

Episode Ninety-Nine - The Epicurean View of Justice (Part Two)

Post by "Cassius" of December 11, 2021 at 6:08 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Cassius I agree with what you've written but I do question this quote. First, are you saying that we actually categorize something as part of a preconception? That seems to me to be done using reason: I understand a preconception as being more "primitive" than that, more akin to a sensation or feeling.

Yes I agree with your point Godfrey. Whatever we are talking about has to be pre-rational. As I think about it further I think in the past I may have suggested an analogy with the way that the eyes and ears work -- they see and hear within a range of naturally determined "wavelengths" and within those ranges they perceive in certain ways - colors for example.

We can't be talking about rational categorization as for example Aristotle does with his logic. We have to be talking about something inherent in the mechanism of the human mind that is tuned to perceive relationships that we otherwise would not even perceive as significant.

Do I recall that there are examples such as whether animals looking at a TV screen even perceive the images on them? I am thinking that this mechanism must be some kind of tendency to recognize something specific (like the eyes see light and the ears hear sound) but that it functions in the field of abstract relationships. I seem to recall that was DeWitt's suggestion, though I think when he talks about it he strays too far and seems to talk about ideas themselves.

This is where I go back to that article from [Jackson Barwis written in criticism of John Locke's \(and others'\) Blank Slate](#) theory. Barwis' point is that just because we aren't born with "ideas," that doesn't mean we aren't born with "principles of function" that precede and allow us to develop ideas from those principles:

Quote

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.”

Now is there nothing in what he advances in this place that will affect your doctrine of innate principles?

I think not, answered he.

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.

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As those who have been here long enough know, I highly recommend the entire essay by Barwis - "[Dialogue on Innate Principles.](#)" My view has been for a while, and continues to be, that working with Barwis' core point it's possible to reconstruct a very possible description of the path that Epicurus was taking on anticipations as a PRE-conceptual ("pre-ideas") faculty.

DIALOGUES CONCERNING INNATE PRINCIPLES.

CONTAINING
AN EXAMINATION OF MR. LOCKE'S
DOCTRINE ON THAT SUBJECT.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
THREE DIALOGUES CONCERNING LIBERTY.

*Mensurae arbitrarie conscientiam metus sunt, quae ab illis immortalibus accipiuntur, quae a nobis deus non potest
quae a optimorum conditionum atque factorum totis in oculis vultu erit, sine ulla metus et timore cum honestate vitiosa.*

*...And must think that consciousness implanted in our minds, which we have received from the immortal gods, and which cannot be taken
from us, to be the most powerful motive of all. And if that is a witness of virtuous maxims and virtuous actions throughout our whole lives,
we shall live without any fear, and in the greatest honor.*

CICERO, Octavius pro et CLAUDIUS.