Anticipations - Justice & Divine Nature

Post by “Cassius” of August 16, 2021 at 12:10 PM

At the risk of quoting too long an excerpt, I need to insert here the reference I have cited before as I think articulating the best way forward in understanding the difference between an "innate idea" versus an "innate principle." This is from Jackson Barwis' book against John Locke's view of innate ideas, and it is the most clear presentation of this issue I have found. I think Barwis is essentially stating the position Epicurus was describing.

This also addresses the argument which immediately must be confronted by anyone who asserts that there are truly innate "ideas." They must be confronted immediately with the question: "Well, then, give me a list of them!"

All this comes from Barwis's "Dialogues On Innate Principles"

> Quote
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> Mr. Locke then, you know, returned I, has used several ways to prove that we have no innate principles: and though I clearly see that your arguments do make generally against them all; yet I shall be better satisfied if you will permit me to particularize some of them, if it be only to hear, from you, a refutation of them.
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> He bowed.
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> You know, continued I, Mr. Locke advances that principles cannot be innate unless their ideas be also innate. "For, says he, if the ideas be not innate, there was a time when the mind was without those principles; and then they will not be innate, but be derived from some other original. For where the ideas themselves are not, there can be no knowledge, no assent, no mental or verbal propositions about them."
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> Now is there nothing in what he advances in this place that will affect your doctrine of innate principles?
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> I think not, answered he.
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> For granting that we have no innate ideas, it is by no means from thence follow, as he says, then we have no innate principles. Ideas, simply considered, are very different things from innate moral principles, or from any other principles, which constitute the nature of things. If I have not already shown, I will, by and by, endeavor more clearly to show that the propositions we compose according to our idea of things are nothing but propositions; they are not really the principles of the things treated of: the principles of the things treated of are naturally inherent and exist perpetually in them whether our

ideas or propositions concerning them be true or false.

But in the part quoted there is a fallacy. He says, "if the ideas be not unique, there was a time when the mind was without those principles." The conclusion, you see, is vague and delusive. The only just conclusion he could have drawn was, that if the ideas be not innate, there was a time when the mind was without those ideas, out of which the propositions are formed, which I call principles. I doubt not that you perceive they are very improperly so called in the present question. For Mr. Locke thus confounds the principles of our nature, and the ideas contained in the propositions he names, together, as if they were the same things: but they cannot be so, because the one receives existence from the prior existence of the other. That is, our moral ideas receive their existence from the prior existence of our innate moral sentiments or principles: as our ideas of light and figure are derived from the prior existence of sight.

In this question the matter, as too frequently happens, has been puzzled and obscured by the misuse of words. Axioms, and allowed propositions, are called principles. But they are only principles formed by the human mind, in aid of its own weakness; which, in reasoning, can proceed but a little way without proved or granted propositions to rest on. They might, perhaps, with much more propriety, be called helps, assistances, or supports to the imbecility of the human mind, than principles of things. The principles which naturally inhere in every species of created beings are of a nature entirely different.

It seems, then, said I, that you agree with Mr. Locke that neither ideas or propositions can be innate: but you differ from him by denying any propositions what so ever to be properly the principles of any species of beings; and by affirming that both speculative and practical propositions are mere creatures of human invention; which whether they be true or false, that is, founded in the nature of things or not, the true natures and principles of things remain unalterably the same.

That is my meaning, replied he, and that, therefore, most of the arguments advanced by Mr. Locke against innate principles are nothing, or but very little, to the purpose; because they only tend to combat things as innate principles which are nothing like innate principles; and, if it be not too bold a thing to say of so penetrating a genius, he seems only to have been fighting with a phantom of his own creating.

Indeed, highly as I think of his genius and integrity, I should have much doubted of his sincerity in this doctrine if we had not frequently seen men of the first rate abilities suffer themselves to be carried into great absurdities by their fondness for a favorite system, or, by too hasty a desire of forming a perfect one.

It is certain, however, that nothing can be more excellent than his work as far as it regards our manner of acquiring ideas by sensation and reflection. But what should move him to advance that we have no other way of acquiring ideas; why he should

exclude our moral sense and deny even its existence with the pains of so much acute false reasoning, I shall not, at present, endeavor to explain. But having so determined, he found it necessary to remove all notions of innate moral principles (and with them, all other innate principles) out of the way, in the beginning of his book: for had they been granted, another source of ideas must have been admitted besides those of sensation and reflection as explained by Mr. Locke. And I shall not hesitate to affirm that a clear and indisputable explication of this mode of acquiring ideas would have cost him much more pains in trouble than all the rest of his most ingenious work. For human actions and opinions, in the ordinary course of things, pass away in so rapid a succession as to leave no lasting traces behind them; nothing fixed to which we may refer for a renewal or a correction of our moral ideas concerning them, if our memory prove deficient. And, unless they be recorded with extraordinary accuracy, they can seldom be contemplated a second time in precisely the same light in which they were viewed at the first.

But all those ideas which arise in our minds by the impressions which external things make upon our senses being derived from objects of fixed and lasting natures, when our memory fails us, when we doubt the clearness or precision of our ideas, we can, generally, refer with ease to the objects themselves, and can renew, or rectify, our ideas at pleasure. This renders geometry so certain and indisputable as science: for the least variation or incorrectness in our ideas may be discovered and corrected by recurring to the figures themselves, which, through the medium of sight, convey invariably the same ideas to the mind. Nor is there any impediment, anything naturally interesting to our affections, in the nature of the things themselves, that should make us see them falsely or apply them irrationally.

But it is not so in moral science; it more closely concerns and is more deeply interesting to us in every point of view: it therefore throws more impediments in our way to a right understanding and clear comprehension of its truths. Our early-imbibed prejudices, misplaced affections, ill-governed passions, and jarring interests, distort and falsify our ideas in moral subjects extremely, nor can a just and natural representation of our moral sentiments or feelings take place in our minds until those delusive and turbulent enemies to moral truth be subdued or properly corrected. And also to men whose affections and passions are duly tempered, and minds naturally adjusted, moral truths may be as clear as mathematical ones, yet, from the unhappy circumstances above-mentioned, they are generally much more clouded and obscured; and are, therefore, perpetually subjected to tedious and unpleasant disputations: a very untoward and disgusting circumstance without a doubt.

But which you think, replied I, not enough so to have caused Mr. Locke to deny the existence of innate moral principles; things so essentially interesting to the calls of virtue: and which, you consider as a source of ideas, not comprehended in what he understands by sensation and reflection.

> And are you not of the same mind, interrogated he, in a lively tone?
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> At present I am, answered I, but yet I must bid with Mr. Locke to be more clearly informed concerning the nature of those innate principles; for, says he, "nobody has yet ventured to give a catalogue of them."
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> By the demand of a catalog of them, said my friend, he seems only to expect a string of moral maxims or propositions: but these, we have agreed, with him, are not innate principles: we have agreed that they are not properly principles of things at all. But, before we attempt to explain farther what we mean by innate moral principles, it may not be improper to endeavor to define what we would be understood to signify by the word principle, so far, at least, as it regards our present inquiry: and so, perhaps, when we come to speak of any innate principle, after describing it as well as we can, we may be allowed to say what Mr. Locke says of the faculty of perception, which I presume is innate, viz. “who ever reflects on what passes in his own mind cannot miss it; and if he does not reflect, all the words in the world cannot make him have any notion of it.” So, our moral principles be innate, and of a simple nature, when we would describe the sensations or sentiments they produce in us; if by turning men's minds inward upon their own feelings we cannot make them perceive what they are, words in any other view will be vain and useless. Yet in essentials all men must be sensible of them, and capable of perceiving them, clearly enough, in plain, practical cases, for all the good purposes of human life: except, indeed, such persons as Mr. Locke very strangely, not to say preposterously, selects as the most likely to preserve a pure and perfect sense of them: viz. idiots, infants, and madmen.
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> He was going to proceed in the definition of his meaning by the word principle when finding we were just at home, he declined it to another opportunity; to which I assented, on a promise that it should be early next morning. And thus ended our first dialogue.
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