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Abstract Ideas and the Possibility of Science in Locke's *Essay*: A Comparison of Lockean and Aristotelean Empiricism

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The possibility of science is threatened by a categorical distinction between abstract ideas and real essences, a division which reduces knowledge to mental or linguistic constructions, detached from the reality of beings and their causes. Yet in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke argues at III.III.13 that ideas must be distinct from real essences lest a conflict of identity occur. Without this distinction, according to Locke, we are forced to posit multiple essences of a single thing, one which will be known, the other unknown. The basis for his argument is twofold. First, ideas are different than other entities. Second, this difference is an essential difference. In so arguing, Locke departs from Aristotelean empiricism, undermining any scientific enterprise. This paper will provide an analysis of Locke's argument, exploring its context, its structure, and its implications in light of traditional Aristotelean empiricism.

First, this paper will explore the context of Locke's epistemology. Second, the form of the argument at III.III.13 will be analyzed. The argument will be contrasted with Aristotle's own manner of relating understanding and real essence. The paper will conclude by comparing Aristotelean and Lockean empiricism, clarifying how an Aristotelean understanding of experience and essence makes real science possible.

The Context

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding is to some extent Locke's response to Descartes' metaphysical project. In an attempt to gird up the foundations of faith and science, Descartes utilized doubt as a method to discover what could be held with certainty. In the process, he initiated a well-known dualism which set mental reality in strict opposition to that of material. This dualism not only posits an ontological divide between the two kinds of being, but leaves the

mind in solipsistic and skeptical isolation. It is questionable whether unity is ever satisfactorily restored by Descartes.

Locke's *Essay* represents an attempt to correct Cartesian rationalism; yet Locke's philosophy reproduces, in its own manner, the dualism between the mental and the real. This dualism is especially apparent in Locke's distinction between ideas and real essences. While Locke arrives at this distinction, in part, because he accepts the Cartesian distinction between the mental and real, his own metaphysical and psycho-epistemic system contributes significantly to the argument.

Rejecting rationalism, the primacy of mind secluded from sense and experience, casting aside innate ideas, Locke defends an empiricist epistemology which in some respects strives to bridge the Cartesian gap. The mind is no longer isolated, working up mathematically from its own foundations; instead, all that it thinks begins with the senses.

His empiricism echoes Aristotle's own order of learning and experience; yet, we can point to two significant differences. First, the mind remains not only distinct from, but even alien in nature to the material world. Second, the mind passively experiences only simple ideas—it has no receptive experience of wholes or substance. Lockean empiricism means that we have no capacity to receive impressions of wholes, nor are such wholes in themselves primary. He advocates a corpuscular-materialism which views non-mental beings as qualitative aggregates, composite arrangements of matter. Substance is therefore a mental abstraction, useful for sorting. While Locke maintains that the mind receives all that it thinks from experience, the mind does not experience things or beings per say.

We can note thus far that aspects of Aristotle's empiricism might be harmonized with what Locke has argued. For Aristotle, all that we know is also first in the senses. For Aristotle

also, we do not sense substance; we sense sensations (or the sensible), and through abstraction arrive at a knowledge of universals. But for Aristotle, the form or whole is always what structures a sensation and is communicated through the sensible. Substance or form is not first to us, but it is first in itself, the cause and principle of what we sense. In Locke's version of empiricism, substance ceases to play this role, and there remains a fundamental gap between mental experience and real existence. Experience is no longer the reception of a whole through sensible quality; rather, quality is itself fundamental. Matter is no longer the particular material of some transcendent unity; rather it is significant qua matter. Such matter can affect the mind, but does not itself communicate with mind.

The Argument

Locke's distinction between abstract ideas and real essences naturally follows upon what has been rehearsed: the mental/material divide, corpuscular materialism, the nature of secondary qualities, and the nominal character of substance. His representationalism not only follows upon, but clarifies these elements of his philosophy, showing the extent to which he departs from Aristotle. Abstract ideas and real essences must be different, so Locke argues: if not, there would be two distinct essences of a single thing, one mental, the other real, making essence approximate or fluid.

> Real essences of substances, if different from our abstract ideas, cannot be the essences of the species we rank things into. For two species may be one as rationally, as two different essences be the essence of one species; and I demand what are the alterations may or may not be in a horse or lead, without making either of them to be of another species? In determining the species of things by our abstract ideas, this is easy to resolve: but if any one will regulate himself herein by supposed real essences, he will, I suppose, be at a

> loss; and he will never be able to know when any thing precisely ceases to be of the species of a horse or lead.[1]

Locke begins with the assumption that that which is *in* the mind is not that which is *in* a thing; therefore, whatever is in the mind, it cannot be a real essence. While this argument is valid, it may be so ambiguously, relying upon a specific construal of essence, of mind, and of distinction itself—a construal clearly shaped by the overarching assumptions of the *Essay*.

For Locke, the unique character of ideas (as mental) establishes a prima facia difference between them and things, as well as the essences of things. An idea is in the mind; therefore, it is not the essence which is in or construes an actual being. Whatever Locke means by describing real essence as "inner nature" at III.III.15, he assumes that once such an essence is posited to exist 'out-there', it cannot be that which is 'in-here'. If we insist an abstract idea is *also* the essence of a thing, we de-essentialize essence by multiplying it. Because they are two, they are not one. This is a relatively straightforward argument for difference; yet it should be noted, difference here must approach the absolute—however small the divergence. An idea and a real essence must be distinct *essentially* if the argument is to be unambiguously valid.

Disregarding the material-mental distinction for a moment, the argument certainly follows if essence is merely the total aggregate of a material being. In such a case, any distinction or lack of totality in our knowledge would represent an essential divergence. But such a construal of essence suggests that all essence is particular, only approximating other similar essences. In such a case, essence represents not a universal or nature, but a summation of an individual. In this light, the active work of generalizing, approximating, and sorting, which Locke attributes to the understanding, takes on great import.

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[1] John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III, 3, 13, In *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, 2nd edition, Ed. Roger Ariew & Eric Watkins, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009, 380.

While Locke does not deny there are kinds in nature, and even an "inner nature," he falls short of saying such is universal or causative.[2] Even when God attains to knowledge of real essence, He does so having perfect aggregate knowledge *about* beings, not by grasping the source of that which is a universal and unifying cause.[3] That which is known is never depicted by Locke as a cause of being (though the analogy of the watchmaker is suggestive), but rather a more or less accurate summation.[4] Locke maintains a version of representationalism by arguing that ideas are only *about* things; they are not their formal identity or nature.

A Divergence

This read of essence and understanding is a decisive break with Aristotelean philosophy. The natural world for Aristotle functions according to the reproduction and multiplicity of sameness which is ordered and caused by unity of form—form which is psychically communicable. Distinction in the material world, numerical difference, for Aristotle, is governed by sameness, often an essential sameness, so that a distinction of number does not prima facia mean a distinction of kind. For Aristotle, the distinction between thought and real essence need not ipso facto constitute essential distinction. A conclusion of this sort is only necessary if one insists that essence is a non-mental (or a never-mental) reality, that is, if essence or form is something alien

[2] Essence for Locke may mean the mysterious "inner-nature." But in such a case it remains not only mysterious, but actually unknown. There is tension between his aggregate account of being and this other conception of essence which is seems not to be the Aristotelean whole or substance, but a hidden cause or meaning. This has inspired some to characterize essence as a meaningless thing hidden in a box.

[3] This is further illustrated in Locke's discussion of the scholastic use of species and genus. While he maintains the existence of real essence, he rejects the effectiveness and accuracy of definition or knowledge by species and genus. This suggests the being of a thing is no longer understood to be formal. Cf. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* In *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, 2nd edition, Ed. Roger Ariew & Eric Watkins, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009.

[4] III.VI.3; III.VI.39; A watchmaker would both know the idea because of empirical experience and having been the maker. Locke does not bring these two aspects together in the *Essay.* Cf. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* In *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, 2nd edition, Ed. Roger Ariew & Eric Watkins, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009.

to mind. Such would bar us from the natural sciences—if science is knowledge of nature and not simply a mental construct.[5]

Such is not the case for Aristotle to whom being means being knowable.[6] The possibility of coherent science depends on the intelligibility of things. Conversely, science and art are evidence that the world is intelligible. The Aristotelean principle of being is, in part, formal order, and formal order for Aristotle is by nature logically or mentally graspable. There is no essential transformation to real essence when it comes to be known in the mind. For Aristotle, the abstraction which occurs in an act of understanding is not constructive or artificial but reductive, distinguishing between particulars, accidents, and that which is universal. It is in Modern Representationalism that ideas cease to be the forms of real things, in which ideas become likely mental constructs, essentially distinct from real essences.

For Locke, abstraction must be constructive because of what he believes about mind and matter. Consequently, substance is only a nominal or mental reality. Human knowledge is the result of how the mind construes, sorts, and consequently speaks about being. Our knowledge is not in*formed* by the world, being passively receptive to its formal realities; rather, knowledge is the creative activity of the mind which composes and originates abstract ideas. Unity is no longer transcendent; it mentally assembled. In this context, the mind is no longer "the place of forms," or "potentially all things"; it is a stranger in a strange land.[7] It is no longer capable of what amounts to a kind of cosmic participation, but attains to knowledge through an empiricism which ironically discovers only its own constructs.

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[5] Perhaps Kant's project picks up with just such an assumption.

[6] For the Christian, this is because the source and pattern of being is Logos (Col. 1:16; John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:1-3). While Aristotle cannot ascribe such a source to all being, he yet orders all being under the structure of form which is a logos or expressible as such.

[7] Aristotle, *On the Soul*, III.4; III.5, in On the Soul & On Memory and Recollection. Translated by Joe Sachs. Santa Fe, New Mexico, Green Lion Press, 2001.

Concluding Thoughts on Lockean vs. Aristotelean Empiricism

Because there is terminological overlap between Aristotle and Locke, 'empirical' and 'experience' have taken on an ambiguity which obscures the significant difference between these modes of science and philosophy. These terms mean something quite different in Modern Philosophy and contemporary jargon than they do in Aristotle.

Implicit in all Aristotelean philosophy is an understanding that being as such is knowable. This underlies his gentler distinction between form and matter, and thus between mind and matter.[8] The mind, a power of an embodied soul, comes to know what it does through the senses, but ultimately through experiences which grasp what is *in* the sensations. Post-Baconian philosophy (Locke as an exemplar of such) alters the meaning of 'experience' and 'empirical.' They are cast forward in the psychological experience to mean sensation or data, not the unification or abstraction of such.[9] For Locke or Bacon, the empirical experience is the immediate, the observable. For Aristotle, the empirical is the discovery of real, but not immediately clear unity. This kind of unity is analogous to how a play can have many events and yet "have for its subject a single action, whole and complete.[10]

Sensing is but the beginning for Aristotle. We sense sensible things, and such sensations make possible our coming to know wholes. These wholes are causative of the sensible, but are

[8] This connection for the Christian is even less structurally problematic. If the source of being is God who is Knowledge and Word. All being which is made through Him has the pattern of word and therefore is not merely existent but exists as knowable and communicable.

[9] Baconian science and experimentation suggests a more complicated view, one in which even the senses cease to be wholly valid, but rather the data of testing, particularly by instrumentation and mathematics. The irony of modern empiricism is its ambivalence toward the senses and experience. Whether or how a ratio remains between senses, experimentation, and theory (the new intelligible) is beyond the power of modern sciences to address.

[10] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 3.23, Transl. by S.H. Butcher, at the Internet Classics Archive, http://classics.mit.edu.

not equivalent to them. It is significant that clarity about such wholes occurs only by and in experience, not sensation. For Aristotle, it not sensation, nor even memory alone, but a unity which takes shape out of them that makes understanding and science possible.

> from memory experience is produced…several memories of the same thing produce finally the capacity for a single experience. And experience seems pretty much like science and art, but really science and art come to men through experience; for 'experience made art', as Polus says, 'but inexperience luck.'"[11]

Aristotle's quotation of Polus is instructive here. An artist or scientist who worked by chance or by the modern sense of experience or sensation would be no more an artist or scientist than a child. Sensory data or the merely 'empirical' is hardly enough for science or philosophy, but is materially necessary for the development of such. The unity which we come to know is a unity we find through the senses, but not by sensing.

Doe this threaten the empirical project by introduction mysticism or rationalism? On the contrary, traditional empiricism prevents knowledge from being atomized into discrete, incoherent moments. Real science depends on unity and stability in nature, and an experience of this unity by the mind. Aristotelean experience (and induction) only threatens the empirical project if we insist essence is never conformable to soul (mind). In doing so, we assume that mind must be unrelated to the vast realities and modes of being which it encounters as knowable. We must reject the testimony of experience which tells us we come to know wholes, over and above their qualities. In doing so, we part ways with Aristotle and Aristotelean psycho-epistemology and embrace a *new* empiricism, one which frustrates the possibility of real science.

[11] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I.1, Transl. by W.D. Ross, at the Internet Classics Archive, http://classics.mit.edu.

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