Descartes) took for granted (and not unreasonably) that the innateness of mathematical axioms entails the innateness of mathematical theorems. After all, if the use of reason is sufficient of itself to extract mathematical theorems from mathematical axioms, then it would appear that the mind is disposed to perceive and know mathematical theorems without assistance from the senses, and hence that such dispositional knowledge must be innate.

Second, Locke takes himself to “agree with these Defenders of innate Principles, That if they are *innate*, they must needs *have universal assent*” (E I.ii.24: 61). As Locke sees it, the reason for accepting the thesis that all innate principles are universally assented to derives from another, namely that “every innate Principle must needs be [self-evident]” (E I.iii.4: 68). For example, as Locke argues, the principle of non-contradiction “carries its own Light and Evidence with it, and needs no other Proof: He that understands the Terms, assents to it for its own sake” (E I.iii.4: 68). The idea that innate principles are self-evident, and hence the objects of universal assent, arguably follows from (or, at least, harmonizes with) the claim that innate principles are meant to serve as the foundation of all our acquired knowledge. For it is reasonable to hold, as Locke's opponents did, that what makes a principle indubitable and foundational is the fact that understanding it is sufficient for recognizing its truth.

### **The First Prong: Arguments for Nativism Undermined**

As Locke sees it, the master nativist argument, already familiar from our discussion of the views of the Epicureans, the Stoics, and Lord Herbert, is the argument from universal consent: “There is nothing more commonly taken for granted, than that there are certain

Principles both *Speculative* and *Practical* (for they speak of both) universally agreed upon by all Mankind: which therefore they argue, must needs be the constant Impressions, which the Souls of Men receive in their first Beings, and which they bring into the World with them” (E I.ii.2: 49). The argument, in a nutshell, is this:

*Argument from Universal Consent (AUC)*

- (1) There are speculative and practical principles to which every human assents.
  - (2) If every human assents to P, then P is innate.
- So, (3) There are innate speculative and practical principles.

Locke criticizes both premises of AUC. As against (1), Locke repeatedly points to evidence indicating that there is no one speculative or practical principle to which all humans assent. For example, Locke thinks it obvious that infants and the weak-minded do not assent to, let alone understand, the principle of non-contradiction (E I.ii.5: 49). And though it is commonly thought that everyone assents to the principle that one should do what is just, Locke thinks that simple observation of human behavior is sufficient to establish that when outlaws embrace this principle, they do so only as a rule of convenience, ready to be broken at a moment’s notice (E I.iii.2: 66).

Nowadays, the lack of universal assent to these principles may seem obvious. But in Locke’s time, divines never tired of referring to the latest far-flung area of the globe whose inhabitants were reported by European travelers to believe in the existence of a deity and to recognize the wrongness of such actions as murder and theft. What irked Locke was that the proponents of AUC needed to show more than just that there are principles to which *many* humans assent: they also needed to show that there are principles to which *no* humans *fail to* assent. Whence the importance of what might otherwise appear as an unnecessary reminder of the existence of humans who are insufficiently mature, intelligent, or educated to assent to the principles commonly thought innate.

As Locke sees it, the main reason to believe (2) takes the form of an argument from the best explanation: given that some principle P is universally assented to, the best explanation for the existence of such universal assent is that P is innate. What Locke denies here is the

assumption that the innateness of a principle is what best explains the fact that it is the object of universal assent. As Locke puts it: “This Argument, drawn from *Universal Consent*, has this misfortune in it, That if it were true in matter of Fact, that there were certain Truths, wherein all Mankind agreed, it would not prove them innate, if there can be any other way shewn, how Men may come to that Universal Agreement, in the things they do consent in; which I presume may be done” (E I.ii.3: 49). Locke later argues that universal consent to practical propositions can be explained as resulting from inculcation (E I.iii.22-26: 81-84) and that universal consent to speculative propositions can be explained as the concomitant of intuitive knowledge (see E IV.ii.1: 530-531). So, in the first place, the “unwary, and, as yet, unprejudiced Understanding” of children is ready to accept any practical doctrine taught by their caregivers, at a time “before Memory began to keep a Register of...when any new thing appeared to them.” When these children become adults, they do not remember that the practical rules to which they now give ready assent were instilled in them by others, and so “make no scruple to *conclude, That those Propositions, of whose knowledge they can find in themselves no original, were certainly the impress of God and Nature upon their Minds*” (E I.iii.22-23: 81-82). And, in the second place, a person’s ready assent to a speculative maxim may be explained by the fact that she intuits, i.e., immediately perceives without relying on any further intervening ideas, that the ideas out of which the maxim is constructed agree (or disagree). As Locke sees it, the self-evidence of this intuitive knowledge engages the will inasmuch as the knowledge “is irresistible, and like the bright Sun-shine, forces it self immediately to be perceived, as soon as ever the Mind turns its view that way; and leaves no room for Hesitation, Doubt, or Examination, but the Mind is presently filled with the clear Light of it” (E IV.ii.1: 531).

Locke claims that, in order to avoid the deficiencies of AUC, “’tis usually answered, that all Men know and *assent* to [speculative maxims], *when they come to the use of Reason*, and this is enough to prove them innate” (E I.ii.6: 51). Which brings us to the following revision of AUC:

*Argument from Universal Consent upon the Use of Reason (AUC-UR)*

- (4) There are speculative and practical principles to which every human assents *when he comes to the use of reason*.
- (5) If every human assents to P *when he comes to the use of reason*, then P is innate.

So, (6) There are innate speculative and practical principles.

The point of turning AUC into AUC-UR, as Stillingfleet does (see Stillingfleet 1662: 369), is to replace (1) with (4), which, being weaker, has a better chance of being true.

Locke's reaction to AUC-UR begins with the claim that the phrase "*when he comes to the use of reason*" could mean one of two things:

- (a) when the use of reason makes them known to him
- (b) at the very time when he is first endowed with reason.

Upon disambiguation, AUC-UR turns into two arguments, AUC-UR(a) and AUC-UR(b):

*AUC-UR(a)*

- (4a) There are speculative and practical principles to which every human assents when the use of reason makes them known to him.
- (5a) If every human assents to P when the use of reason makes it known to him, then P is innate.

So, (6) There are innate speculative and practical principles.

*AUC-UR(b)*

- (4b) There are speculative and practical principles to which every human assents at the very time when he is first endowed with reason.
- (5b) If every human assents to P at the very time when he is first endowed with reason, then P is innate.

So, (6) There are innate speculative and practical principles.

Let us now consider Locke's reaction to each of these arguments, beginning with the first. Locke claims that mathematical theorems, no less than mathematical maxims, are such that every human assents to them when the use of reason first makes them known to him. It then follows from (5a) that "there will be no difference between the Maxims of the Mathematicians, and the Theorems they deduce from them: All must be equally allow'd innate" (E I.ii.8: 51).

Recall now that Locke assumes (as it turns out, unfairly in respect of dispositionalist nativists) that all of his nativist opponents are committed to the thesis that mathematical theorems are not innate. It follows that one who proposes AUC-UR(a) as his reason to accept nativism is caught in a bind: for he must either abandon one of the premises of this argument or abandon his commitment to the proposition that mathematical theorems are not innate. As we've seen, this problem should trouble the occurrent, but not the dispositionalist, nativist.<sup>12</sup>

In his response to AUC-UR(b), Locke makes two points. The first is that the evidence, such as it is, suggests that (4b) is simply false. For all maxims that are commonly thought innate “are not in the Mind so early as the use of Reason: and therefore the coming to the use of Reason is falsely assigned, as the time of their Discovery.” For instance, the principle of non-contradiction is such that “Children...and a great part of illiterate People, and Savages, pass many Years, even of their rational Age, without ever thinking on this, and the like general Propositions” (E I.ii.12: 53). So if there are indeed any principles to which every human assents when he is first endowed with reason, they aren't the ones commonly thought innate. The reason for this, Locke thinks, is that these principles are general, and, as he will argue in Book II, general ideas are created by the mental operation of abstraction, a faculty that (though innate) is not ready to be used until *after* children come to the use of the reason (E I.ii.14: 54, E II.xi.9: 159, E II.xii.1: 163).

Locke's second point is that (5b) is false as well. Suppose, to begin, that one is considering whether a given (mental) proposition is true. Such a proposition, Locke holds, consists of two ideas (E IV.v.5: 575), knowledge of which consists in the perception of the

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<sup>12</sup> Locke also supposes that one who wishes to rely on (4a) over (1) presupposes that the propositions to which every human assents *when* the use of reason makes them known to him are *not* universally assented to *before* the use of reason makes them known. Such an opponent must therefore hold that “the Use of Reason is necessary to discover” these propositions (E I.ii.9: 51). As against this, Locke argues that such propositions cannot be innate. If they were, then reason would be needed to discover propositions that are already in the understanding, and hence, since one is conscious of whatever is in one's mind, already known. Yet if reason is *needed* to discover these propositions, then they can't possibly be known before reason is used to discover them. Hence, before the use of reason, these propositions would be both known and not known at the same time. Contradiction. Notice that this argument relies on the assumption that one is conscious of whatever is in one's mind, an assumption that Occurrent Nativists accept, but that Dispositional Nativists reject.

agreement or disagreement of those ideas (E IV.i.2: 525). Now sometimes, as we've seen, the fact that two ideas agree or disagree is something the mind immediately perceives, without the assistance of intermediate ideas (E IV.ii.1: 530-531). But it can also happen that the agreement or disagreement of the two ideas that make up a proposition is not immediately perceivable (E IV.ii.2: 531-532). In such cases, reason is the faculty whose function it is to discover and order the intermediate ideas that enable us to demonstrate truths that are not self-evident (E IV.xvii.2: 668-669). Now, as Locke assumes, nativists must surely admit that at least some of the ideas (both extreme and intermediate) on which reason operates are adventitious. The "province" of reason, as one might say, includes acquired ideas, as much as it is also held to include innate ideas. But, Locke objects, "by what kind of Logick will it appear, that any Notion is Originally by Nature imprinted on the Mind in its first Constitution, because it comes first to be observed, and assented to, when a Faculty of the Mind, which has quite a distinct Province, begins to exert it self?" (E I.ii.14: 54). Put simply: if the province of reason includes acquired ideas, why suppose that ideas discovered when reason first begins to exert itself must be innate?

Locke now claims that, in order to avoid the deficiencies of AUC-UR, "Men have endeavoured to secure an universal Assent to those they call Maxims, by saying, they are generally assented to, as soon as proposed, and the Terms they are propos'd in, understood: Seeing all Men, even Children, as soon as they hear and understand the Terms, assent to these Propositions, they think it is sufficient to prove them innate" (E I.ii.17: 56). Which brings us to a second attempt at revising AUC, one that might reasonably be laid at the door of Whichcote and More:

*Argument from Universal Consent upon First Proposal (AUC-FP)*

- (7) There are speculative and practical principles to which every human assents as soon as they are proposed and the terms they are proposed in understood.
- (8) If every human assents to P as soon as P is proposed and P's constituent terms understood, then P is innate.

So, (9) There are innate speculative and practical principles.

Locke replies by denying (8). To begin with, Locke notes that any true (particular) proposition of the form “A is not B” (e.g., “yellow is not red”), where the idea expressed by “A” disagrees with the idea expressed by “B”, will, according to (8), turn out to be innate. For such a proposition is universally assented to as soon as it is proposed and its constituent terms understood. The problem is that there will be “a Million of ... such Propositions, as many at least, as we have distinct *Ideas*” (E I.ii.18: 57). This again contradicts what Locke (perhaps mistakenly) sees as the nativist presupposition that innate principles are limited to a small number of general maxims.

A further problem arises when this result is combined with the assumption that (mental) propositions are composed of ideas (E IV.v.5: 575) and the further (reasonable) assumption that a whole can't be innate unless its parts are innate. As Locke remarks, these assumptions entail (T) that “no Proposition can be innate, unless the *Ideas*, about which it is, be innate” (E I.ii.18: 58). Now it is plain that the proposition that yellow is not red is assented to as soon as proposed and its constituent terms understood. Hence, by (8), this proposition is innate. Yet the ideas of yellow and red are acquired through sense-perception, and so are not innate. It immediately follows from (T) that the proposition that red is not yellow is not innate. Contradiction.<sup>13</sup>

As should now be clear, none of Locke's criticisms of these three versions of the Argument from Universal Consent commits the straw man fallacy. The first targets Lord

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<sup>13</sup> Locke also attacks a presupposition of (7), namely that many of the propositions that are assented to *soon as* they are proposed and the terms they are proposed in understood are *not* assented to *before* they are proposed or *before* the terms they are proposed in are understood. If the presupposition were true, then there would be innate propositions to which some do not assent and to which they never have assented. But given that these propositions are self-evident and that one is conscious of whatever is in one's mind, this is impossible: if the propositions are innate, they're in the mind; so we are conscious of them; and if they are also self-evident, then we cannot help but assent to them. Moreover, even if lack of assent were no proof that the relevant propositions are not innate, we would need to explain why it is that people fail to assent to these propositions before they are proposed (even if the ideas out of which the propositions are composed are familiar), but then assent to them after they are proposed. One possible explanation is that “proposing [propositions] print[s] them clearer in the Mind” (E I.ii.21: 59). But if this were true, then it would follow that teaching (*via* proposal) makes innate propositions better known than they were before. And this contradicts the nativist presupposition that innate propositions are supposed to serve as the foundation of all our other knowledge. Notice again that Locke's attack on (7) depends on an assumption that the Occurrent Nativist accepts, but that the Dispositional Nativist rejects: namely, that one is conscious of whatever is in one's mind.

Herbert and those nativists who relied on Epicurean and Stoic arguments, the second targets Stillingfleet (and fellow travelers), and the third targets the Cambridge Platonists, particularly Whichcote and More. Thus, it cannot reasonably be argued that Locke was simply scoring rhetorical points at the expense of possible, but non-actual adversaries.

### **The Second Prong: Arguments Against Nativism**

Having criticized AUC and the arguments it inspired, Locke turns to his own criticisms of nativism. The first of these criticisms appears in the middle of his discussion of AUC. Having stated that AUC is unconvincing because there are reasons to think that universal assent is not sufficient for innateness (i.e., that (2) is false), Locke seemingly attempts to turn AUC (including (2)) against the nativist, claiming that “this Argument of Universal Consent, which is made use of, to prove innate Principles, seems to me a Demonstration that there are none such: Because there are none to which all Mankind give an Universal Assent” (E I.ii.4: 49). It therefore appears as if Locke is putting forward the following piece of anti-nativist reasoning:

- (10) There are no principles to which every human assents.
  - (11) If every human assents to P, then P is innate. (= (2))
- So, (12) There are no innate principles.

The problem with this argument is that it commits something akin to the fallacy of affirming the consequent: if P is not innate, then P is not universally assented to; P is not universally assented to; therefore, P is not innate.

But an interpretation that would foist such an unfortunate argument on Locke would be exceedingly ungenerous. In the very next paragraph, Locke makes it clear that he simply assumes that “universal Assent... must needs be the necessary concomitant of all innate Truths” (E I.ii.5: 49), and later points out that in this he is in agreement with his nativist opponents (E I.ii.24: 61). The relevant assumption here is not that universal assent is *sufficient* for innateness, but rather that universal assent is *necessary* for innateness. So the innatist presupposition that Locke proposes to turn against innatism isn't (11), but its converse. Whence arises the first, and most important, of Locke's anti-nativist arguments:

*Argument from Lack of Universal Consent (ALUC)*

(10) There are no principles to which every human assents.

(11c) If P is innate, then every human assents to P.

So, (12) There are no innate principles.

In making the case for (10), Locke's strategy is to argue, first, that the principle of non-contradiction (PNC) and the principle of equality (PE) are not universally assented to, and hence, since there are no speculative principles that have a better chance of gaining universal assent than these two self-evident maxims, there are no speculative principles to which all humans assent.<sup>14</sup> Second, Locke claims that it is even more obvious that no practical principle is the object of universal assent: as he puts it, "it is much more visible concerning practical Principles, that they come short of an universal Reception" (E I.iii.1: 65).

The text of the *Essay* at first suggests the following reconstruction of Locke's argument for (11c). Innate principles, by definition, are in each human mind. Now if a principle is in human mind M, then it must be perceived by M; "imprinting, if it signify anything, being nothing else, but the making certain Truths to be perceived" (E I.ii.5: 49). Moreover, all innate principles are self-evident: for if there were "natural Characters ingraven on the Mind..., they must needs be visible by themselves, and by their own light be certain and known to every Body" (E I.iii.1: 66). But if a principle is both perceived and self-evident, then it is "irresistible" (E IV.ii.1: 531), and hence compels assent. It follows that innate principles must be universally assented to.

However, Locke came to recognize that a principle P can be in mind M at time T without actually being perceived by M at T. This is emphasized in a section that was added to the second edition of the *Essay*. There Locke claims that "whatever Idea is in the mind, is either an actual

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<sup>14</sup> The argument for the claim that PNC is not the object of universal assent relies on the premise that some humans do not so much as perceive or understand PNC. As Locke puts it: "'tis evident, that all *Children* and *Ideots*, have not the least Apprehension or Thought of [PNC]" (E I.ii.5: 49). This premise is then coupled with the

perception, or else having been an actual perception, is so in the mind, that by the memory it can be made an actual perception again” (E I.iv.20: 96-98). It follows from this, not (A) that if P is in M at T, then M actually perceives P at T, but rather (B) that if P is in M at T, then *either* M actually perceives P at T *or* M perceived P at some time before T.

If (A) is replaced by (B), then Locke must replace his argument for (11c) with the following argument for (11d):

(11d) If P is innate, then every human has at some time or other assented to P.

Innate principles, by definition, are in each human mind. Now if P is in M at T, then either P is perceived by M at T or P was perceived by M at some time before T. But all innate principles are self-evident and so assent-compelling when perceived. Thus, if P is innate, then M either assents to P at T or M assented to P at some time before T. QED.

But if (11c) is replaced by (11d), then (10) must be replaced by (10d) to preserve the validity of Locke’s argument from lack of universal consent:

*Argument from Lack of Universal Consent\** (ALUC\*)

(10d) There are no principles to which every human has at some time or other assented.

(11d) If P is innate, then every human has at some time or other assented to P.

So, (12) There are no innate principles.<sup>15</sup>

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assumption that assent to P at time T requires perception of P at T, so that “want of [apprehension] is enough to destroy ... Assent” (E I.ii.5: 49).

<sup>15</sup> There are clear textual indications that, even as early as the first edition, Locke intended to rely on (B), rather than (A), in arguing for (11d), rather than for (11c). As Locke puts it: “No Proposition can be said to be in the Mind, which it *never yet* knew, which it was *never yet* conscious of” (emphasis added – E I.ii.5: 50); or again, “to be in the Mind, and, *never* to be perceived, is all one, as to say, any thing is, and is not, in the Mind or Understanding” (emphasis added – E I.ii.5: 50-51). However, there are also clear textual indications that Locke refused to abandon (A), even as he was pushing it aside in favor of (B) in ALUC\*. For (A) operates not merely in ALUC, but also in some of the arguments Locke uses to undermine AUC-UR(a) and AUC-FP (see n. 12 and n. 13). Given the evidence, the most reasonable hypothesis seems to be that Locke did not really think it important to distinguish between (A) and (B) until the second edition (which is when he chose to emphasize the distinction in E I.iv.20), at which time he simply forgot that (A) was implicated in some of the arguments he was relying on to undermine

Before moving on, Locke considers an objection to (11d). It might be thought that for a principle to be innate is for the mind to possess the capacity to perceive and assent to it (E I.ii.5: 50). If this were true, then (11d) would be false, for it could happen that, though M is always capable of perceiving and assenting to P, there is no time at which M actually assents to P. Locke's reply to this objection is this. If what it is for a principle to be innate is for every human mind to be capable of assenting to it, then, since every truth is such that every human mind is capable of assenting to it, it follows that every truth is innate. This result then contradicts the nativist presupposition that some truths are not innate.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to ALUC\*, Locke provides three independent reasons for thinking that *practical* principles in particular are not innate. The first is based on an already familiar assumption, namely that all innate principles are self-evident:

*Argument from Lack of Self-Evidence (ALSE)*

(13) All innate principles are self-evident.

(14) No practical principles are self-evident.

So, (15) No practical principles are innate.

Locke does not think that this kind of argument will work to show that speculative maxims are not innate. This is because he thinks that speculative maxims, such as PNC and PE, are self-evident. But practical principles are a different kettle of fish, for, as Locke sees it, "*there cannot any one moral Rule be propos'd, whereof a Man may not justly demand a Reason*" (E I.iii.4: 68). Since it would not be appropriate or "just" to demand a reason for a self-evident principle, moral

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various versions of the nativist argument from universal consent. Had he realized that (A) was so implicated, he would have either removed the texts in which (A) is relied on or altered them in such a way as to replace (A) with (B) without compromising soundness.

<sup>16</sup> Locke offers a "farther argument" against the innateness of speculative maxims. Innate principles, he writes, "*should appear fairest and clearest*" and "must needs exert themselves with most Force and Vigour" in those "least corrupted by Custom, or borrowed Opinions." But those who are least corrupted in this way are "*Children, Ideots, Savages, and illiterate People.*" Yet it is to these individuals that speculative maxims are "least known." Consequently, no speculative maxims are innate (E I.ii.27: 63).

rules cannot be self-evident.<sup>17</sup> To bolster his case that every practical principle “need[s] proof to ascertain its Truth,” Locke cites as his primary example the Golden Rule, “*That one should do as he would be done unto,*” which is commonly thought innate, but for which it would not be absurd to request justification (E I.iii.4: 68).

The second reason for thinking that practical principles are not innate concerns the peace of mind with which moral rules are routinely transgressed:

*Argument from Confident Transgression (ACT)*

- (16) Human beings would not transgress innate practical principles with confidence and serenity.
- (17) Every practical principle is such that there are human beings who transgress it with confidence and serenity.

So, (18) No practical principles are innate.

In defense of (17), Locke adduces evidence to suggest that many human beings have committed the worst kinds of atrocities (murder, rape, infanticide, cannibalism, etc.) “without scruple” (E I.iii.9: 71). In defense of (16), Locke argues that it is plain that innate moral rules would be laws and that every law has a law-giver who rewards those who follow the law and punishes those who do not (E I.iii.12: 74 and E I.iv.8: 87). Hence, since we are conscious of anything that is innate, we would all know, if moral rules were innate, that we will be punished for transgressing them (presumably by God in the afterlife, since it is clear that many do not suffer in this life for their moral transgressions). But the knowledge that one will be punished for transgressing a rule is sufficient to produce fear, and hence lack of confidence and serenity when one actually transgresses.

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<sup>17</sup> Locke also argues, in defense of (14), that, though no self-evident proposition can be the object of widespread disagreement, there is a “great variety of Opinions, concerning Moral Rules, which are to be found amongst Men” (E I.iii.6: 68-69). It follows directly that no practical propositions are self-evident.

Thirdly, Locke argues that, though it should be easy to tell the difference between innate and adventitious propositions, “no body, that [he knows], has ventured yet to give a Catalogue of them” (E I.iii.14: 76):

*Argument from Lack of a Catalogue (ALC)*

- (19) If there are any innate principles, then they are easily distinguished from non-innate propositions (i.e., propositions that are either deduced from innate principles or learned).
- (20) If innate principles are easily distinguished from propositions that are not innate, then it should be easy for any human being to “know what, and how many, [innate principles] there were” (I.iii.14).
- (21) It is not easy for human beings to know what, and how many, innate practical principles there are.

So, (22) No practical principles are innate.

Locke’s guiding thought here is that a principle’s innateness ought to be transparent to any mind on which it is imprinted: P’s being innate is sufficient for my being conscious of the fact that P is innate.<sup>18</sup>

Locke completes his anti-nativist attack with a general argument that is intended to show that none of the constituents of any principle commonly thought innate is innate, and hence that no principle commonly thought innate is innate:

*Argument from Lack of Innate Ideas (ALII)*

- (23) Principles are mental propositions that consist of the joining or separating of ideas.

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<sup>18</sup> In the way of an objection to (21), it was brought to Locke’s attention that Lord Herbert had proposed a complete list of innate practical principles, as well as a list of six marks by means of which to distinguish them from non-innate practical propositions, in his *De Veritate*. Locke argues that none of the propositions Lord Herbert considers innate satisfies all six marks of innateness (E I.iii.15-19). It follows that (i) none of the practical propositions Herbert thinks innate is innate or (ii) the list of marks Herbert proposes as his means of distinguishing between innate and non-innate propositions is inadequate.

(24) If a complex whole is innate, then its parts must also be innate.

(25) None of the ideas that compose the principles commonly thought innate is innate.

So, (26) None of the principles commonly thought innate is innate.

Taking (23) and (24) on board, Locke spends most of I.iv defending (25). Locke focuses on seven ideas in particular: the idea of impossibility (which is relevant to PNC), the idea of identity (which is relevant to PE), the idea of a whole and the idea of a part (which are relevant to the speculative maxim that the whole is bigger than a part – see E I.iii.1: 66), the idea of worship and the idea of God (which are relevant to Lord Herbert’s practical maxim that God ought to be worshipped – E I.iii.15: 77), and the idea of substance (substratum).<sup>19</sup>

Here, in brief, are his reasons for thinking that these ideas are not innate:

*Impossibility and Worship* (E I.iv.3: 85-86 and E I.iv.7: 87): Children lack these ideas. But an idea cannot be innate unless it is present to all human minds. So the ideas of impossibility and worship are not innate. Moreover, only very few adults have a clear and distinct idea of worship. But an idea cannot be innate unless it is clear (see n. 16). So the idea of worship is not innate.

*Identity* (E I.iv.4: 86): Suppose that X is a human composed of soul S and body B at time T1, while Y is a human composed of soul S and body B\* at time T2 (where T1 is not identical to T2 and B\* is not identical to B). It is difficult to say whether X is the same human as Y, and hence the idea of identity is not clear. But an idea cannot be innate unless it is clear (see above). So the idea of identity is not innate.

*Whole and Part* (E I.iv.6: 87): The idea of whole and the idea of part are relative to the ideas of extension and number. But if X is an idea that is relative to the idea of Y and person P possesses X, then P also possesses Y. Hence, if X is an idea that is relative to the idea of Y and X is innate,

then Y is innate. It follows that if the idea of whole and the idea of part are innate, then the idea of extension and the idea of number must be innate as well. But the idea of extension and the idea of number are acquired by means of the senses, and hence are not innate. So the idea of whole and the idea of part are not innate.

*God* (E I.iv.8: 87-88, E I.iv.14-15: 92-93): Ancient philosophers report the existence of numerous godless men, and current anthropological evidence testifies to the existence of whole nations among whose members there is to be found no idea of God. Moreover, even among “civilized” nations, there are many whose idea of God is not clear. Finally, there are contrary and inadequate conceptions of God in the minds of different human beings. But an idea cannot be innate unless it is present to all minds, clear, adequate, and uniform (see above). So the idea of God is not innate.

*Substance* (E I.iv.18: 95): The idea of substance signifies only “an uncertain supposition of we know not what..., something whereof we have no particular distinct positive *Idea*,” and hence is one of the most obscure and confused ideas there are (E I.iv.18: 95). But an idea cannot be innate unless it is clear (see above). So the idea of substance is not innate.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Locke does not mention any maxim that is commonly thought innate and that contains the idea of substance. But we can speculate. All of Locke’s nativist opponents would have thought it an innate maxim that all accidents must inhere in a substance.

<sup>20</sup> From the result that the idea of God is not innate, Locke constructs a further argument against the claim that there are innate practical propositions. As he argues (see E I.iii.12: 74), one cannot have the concept of moral obligation without having the concept of a law, and one cannot have the concept of a law without having the concept of a law-giver (i.e., God). So, if the idea of God is not innate, then the idea of obligation is not innate. But every practical proposition is of the form, “One ought (not) to do X,” and hence the idea of obligation is a component of every practical proposition. Given that no proposition can be innate unless its component ideas are also innate, it follows that no practical propositions are innate.

### 3. Locke's Anti-Nativist Arguments Evaluated

#### The First Prong: Arguments for Nativism Undermined

Locke's criticisms of AUC, AUC-UR, and AUC-FP are sufficient to establish that these arguments are unsound. Commentators have mostly complained, not that Locke's criticisms are off the mark, but that they are directed at the kind of argument for nativism that none of his contemporaries accepted. As we've seen, this is an uncharitable way to read the *Essay*. For there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Locke's criticisms were directed at the views of specific, albeit unnamed, writers with whose works Locke was familiar.

#### The Second Prong: Arguments Against Nativism

##### Argument from Lack of Universal Consent

According to ALUC\*, there are no principles to which all humans have at some time or other assented (10d). But, if P is innate, then all humans have at some time or other assented to P (11d). Therefore, there are no innate principles.

Locke's reason for accepting (11d) is that whatever is in the mind must be either occurrently perceived or stored in memory. But why should we accept this? If memory is some sort of storehouse or repository of ideas, why couldn't there be another mental faculty whose function it is to store ideas and then, like memory, bring them to consciousness, but, unlike memory, without a consciousness of their having been in the mind before? If there were such a faculty, then ideas could be in the mind without being occurrently perceived or stored in memory.

In a later section on memory, Locke points out that the storehouse model of memory misleading, for it is only in a figurative sense that an idea that is in one's memory is in one's mind:

But our *Ideas* being nothing, but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them, this *laying up* of our *Ideas* in the Repository of the Memory, signifies no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before. And in this Sense it is, that our *Ideas*

are said to be in our Memories, when indeed, they are actually no where, but only there is an ability in the Mind, when it will, to revive them again; and as it were paint them anew on it self (E II.x.2: 150).

Locke claims that the storehouse metaphor is just that: a metaphor. Importantly, we shouldn't think of memory as (or as anything like) a place where ideas are kept when they are not actually perceived: ideas that are not actually perceived are, as he says, "no where". Memory is nothing but a power to revive ideas with the perception of having perceived them before. Of course, the notion of "reviving" is metaphorical too, and also potentially misleading. For one natural way of thinking of "reviving" is as bringing something from a dormant state to a state of wakefulness. This suggests the possibility of an idea's being in the mind, but only in a dormant (i.e., unconscious) state. Locke is careful to warn his readers not to interpret "reviving" in this way. Ideas are "revived" only in the sense of being, as it were, repainted (yet another metaphor). If one thinks (as Locke does) of the mind as a canvas or slate, an idea that is "lodg'd in the memory" is an idea that used to be on the canvas but no longer appears on the canvas. Its being revived, then, is no more than its reappearing on the canvas.

There is clearly some tension in the metaphorical picture Locke paints here. If a forgotten idea (i.e., an idea that was once perceived but is no longer perceived) is "no where" (in metaphorical terms, does not appear on the canvas of the mind), then it stretches the metaphor of containment to the point of absurdity to say that forgotten ideas are *in* the mind. And what should we say of ideas that were once perceived but are never perceived again? According to Locke, the mind has the power to revive these ideas, to repaint them anew on the canvas of the mind. But what if the mind never exercises this power? Should we say, as Locke does, that forgotten ideas that are never "repainted" are still *in* the mind? And if we say this, then why can't we say, in defense of Dispositional Nativism, that ideas that are never brought to consciousness but that we have the ability to "paint" on our minds without any accompanying perception of having had these ideas before are also *in* the mind? The problem here is that Locke's own account of the metaphysics of memory gives solace to the Dispositional Nativist.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This problem also affects Locke's "farther argument" against the innateness of speculative principles, a piece of reasoning that relies on the claim that innate principles "should appear fairest and clearest" and "must exert

But the debate does not end here. As Locke argues, even if it were possible for innate principles to be in the mind without being present to the mind, it would be pointless for God to stamp merely latent principles in our minds. For as long as they are latent (possibly an entire lifetime), these principles do not help those who possess them attain knowledge of their circumstances or of their duties. As Locke puts the point: “If Men can be ignorant or doubtful of what is innate, innate Principles are insisted on, and urged to no purpose; Truth and Certainty (the things pretended) are not at all secured by them: But Men are in the same uncertain, floating estate with, as without them” (E I.iii.13: 75). But surely even nativists would agree that the point of God’s having endowed us with innate principles is that they may serve to guide our actions and thoughts. Thus, assuming that God never acts in a pointless way, it follows either that all innate principles are occurrent (in which case Dispositional Nativism must give way to Occurrent Nativism, with its all-too-numerous theoretical drawbacks) or that God did not engrave them on our minds (in which case Parker’s remark that they may, for all we know, be untrustworthy—“as Weeds are the first and natural Issues of the best Soyles”—is singularly *a propos*). The burden placed on the nativist is significant and under-appreciated.<sup>22</sup>

### **Argument from Lack of Self-Evidence**

According to ALSE, whereas all innate principles are self-evident, no practical principles are self-evident, and hence no practical principles are innate. It would be difficult for any of

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themselves with most Force and Vigour” in uncorrupted minds (see n. 16). In reply, the Dispositional Nativist might well argue that, if a principle can be in the mind without being brought to consciousness (a possibility for which Locke’s account of memory makes room), then there is no reason to think that innate principles should “exert themselves,” whether in corrupted or uncorrupted minds.

<sup>22</sup> I imagine a similar outcome to the debate over the soundness of the Argument from Confident Transgression. According to ACT, although human beings would not transgress innate practical principles with confidence and serenity (16), every practical principle is such that there are human beings who transgress it confidently and serenely (17). It follows that no practical principles are innate. In defense of (16), Locke assumes that we are conscious of anything that is innate (see above). Although the Occurrent Nativist accepts this assumption, the Dispositional Nativist rejects it on the grounds that at least some innate principles are latent, and hence not present to the mind. It is the latency of these principles that explains why so many transgress them so confidently. It is at this stage that I imagine Locke falling back on his claim that it would be pointless for God to stamp merely latent principles in our minds.

Locke's immediate nativist predecessors to deny the assumption that innate principles are self-evident, since they held that innate principles are to serve as the foundations of the rest of our knowledge. But the most glaring problem with this argument lies with the assumption that no practical principles are self-evident, for this is an assumption that Locke himself rejects!

Here's where Locke stumbles. If no practical principles are self-evident, then morals cannot be a demonstrative science. The reason for this is that, for Locke, every principle of a demonstrative science is either a self-evident axiom or derived from self-evident axioms by self-evidently valid steps. Thus, if morals is a demonstrative science, there must be at least some self-evident moral axioms, i.e., self-evident practical principles. The problem here is that Locke holds that a demonstrative science of morals is possible (see E III.xi.16: 516, E IV.iii.18: 549, E IV.xii.8: 643). Thus, Locke must hold that there are self-evident practical principles from which all other practical principles are validly derived.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, Locke could abandon the claim that a demonstrative science of morals is possible. If he did so, however, he would also need to give up his conception of God's goodness. As Locke sees it, it would be unkind in the extreme for God to create humans without giving them the wherewithal to determine what they need to do and avoid in order to act rightly and merit eternal happiness in the afterlife. If morals were a demonstrative science, then humans could discover their duties (and so the way to eternal bliss) by exercising their (native) reason and their (native) ability to perceive the agreement and disagreement of ideas. But if morals is not a demonstrative science, then nothing guarantees that humans who exercise their native faculties properly will discover the way to happiness. Surely God wouldn't create human beings knowing that they would suffer through no fault of their own.

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<sup>23</sup> Consider, for example, Locke's derivation of the practical principle that where there is no property, there is no injustice (E IV.iii.18: 549). Locke affirms, first, (a) that to have property is to have a right to something, and second, (b) that injustice is the invasion or violation of a right to something. It follows from these two propositions that injustice is the invasion or violation of property, and hence that where there is no property there is no injustice. But what is the epistemic status of the two principles, (a) and (b)? It seems that they are self-evident, since Locke tells us that the idea of property is the idea of a right to something, and the idea of injustice is the idea of the invasion or violation of a right. And aren't these self-evident principles themselves practical?

### **Argument from Lack of a Catalogue**

According to ALC, it should be easy to distinguish innate from non-innate propositions, in which case it should be easy to know what, and how many, innate principles there are. But, in fact, it turns out to be rather difficult to say what, and how many, innate practical principles there are. Consequently, no practical principles are innate.

Here, Locke assumes that a proposition's innateness ought to be transparent to any mind on which it is imprinted: P's being innate is sufficient for one's being conscious of the fact that P is innate. But why should this be? In the first place, the Dispositional Nativist will say that, since the fact that a proposition is innate isn't even sufficient for its being conscious, surely it can't also be that a proposition's innateness is sufficient for one's being conscious of its very innateness! But the Occurrent Nativist can object as well. For even if a proposition's being innate *is* sufficient for its being conscious, consciousness of a proposition need not entail consciousness of its origin. The entailment will hold if the origin of a proposition were somehow part of its content (so that mere awareness of the proposition would allow us to say where it came from). But, of course, a proposition's origin is rather conspicuously *not* part of its content. So why think that consciousness of an innate proposition automatically translates into consciousness of its origin? On balance, then, this argument is less than persuasive.

### **Argument from Lack of Innate Ideas**

According to ALII, if the ideas that compose principles aren't innate, then the principles themselves can't be innate. But none of the ideas that compose the principles commonly thought innate is innate. Hence, none of the principles commonly thought innate is innate.

This argument, as Locke recognizes, is only as good as Locke's case for thinking that none of the ideas commonly thought innate is innate. Locke claims that the ideas of impossibility, worship, and God are not present to all humans, and that the ideas of impossibility, worship, God, identity, and substance are unclear. Since innate ideas must be clear and present to all humans, it follows that these ideas are not innate.

As we've seen, the Dispositional Nativist denies that innate ideas must be present to the mind. However, it is more difficult for the Dispositional Nativist to deny that innate ideas must be clear. Were God to create an obscure principle, what possible reason could He have for

stamping it on the minds of humans? If an innate principle's function is to guide a person's thoughts and actions, doesn't its being composed of obscure ideas get in the way of its performing this function well? And why would God endow us with principles that perform their function poorly, if at all?

It would seem that it would best serve the Dispositional Nativist to insist that the ideas Locke finds unclear are really clear. Locke doesn't provide much in the way of argument for the claim that the ideas of impossibility, worship, and God aren't clear. But he does argue that the idea of identity isn't clear because there are situations in which it is difficult to say whether X is the same human as Y, and he argues that the idea of substance is unclear because it signifies only an "uncertain supposition of we know not what."

In reply, the nativist might point out that the argument that the idea of identity is obscure is one that Locke himself rejects. Locke claims that, where X is a human composed of soul S and body B at time T1 and Y is a human composed of soul S and body B\* at time T2 (where B is not the same body as B\*), it is difficult to say whether X is the same human as Y. But this contradicts Locke's claim in the chapter, "Of Identity and Diversity," that it is actually quite clear that sameness of soul is not sufficient for sameness of human being. Locke considers the question whether Heliogabalus, by supposition a human being composed of a soul S and a human-shaped body B, is the same man as a hog composed of the same soul S and a hog-shaped body B\*. Locke's answer to this question is emphatically in the negative: "Yet I think no body, could he be sure that the Soul of Heliogabalus were in one of his Hogs, would yet say that Hog were a Man or Heliogabalus" (E II.xxvii.6: 332). Locke's point here generalizes: "[It is] a very strange use of the Word Man, applied to an Idea, out of which Body and Shape is excluded" (E II.xxvii.6: 332). Thus, in general, if X's body is of characteristically human shape whereas Y's body is not, then it follows immediately that X and Y are clearly not the same man.<sup>24</sup>

As for the idea of substance, the nativist might object that uncertainty as to the nature of what an idea represents does not entail that the idea itself must be obscure. As Frege might put

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<sup>24</sup> Since E II.xxvii was added to the second edition of the *Essay*, it is possible that Locke simply forgot to change (or even delete) his first edition argument in E I.iv.4 for the claim that the idea of identity is obscure.

it, the sense of a term might be clear, even as one is uncertain as to the nature of the term's referent. For example, the sense of "The Morning Star" might be clear, even to one who knows little or nothing about Venus itself.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

How in the end should we evaluate Locke's anti-nativist polemic? As I've argued, Locke's criticisms of the various versions of the nativist Argument from Universal Consent hit the mark, thereby shaking one of the reasons most commonly given in favor of nativism by Locke's opponents. By contrast, Locke's direct criticisms of nativism itself are a mixed bag. On the one hand, some arguments (e.g., the Argument from Lack of Universal Consent) rank as powerful indictments of Occurrent Nativism. On the other, some of the arguments (e.g., the Argument from Lack of Self-Evidence) are inconsistent with other positions Locke holds, while others are less than persuasive (e.g., the Argument from Lack of a Catalogue). Moreover, none of the arguments can reasonably be read as a knock-down argument against Dispositional Nativism. Nevertheless, Locke's additional concern about the seeming pointlessness of God's providing humans with latent principles (especially considering the fact that God might have made these principles occurrent instead) successfully shifts the burden of proof onto the shoulders of Dispositional Nativists.

It might be thought that, after attending to arguments for and against nativism in Book I, Locke's attention shifts to other matters in Books II-IV of the *Essay*. This is not entirely accurate. In particular, it is possible to read much of the *Essay* as an extended answer to the nativist challenge propounded by Descartes and the Cambridge Platonists. More, for one, had argued that ideas of relations could not be "Impresses of any material Object from without [the

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<sup>25</sup> Concerning the ideas of whole and part, Locke's argument is that they are relative to the ideas of extension and number, which are themselves acquired through the senses. But, Locke claims, if X is an idea that is relative to the idea of Y and X is innate, then Y is innate. Since the ideas of extension and number are not innate, it follows that the ideas of whole and part are not innate. The real sticking point here is Locke's insistence that the ideas of extension and number are adventitious. This is something that Descartes, for one, denied. Adjudicating this dispute is beyond the scope of this essay.

mind],” and hence must be part of the “natural furniture of the humane Understanding.” (And Descartes and Cudworth had argued, on similar grounds, that ideas of cogitative beings and their modes, and general ideas must be innate – see n. 10.) More had also argued that principles on which the mind can “straightaway pronounce,” including such mathematical theorems as that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right ones, cannot be adventitious. In Book II, when Locke moves on to give his own empiricist account of how the human mind comes by ideas of relation (E II.xxv-xxviii), ideas of cogitative beings (E II.xxiii.15), ideas of cogitative modes (E II.xix-xx), and general ideas (E II.xii), we should read him as addressing, forcefully and directly, the nativist argument that these ideas cannot be either adventitious or constructed. And in Book IV, when Locke provides an empiricist account of demonstrative knowledge (E IV.ii), we should read him as countering the Morean argument that mathematical theorems must be innate. Overall, the polemic against nativism articulated in Book I does not merely introduce, but also frames, the main epistemological doctrines defended in the rest of the *Essay*. It is in this sense that a proper understanding of Locke’s polemic serves to deepen one’s understanding of the book as a whole.