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“For if the soul were like these empty tablets, truths would be in us as the shape of Hercules is in a block of marble, when the marble is completely indifferent to receiving this shape or another. But if the stone had veins which marked out the shape of Hercules rather than other shapes, then that block would be more determined with respect to that shape and Hercules would be as though innate in it in some sense, even though some labor would be required for these veins to be exposed and polished into clarity by the removal of everything that prevents them from appearing. This is how ideas and truths are innate in us …”

In his Preface to the *New Essays*, Leibniz attempts to refute the conclusions of John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in defense of rationalism. By reconstructing his reasoning, outlined in the above passage, I will analyze the analogy with which Leibniz visualizes his view of the mind’s structure. It is important to first summarize Locke’s opposing view before comparing the two within the structure of Leibniz’s analogy. In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* Locke equates the mind to a “blank tablet” that acquires knowledge only through sensory experiences and conscious cognitive operations, without the use of any innate ideas. Leibniz’s rebuttal aims to show that there are ideas present in all minds at the moment of creation.

Leibniz begins by considering Locke’s conception of the mind as a block of marble. If Locke’s system is true, Leibniz says, there would be no order to the manner in which the mind receives ideas. He objects to this lack of semblance, instead comparing the mind to a block of marble with “veins” marked throughout it. According to Leibniz, these veins are a set of innate ideas present in the mind from its inception but not initially evident to the individual. It is only through “labor,” or explicit actions taken by the individual, that these ideas are revealed.

Leibniz’s argument cannot be presented as a foil to Locke’s due to their dependence on differing metaphysical theses. Whereas Locke believes in an external world, constantly supplying an individual with sensory information, Leibniz believes in a system of pre-established harmony, by which each person experiences a unique perspective of the universe. In the context of Leibniz’s metaphysical thesis, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that individuals possess innate ideas from the moment they are created by God. However, Leibniz’s view is not adapted to the paradigm within which Locke is working, and so does not present a direct alternative. If, however, Leibniz rooted his argument in a metaphysics that supports interaction with the external world, it could be directly compared with Locke’s empiricist view.

As for the actual view that Leibniz supports, a substantial objection can be made against nativism on the grounds of evolutionary tendencies. Leibniz’s innate ideas could easily be the effect of natural selection biasing human perceptions in a manner that has proven to be evolutionarily successful. For example, rationalists could support the idea that “it is impossible for the same thing to be and to not be.” If, perhaps, a prehistoric human was hunting for prey in the wild, only for it to flee out of sight, it is natural to conclude that believing in the continued existence of the prey would be evolutionarily advantageous. As such, the general concept of innate ideas cannot be sufficiently distinguished from biological tendencies that would arise through natural selection, and so are redundant and excessive.

There is additional evidence that supports the thesis that our ideas are not innate, again using the fundamental thought that “it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be” as an example. Jean Piaget, a psychologist who made significant contributions to the study of child development, found that many children less than two years old had not yet achieved object permanence, the cognitive skill of knowing an object still exists even when it is hidden. Piaget’s findings show that, at the very least, children do not possess a working knowledge of the external world in the early stages of life. This further supports the claim that children develop universal truths based on their experiences with the external world, and thus refutes the defense of innate ideas argued by rationalists.

A common rationalist argument against the acquisition of knowledge through sensory experience addresses the limited scope of information that an individual can attain from a single instance. Leibniz himself advocates for this position in his Preface to the *New Essays*, questioning the validity of general truths if sensory ideas are particular and individual. However, Leibniz does not give credit to the human ability to process and internalize information at a subconscious level. Researchers at the University of Oregon found that, when the conscious mind is unaware of external stimuli, such as a simple math equation, the unconscious mind can still process incoming information and perform the required computation. This suggests that the unconscious mind is capable of processing nearly every moment of an individual’s life. Ideas about the external world may not be certifiably true, as they are only an assemblage of specific instances, but the enormous sample size collected by the unconscious mind means it is almost entirely impossible to assert their falsehood.

In conclusion, Leibniz does not provide a substantive defense of nativism in his reply to Locke. A direct comparison between the two arguments cannot be made, as each presupposes a different system of metaphysics that affects the respective conclusion. When considering Leibniz’s advocacy for nativism in a vacuum, there are still objections to be had based on evolutionary theory and recent research in neuroscience and psychology. As such, Leibniz’s argument must be adapted to match the knowledge of the twenty-first century in order to become defensible.

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