

REMINDER

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INNATE PRINCIPLES AND RADICAL
INTERPRETATION

Simon Evnine

In this paper I wish to discuss Locke's reasons for rejecting innate principles. In particular, I shall be dealing with his treatment of the speculative maxim "It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be", and that in its formal mode " $-(p \ \& \ -p)$ ". What I want to suggest is that there is another way for principles to be in the mind than that allowed by Locke, and an examination of this way of "being in the mind" will help to clarify what I consider to be infelicities in Locke's own arguments against the innateness of this maxim. I hope it will be obvious on conclusion that whether the way of being in the mind which I will suggest is to be called a form of innateness or not is a purely arbitrary point, of no philosophical interest.

Locke says of the innatist position that he is attacking that "if these Words (*to be in the Understanding*) have any Propriety, they signify to be understood. So that, to be in the Understanding, and, not to be understood; 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. If therefore these two Propositions, *Whatsoever is, is*; and *It is*

impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be, are by Nature imprinted, Children cannot be ignorant of them: Infants, and all that have Souls must necessarily have them in their Understandings, know the Truth of them, and assent to it".¹

This says that if a proposition is in someone's mind, if it is correct to describe that person as believing something, then that person must perceive that proposition. Of course, Locke's use of the word "perceive" is sufficiently wide for us not to suppose that he thinks we must actually see the proposition (what would it even be to see a proposition such as " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ "?), but it does nonetheless imply that the proposition must have some substantial presence in the mind, or brain, of the person whose idea it is. I shall call this implication the Substantial Presence Theory. That Locke does hold this theory is further borne out by his many uses of expressions such as "imprinted" and "engraven".²

Given this general view of how a proposition is in the mind let us review some of Locke's specific arguments against the innateness of " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ ". The first is that children do not have this principle. "Engraven in the mind" means, for Locke, engraven and understood, and it is certainly true that children, very young children, at least, do not understand " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ "; but then, they *understand* nothing, so unless Locke means to argue from the fact that children are born prior to their acquisition of reason to the conclusion that there are no innate principles, this proves nothing in the particular case under discussion. If Locke does intend this as a quite

general argument, as I suppose he does, he goes on to suggest a modification to the innatist thesis that a proponent of it might wish to make, to the effect that a principle is innate if it is known to everyone on the acquisition of reason. Locke dismisses this ploy on the following grounds. If it means that reason helps one to discover the principle in question, then it cannot be innate. If on the other hand, it does not mean this, then it can only mean that the acquisition of reason is co-incidental with the recognition of the supposed innate principle. But Locke thinks that this is just false; principles such as " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ " are often not "in the mind" of people who have yet acquired reason and are able to assent to propositions such as "sweet is not bitter" (which we would normally consider as instances of the law of non-contradiction).

It is this last rejoinder of Locke's that I think is unhappy. Do we really want to countenance the position that someone can understand instances of the law of non-contradiction without understanding the law itself? Locke gives several reasons why we should be prepared to accept this. First, he thinks it just an empirical fact that people (he has in mind, of course, what we might call "naive" people, of which he instances children, idiots and savages) will assent to "sweet is not bitter" and yet not assent to " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ ". Secondly, he holds that no proposition can be innate unless the simple ideas from which it is composed are innate also: "Hath a Child an *Idea* of *Impossibility* and *Identity*, before it has of *White* or *Black*; *Sweet* or *Bitter*?"³

To take the first of these reasons first, it is certainly a fact that many people assent to "sweet is not bitter" without assenting to " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ ", if "assent" is taken to mean voluntarily and spontaneously assert. But that makes Locke's point trivial. If he means, therefore, that they may assent to "sweet is not bitter", without it being true of them that they believe " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ " then his empirical observation is no longer obvious. What grounds do we have for deciding whether someone believes the law of non-contradiction? Surely one very powerful reason for supposing that he does would be his assenting to instances of it. The fact that a child might nonetheless not assent to the *sentence* " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ " proves something only about his understanding of language and nothing about whether he believes that $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$.

The second of Locke's reasons for the view that acknowledgement of the law of non-contradiction is not co-incidental with the acquisition of reason is as follows. If, for the proposition "sweet is not bitter" to be in the mind, it is necessary for the ideas "bitter" and "sweet" to be in the mind, as surely it is, then it looks as if it ought also to be the case that for the proposition "It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be" to be in the mind, the ideas of "impossibility" and "same" (or, as Locke says, "identity") must be in the mind. And surely a child knows what sweetness is, and that it is not bitterness, from the taste of its mother's milk, long before it knows what the modal property of impossibility is? I think that whatever plausibility this argument has derives from the use of the material mode version

of the law of non-contradiction. This includes the idea "thing" and, to qualify this idea, those of "identity" and "impossibility".

Now we have seen that there are two forms the innatist thesis can take. There is a more extreme version, according to which innate principles are present in the mind from birth. This version was seen to be too strong in that it was apparently inconsistent with the empirical observation that there were no grounds for attributing any possibly innate principles to young children or other pre- or non-rational creatures. We therefore undertook to defend the more moderate innatist position that a principle is innate if it is known on the acquisition of reason. To answer Locke's objection on the basis of this moderate view, we would have to hold that the child acquires ideas such as "thing" and "impossibility" before it acquires sensory ideas like "bitter". But according to Locke's empiricism, there are no means of *acquiring* such abstract ideas, prior to the acquisition of sensory ideas from which to abstract. So it seems as if the only option would be to fall back on the more extreme innatist view, which we have already agreed with Locke is unacceptable. That we should have to face this dilemma is a consequence of the Substantial Presence Theory, for if a proposition must actually have some presence in the mind, then surely we must be able to answer the question, when did this presence originate? And according to Locke, as we have just seen, the answer cannot be before the acquisition of reason, nor can it be at the same time as the acquisition of reason but before

the acquisition of sensory concepts such as "bitter" and "sweet".

If we were to readopt the formal mode, so that what we are discussing is " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ ", then, I think, Locke's argument loses its persuasiveness. What would we be requiring of someone when we say that he believes " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ "? "p" is a schematic letter and entails the possession of no particular idea. (Of course, in propositional calculus, the letters stand for sentences, whereas Locke's simple ideas here are concepts, but I don't think that this is a serious issue.) The rest of the law of non-contradiction consists of the concepts " \neg " and "&", the truth-functional operators of negation and conjunction. We need not claim that this hypothetical person must have the concept of truth-functionality; only, that he must have the concepts of negation and conjunction, which are truth-functions. But Locke himself must allow that to have the proposition "sweet is not bitter" a person must have the concept of negation, and conjunction is surely no more difficult a concept to possess than negation.

Locke says nothing directly about the possession of concepts such as conjunction but what he does say about the word "and" and other particles is nonetheless worth looking at in the light of our discussion. In the chapter on "Particles" he writes: "he who would shew the right use of Particles, and what significancy and force they have, must take a little more pains, enter into his own Thoughts, and observe nicely the several Postures of his Mind in discoursing ... They are all marks of some Action, or Intimation of the Mind".⁴ This view, that the meaning of

particles is determined by the actions, or postures of the mind, and not by its contents, is, in fact, just the sort of view we want to support the thesis that someone who can have the idea "sweet is not bitter" *cannot fail* to hold " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ ", even though they may acquire the concepts of "thing" and "impossibility" long after they acquire those of "sweet" and "bitter". The action or posture of the mind in affirming "sweet is not bitter" will be just the sort of thing in virtue of which that mind possesses the concept of negation. Locke's views on particles, in other words, however incompletely expressed, appear to be at odds with his advocacy of the Substantial Presence Theory. It now looks as if there may be a good case for saying that everyone does come to believe " $\neg(p \ \& \ \neg p)$ " on the acquisition of reason, at least so far as Locke's objections to that position go.

Before I say more about just what I think is involved in a proposition's being in the mind, there are two subtleties in Locke's exposition to which I should give some attention. The first is regarding Locke's claim that people must be able to assent to propositions such as "sweet is not bitter" before they assent to "It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be", on the grounds that they have the ideas of "bitter" and "sweet" before they have those of "identity" and "impossibility". We have seen that there may, after all, be some case for saying that no one could assent to "sweet is not bitter" without it being true of them that they understood the law of non-contradiction. But what Locke in fact says is that "in *Ideas* thus got [through the senses], the Mind discovers, That some agree, and

others differ ... long before it has the use of Words; or comes to that, which we commonly call the *use of Reason*".⁵ Now I don't want to be committed to the thesis that someone could have the law of non-contradiction in his mind long before he came to the use of reason. But there is no need to go that far. We can agree with Locke that a child could distinguish distinct sensory impressions without having to say that at this pre-rational stage, he can assent to the proposition "sweet is not bitter". That is, someone's being sensitive to the difference between bitterness and sweetness is not sufficient for the attribution to him of the proposition "bitter is not sweet". As soon, however, as we can say of someone that he assents to the proposition "sweet is not bitter", we can also say of him that he understands the law of non-contradiction.

The second subtlety of Locke's discussion is in his treatment of self-evidence. In the chapter "Of Maxims", he considers the claim that the mark of an innate principle is that it is self-evident to anyone who understands it: "There are a sort of Propositions, which ... because they are *self-evident*, have been supposed innate".⁶ It seems that Locke equates self-evidence with analyticity. For instance, none of his examples of self-evident propositions are of the sort "I am in pain", which, when true, are contingent though definitely self-evident. He goes on to argue that, if we accept that the maxim "It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be" is innate because it is self-evident (analytic), then we should accept all self-evident (analytic) propositions, such as that yellowness is not

sweetness, as innate on the same grounds. Now, among the class of what are generally called analytic truths, one can distinguish between logical truths and analytic truths which do not have the form of logical truths.⁷ Expressed in the formal mode, it is quite clear that the law of non-contradiction is a logical truth, in that it requires the possession of no concepts other than the truth-functions for its self-evidence. This is not true of other analytic propositions such as that yellowness is not sweetness. To revert to the example "sweet is not bitter", there is a way one could understand this as self-evident without having the concepts of bitterness and sweetness, namely, if one knew the law of non-contradiction and knew also that "bitter" and "sweet" were words of the same category. This is the same as the way in which Dummett says that one could know "'London' denotes London", just by knowing the meaning of "denotes", without knowing anything thereby about English.⁸ But one would not know different things for each proposition one knew in that way, whereas Locke is obviously worried about how much knowledge we would have to admit as innate if our only criterion were self-evidence. So I think Locke's argument about self-evidence is satisfactorily answered by the distinction between logical and other analytic truths.

Finally, let me say how I think the law of non-contradiction is in the mind. As the title of this paper indicates, the answer is to be sought in the theory of radical interpretation. On such a theory, finding a certain degree of rationality in a person is a pre-condition of treating that person as a subject of propositional attitudes at all. If a person is to be

interpretable, if the ascription to that person of beliefs is to make sense, then that person's beliefs must conform to certain standards of rationality. As Davidson, almost all of whose works deploy this assumption, puts it, "To the extent that we fail to discover a coherent and plausible pattern in the attitudes and actions of others we simply forgo the chance of treating them as persons".⁹ The law of non-contradiction will obviously be part of this minimal rationality required for having beliefs at all. If someone appears to accept a contradiction, we will inevitably try to resolve the issue by supposing that some of his words don't mean what they seem to. If this escape fails and we are forced to suppose that the person really does accept a contradiction, openly and knowingly, to that extent the force of the attribution to him of all his beliefs and other attitudes is weakened. If it happens too often, this attribution will simply break down. I don't think there is any clear answer to how many knowing and open contradictions someone could be credited with before we ceased to think of him as believing anything, but it is not to be expected that there should be. Davidson's theory is, in effect, just the opposite of the Substantial Presence Theory, and abandoning this theory is bound to have the consequence that we forgo the clear-cut "scientific" answers which it would have offered. Instead, we enter the more fluid world of interpretation.

Let me just say that this view is distinct from Leibniz's objection to Locke's view that we can reason that bitter is not sweet without having in mind the law of non-contradiction,

namely, that "we use these maxims without having them explicitly in mind. It is rather like the way in which one has potentially in mind the suppressed premisses in enthymemes, which are omitted in our thinking of the argument as well as in our outward expression of it".¹⁰ I am making no claim about the person's reasoning in arriving at the knowledge that bitter is not sweet, especially not that he is using a suppressed premiss. On the other hand, Leibniz also seems to have a different view which perhaps comes closer to the position I am advocating (though I think it is still different) when he says "we shouldn't here be contrasting the axiom with the example, as though they were different truths in this respect ..., but rather regarding the axiom as embodied in the example and as making the example true".¹¹

The position, then, on the law of non-contradiction is not that it is co-incidental with the acquisition of reason, in the sense that it is the first belief we assent to, or that its components are the first concepts we acquire, but rather that its ascription to someone is a pre-condition of attributing to that person any beliefs at all. As I indicated at the outset, it is of little importance whether or not we call this a form of innateness. What is important is that there seems to be a way of a proposition's being in the mind which Locke failed to recognize, and that this failure was encouraged by, or exemplified by, his image of propositions as imprinted on the mind, that is, his acceptance of the Substantial Presence Theory.

Notes

- ¹ *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I,ii,5; 50(37-) (all references are to the O.U.P. edition by Nidditch).
- ² See, e.g. I,iv,14 and 15.
- ³ I,iv,3; 85 (29).
- ⁴ III,vii,3-4; 472 (21-).
- ⁵ I,ii,15; 55 (19-).
- ⁶ IV,vii,1; 591 (6-).
- ⁷ Quine, for instance, makes such a distinction in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism". (*From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P.), rev. ed., 1961, pp. 22-3).
- ⁸ "What is a Theory of Meaning" in S. Guttenplan (ed.), *Mind and Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1975, pp. 106-7.
- ⁹ "Mental Events" in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1980, pp. 221-2.
- ¹⁰ Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* Bk.I, ch.i, transl. P. Remnant & J. Bennett (Cambridge: University Press), 1981, p. 76.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, IV,vii; p. 413. See N. Jolley, *Leibniz and Locke: A Study of the New Essays on Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1984, pp. 172-3, for a discussion of the difference between Leibniz's two positions.

THE SAME SELF

Roger Gallie

Section 1

According to Thomas Reid all mankind place their personality in something that cannot be divided, or consist of parts. As he says in [1] Essay III, chapter IV

My personal identity, therefore, implies the continued existence of that indivisible thing which I call myself.

Reid continues in the next sentence of this paragraph

Whatever this self may be, it is something which thinks, and deliberates, and resolves, and acts, and suffers. I am not thought, I am not action, I am not feeling; I am something that thinks, and acts and suffers.

and so clinches the case for it being correct to classify his account of the continuance of a single self as being an account based on unity of substance, to use the phrase employed by Locke in his Essay, II.xxvii.7 (all quotations from the Yolton edition).