

LOCKE: AN EMPIRICIST?

Terence Moore

Terence Moore explains why Locke is perhaps not quite the “empiricist” many suppose him to be.

In this fourth conversation between a resurrected Locke and the linguist, Terence Moore, Locke vigorously rebuts the oft-repeated claim that he’s an out-and-out empiricist, the so-called ‘Father of British Empiricism.’ The rebuttal focuses on the distinction Locke draws between innate principles and innate faculties. Locke does not, as is commonly believed, view the mind as a *tabula rasa*. The rebuttal, however, is much more than an argument with those critics who appear not to recognise just how fundamental an innatist he is. For Locke the charge of empiricism amounts to an implicit attack on one of his most cherished convictions: that we should think for ourselves. His was the voice of the independent mind.

Moore: You’re fuming, steaming. What’s happened to that cool, disciplined reflection I so admire in you?

Locke: I’ve just been reading books about me in your library. I never would have believed I could be so misunderstood! By philosophers, by historians of philosophy, by encyclopedists. They’ve all got it completely wrong.

Moore: No wonder you’re fuming. What exactly have they misunderstood?

Locke: Where I stand on the mind. They all charge me with being an out-and-out empiricist. Or worse in the encyclopedias, ‘The Father of British Empiricism.’ Simply because I attack one very particular kind of innatism they seem to assume I’m against any idea of a mind endowed with innate faculties. Over and over again they claim one of my central arguments in the Essay is that the human mind is a blank slate. You even own a book whose title is ‘The

Blank Slate.’ ‘Tabula rasa’ is another phrase they attribute to me more times than I’ve had hot luncheons. Isn’t that the modern expression?

Moore: Not quite, but I get your drift.

Locke: I do know someone who referred to the mind as a ‘tabula rasa’, but it wasn’t me. Can you manage a bit of Latin?

Moore: In my day you had to pass a Latin exam to be allowed into Cambridge.

Locke: Then you’ll understand Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologica* Thomas wrote, ‘Intellectus autem humanus . . . est sicut tabula rasa in qua nihil est scriptum.’

Moore: The human mind is a blank slate on which nothing is written.

Locke: Good enough. But here’s a challenge: find me describing the mind as a ‘tabula rasa’ anywhere in the Essay.

Moore: I’m not picking up that gauntlet. A toothcomb search I tried some time ago failed utterly to produce either a ‘tabula rasa’ or a ‘blank slate’ anywhere in the ‘Essay Concerning Human Understanding.’

Locke: Exactly!

Moore: However I did spot something that might begin to explain how the popular misconception might have arisen.

Locke: Ah?

Moore: It was something you wrote at the beginning of Book II about the mind and white paper. But first I want to try and dispel your gloom about how history has treated you. The fact is that not everyone has misunderstood you.

Locke: You mean there are some enlightened ones?

Moore: One of them is Thomas Ebenezer Webb.

Locke: Thomas who? Never heard of him.

Moore: I admit he’s not all that well-known as a philosopher. But in the mid-nineteenth century he wrote an essay entitled ‘The Intellectualism of Locke.’ I suspect you’d appreciate his opening sentence.

Locke: Go on.

Moore: He begins, ‘What if the Empiricism of Locke be one of the ‘fables convenues’ of Philosophy?’ And then

goes on to add, 'This is the fact which it is the object of this Essay to establish, and it is on the establishment of this fact that I rest Locke's claim to be regarded as a great thinker.' That's Webb's opening salvo!

Locke: Obviously a great philosopher – clearly a man who thought his own thoughts. He at least must have recognised how significant for my view of how the mind works were its innate operations – operations springing, I wrote, from the Fountain of Reflection. I must read this Essay.

Moore: I'll see if I can get you a copy. But he wasn't the only one. I realise you're not a fan of Leibniz but I don't believe he would ever have labelled you as an empiricist.

Locke: Because?

Moore: The reason's in a letter he wrote – I forget to whom – in which there's a succinct one-sentence summary of your view of the mind.

Locke: I'd like to hear that sentence.

Moore: It's in Latin!

Locke: I think I can manage!

Moore: It runs, 'Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit prius in sensu, nisi ipse intellectus.'

Locke: Nothing is in the mind that was not first in the senses, except the mind itself. Nisi ipse intellectus. Leibniz, like the inestimable Webb, seems to recognise I saw the mind as innately endowed to reflect on its own processes. I still can't understand why everyone else could get it so wrong. Don't you think my second Fountain, the Fountain of Reflection, spelled it out clearly enough?

Moore: I do now. But I didn't always grasp the subtlety of your ideas. It was only after a close reading of the Essay that I began to see how your enquiry into the original, certainty and extent of human knowledge depended upon your two Fountains, the Fountain of Sensation and the Fountain of Reflection, continuously interacting. From the start you had them working in tandem.

Locke: In tandem. I like that. You're right of course. The two Fountains are interacting all the time, feeding off each

other. The mind's innate operations are needed to work with the experiences the senses provide. For instance, ideas we come to name 'heat', 'cold', 'soft', 'hard', 'bitter', 'sweet' are a consequence of the workings of the mind.

Moore: You saw the role of the Sensation as initiating, triggering innate processes in the mind.

Locke: Triggering, yes. But I never claimed the triggering in any way determined the directions the mind's operations took. More importantly the interaction between the two Fountains is an ongoing process. If you must have a label, call me an interactionist!

Moore: I will, but I suspect the empiricist label has stuck because of something you wrote. You did say, did you not, that all Knowledge comes from Experience.

Locke: I did. It was my one-word answer to my own rhetorical question: where does all our knowledge come from?

Moore: We're now talking about how your answer was understood. You, above all, know we're on a risk gradient trying to understand the language of another – sometimes we get it right, sometimes disastrously wrong. You knew what you had in mind by 'Experience'. Your idea embraced both what comes to us via the senses and from innate operations of the mind. But if you were understood to mean simply responses to the world from the senses, then crudely you're going to be labelled an empiricist, deriving all knowledge from one Fountain the fountain of Sensation. You did after all overwrite Experience in places.

Locke: Where exactly?

Moore: Let me read you a passage from Book II: 'All those sublime Thoughts, which tower above the Clouds, and reach as high as Heaven itself, take their Rise and Footing here (in Experience)'.

Locke: Be fair. Don't stop. 'In those remote Speculations, . . . it stirs not one jot beyond those Ideas which Sense or Reflection have offered for its Contemplation.' Sense or Reflection. Not the one or the other but both interacting.

Moore: I realise that now. For you the combination of sensory and reflective experience is essential if any

knowledge is ever to be gained. Perhaps you underwrote the role of the Fountain of Reflection.

Locke: I don't think so.

Moore: I said a bit earlier I'd spotted something you wrote that may be responsible for the enduring label 'empiricist.' You do recall the statement about the Mind and white paper.

Locke: It wasn't a statement, it was a supposition. I never claimed the Mind was like white paper. What I did in Book II was challenge what was at the time a received doctrine: that Men have innate principles and innate ideas, not based on prior experience, stamped on their Minds.

Moore: I shouldn't have said 'statement.' I should have said 'conjecture.'

Locke: Right. An Aunt Sally of a conjecture, you might say. Is that right?

Moore: Something put up to knock down. Yes.

Locke: Good. What I wrote was *if – if* we were to suppose the Mind were like white paper, then I argued we would have a serious problem. It would be impossible to explain how all the Ideas, fanciful as well as reasonable, we come to have ever arose. Ergo the conjecture is false. The Mind is not like white paper, it must be endowed with its own innate operations.

Moore: Perhaps here we getting close to the source of the popular misconception of you as a champion empiricist. Book I of the Essay is commonly read as a sustained diatribe against innateness. But actually you are supporting it up to the hilt.

Locke: Book I is a bit of a tirade I admit against one kind of innateness. But one kind only. Distinctions, distinctions. You must distinguish between two kinds of innateness. One I will attack with the last breath of my body, the other I will defend to the death.

Moore: I sometimes think the imperative 'Distinguish' should be carved on your headstone. Teach me to distinguish the good and the bad kind of innateness.

Locke: Basically for me the crucial distinction lies between those whose camp is erected on the belief that

principles and notions are innate, and those like myself who believe the mind has no innate principles or notions, but is innately endowed with operations, processes. Lord Herbert is a good example of the first camp.

Moore: Lord Herbert of Cherbury?.

Locke: Yes. His 'De veritate' is a clear example of those who claim principles are native inscriptions imprinted on the Mind. In Book I the innateness I worked hard to subvert was the established opinion among some men that human beings are born knowing things about the world.

Moore: Such as?

Locke: 'Impossible est idem, et non esse.'

Moore: Roughly construed: it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be.

Locke: Not too rough. Another often cited as an innate Principle was: 'Whatever is, is.'

Moore: True enough.

Locke: Truth alone is not sufficient to establish innateness. The confusion I argued lay in treating what is universally accepted as equivalent to innately given. Universal consent can be arrived at by other ways.

Moore: By the use of reason for instance?

Locke: Exactly. Granted the principle 'What is, is' is self-evident, but that's not necessarily because it is inscribed on our brains, but because any consideration of the nature of things excited by those words would not permit a reader to think otherwise, how or whensoever he is brought to reflect on them. I believe it's moral rules that most readily undermine the idea of innate principles inscribed on our Minds. Take as one example: 'Parents preserve and cherish their children.' Is this supposed to be an innate rule that directs the actions of all men? Or else a truth all men have imprinted upon their Minds?

Moore: Do we have to re-visit those grisly tales you told of the inhabitants of Mingrelia and Peru?

Locke: Well, the Mingrelians are reported to have buried their children alive, and the Peruvians, Garcillasso de la

Vega states, fattened and ate the children they begot on their female captives and . . .

Moore: Right, right, your point is made. Moral principles are matters for cultures. Not all parents live in cultures where the morality demands they universally preserve and cherish their children. It's said the Spartans placed their babes on the roof at night to see if they were robust enough to survive.

Locke: I never imagined that was a Greek practice.

Moore: I sense for you, however, there's something deeper, more fundamental involved in the issue of what is and what is not to count as innate. Isn't it much more than an intellectual disagreement about what exactly we should believe is innately imprinted?

Locke: You're right of course. It's not so much these claims themselves that disturb me as the practical consequences that may follow. Professing innate principles lends considerable powers to the professors.

Moore: In what way?

Locke: Consider the role of a Teacher. Consider what power he gains once he firmly believes there are principles innately inscribed on our minds and he knows what they are.

Moore: I recall now. You bring Book I to a close with a moving and cogent philippic against authoritarian teaching.

Locke: I don't remember exactly. I believe I did.

Moore: Let me quote you. 'It is no small advantage to those who affected to be Masters and Teachers to make this the Principle of Principles, That Principles must not be questioned; For having once established this Tenet, that there are innate Principles, it put their Followers upon the necessity of receiving some Doctrines as such; which was to take them off the use of their own reason and judgement, and put them upon believing and taking them upon trust, without further examination.

Locke: I recall the passage now. It runs on, 'In which posture of blind credulity, they might be more easily governed by, and made useful to some sort of Men, who had the skill and office to principle and guide them . . .'

Moore: '...a posture of blind credulity...', I've long cherished that phrase. But you haven't finished your appeal to the independent mind. It's not only teachers, but those in authority who benefit. 'Nor is it', you write, 'a small power it gives one Man over another, to have the Authority to be the Dictator of Principles, and Teacher of unquestionable truths; and to make a Man swallow that for an innate principle, which may serve to his purpose, who teacheth them.' Magnificent!

Locke: It's what I believe. We should strive to think for ourselves.

Moore: After reading it, I composed a maxim for myself and for my students: 'Suspend judgement, examine the evidence.'

Locke: I never said that. I wish I had. I could have made it an epigraph for my book 'Some Thoughts on Education.'

Moore: So to return to innatism. The innatism Book I derides is the innatism that assumes we are innately endowed with Principles and Notions. The innatism you favour assumes the mind is innately endowed not with principles and notions but with certain operations.

Locke: Specifically the ones I discuss under the Fountain of Reflection. One of the most important of those operations is our ability to abstract, to quit particulars. Your Chomsky I think, if I read 'Cartesian Linguistics' aright, would agree. He writes about our freedom from stimuli.

Moore: He certainly makes the point very strongly that our use of language shows us to be stimulus free, not stimulus-bound, beings. So you're not an empiricist, certainly not the 'Father of Empiricism.' What shall I call you?

Locke: Since I hold the way to Understanding lies through the powers of our Minds working in tandem with the Organs of our Bodies, how about in your language calling me an empirical rationalist, or a rational empiricist?

Moore: An oxymoron will do fine to end on. Till next week.

Terence Moore is a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge.