Why abstraction in classical empiricist theories of concept development does not work: The case of Locke

Abstract

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The mental capacity of abstraction plays a key role in early modern (and, to an extent, contemporary) empiricist theories of concept development. Abstraction is the main tool by which the mind develops general ideas from simple ideas of experience of either sensation or reflection. In my view, empiricists have lost the *battle* with nativists over simple ideas. The claim that simple ideas come from experience is no different from the nativist view that simple ideas are acquired from interaction with the environment due to the structure of the sensory apparatus. At best, the debate over whether this account of the acquisition of simple ideas is empiricist or nativist comes down to a verbal dispute. To me, acknowledging that the acquisition of simple ideas of experience depends on the structure of our sensorium is as strong a nativist claim as it can be. Some contemporary proponents of empiricism concede as much. But the *war* between empiricists and nativists is not settled since a whole lot of other ideas could be counted as learned from experience from simple ideas via the mental operation of abstraction. I find the often-made conclusion that since simple ideas are innate, and the faculty of abstraction is innate, all ideas formed by abstraction are innate way too quick and unsatisfactory. The notion of abstraction deserves more consideration before being dismissed as a proper tool to account for learning new and general ideas. In this paper, I give abstraction the consideration it deserves by examining Locke's account as representative of abstraction in general.

First, in Section 1, I start with a classification of Locke's different accounts of abstraction. The main *purpose* of this classification is to assess the nature, function and plausibility, of the psychological mechanism of abstraction as one of the key elements of empiricist accounts of concept development; and *not* to defend a unitary account of Locke's view on abstraction; or to

decide what kind of mental entities abstract ideas are for Locke; or to assess whether Berkeley's criticisms of Locke were correct.

Second, in Section 2 and 3, after laying out the different versions of abstraction in Locke's writings, I argue that each account of abstraction Locke offers fails for different reasons as a psychological mechanism to explain concept *learning*. Despite the vastity of the literature on abstraction, no direct and focused attention has been given to the psychological process of abstraction itself, mostly because this process seems to be self-evident, natural and available to introspection and because the debate on Locke has been dominated by discussions the *nature* of abstract ideas and their universality. My paper intends to fill this gap in the literature.

Locke, Smith, and Kant on Labor and Self-Ownership

Jeff Edwards

ABSTRACT

This presentation first focuses on two key factors that are crucial for understanding how modern theories of political economy emerged from conceptual terrain cultivated by early modern accounts of the foundations of property law: (1) the different roles played by the ideas of self-ownership and appropriation through labor in John Locke's and Adam Smith's portrayals of the origins of property; and (2) the respective roles played by a labor theory of value in Locke's and Smith explanations of the development of material inequality on the basis of private-property acquisition. After treating these two factors in some depth, I turn to (3) Immanuel Kant's conceptual repudiation of the idea of self-ownership. I conclude by discussing the remarkable, though still largely unappreciated and insufficiently explored, significance of all three factors combined for a later critique of political economy.

"Newtonian Metaphysics in Early American Natural Philosophy"

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Early American Natural Philosophy -- i.e. conceptions of nature developed by European colonial philosophers in the nort/east of North America during the 17th/18th centuries leading up to the American Revolution -- should be of interest to Early Modern scholars for a number of reasons. First, this period seems to mirror or recapitulate conceptual transformations well underway in Europe: the status of mechanism as a guiding principle of natural philosophy, the problematic or unstable role of 'hypotheses' or 'speculation', the relation of God to nature, the laws of nature, space & time, materialism vs. dualism, and the status of the 'new philosophy' in recently founded universities like Yale and Columbia. Second, Early America offers a fruitful case-study of the reception and understanding of Newtonianism among an enthusiastic, well-educated community of scholars who were relatively independent of the longstanding internecine battles among the Newtonians, Cartesians, and Leibnizians of Europe. In Early America, we are presented with a Newtonianism 'off leash'. Third, we might locate in American Newtonianism, the seeds of persistent strains within American philosophy and metaphysics, since then, such as idealism and pragmatism.

This brief discussion will focus on one central but now-obscure figure from this era, Cadwallader Colden (1688-1776), especially his main works in physics, and his correspondence with the Connecticut Berkeleyan Samuel Johnson (1696-1772). I will occasionally mention better-known Early Americans like Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. They were all public intellectuals and/or politicians, and all were influenced by Newton. But the Newtonianism of Colden was deeper, more sustained, and more philosophically ambitious. Furthermore, Colden enjoyed a lengthy and rich correspondence with American and Continental figures, which reveals already the divergent ways the incomparable Mr. Newton's philosophy was understood in the 'new world'.

After studying numerous sciences at Edinburgh, including Newton's mechanics and optics, Cadwallader Colden emigrated to America in 1710, settling in New York, where he became official surveyor, diplomat to the Iroquois, and acting Governor. Despite his public duties, Colden pursued several productive scientific research programs, which were admired by prominent Americans like Benjamin Franklin. His natural philosophy has been touched on by a few American historians but hardly at all by historians of (philosophy of) science. This paper examines his emendations of Newton's physics, set out in *The Principles of Action in Matter* (1751). In particular, I will be concerned with the metaphysical underpinnings of Colden's system and how it depends upon, and departs from, Newton's. I

begin with a brief overview of Colden's physics and astronomy, and then consider in more detail four crucial metaphysical issues at the heart of his natural philosophy:

(1) The Inherent Activity of Matter. According to Colden, inertial motion and rest, collision, and attraction, all involve intrinsic material activity. To this end, Colden introduces three additional forces, each of which ascribe a special 'activity' to three kinds of matter. Ordinary, gross bodies have a *power of resisting.* Light has a *moving power*. For example, light from the sun exerts power to move a planet outwards but the planets own resisting power counteracts this. Ether has a *reacting* or *elastic power*, which communicates the action it receives from any contiguous thing.

(2) God's Relation to the World. An 'Intelligent Being' governs the material universe, but does not create it since God and the world are co-eternal. Nevertheless**,** "the intelligent being is universally diffused in the same manner as space is", i.e. even through all bodies. (Treatise on the Eye, 10: C 124)

(3) Teleology in Science. The organization of the universe suggests an intelligent designer, but matter acts without any guidance. "Nothing in the actions of matter can induce one to think that its action proceeds from any sense, perception, intelligence or will." (P 7, 3; C 89)

(4) Mind and Body. Mind and body are ontologically distinct, yet mind is in space and analogous to space. "Matter can act on spirit to produce ideas (P 7, 17; C 92) and intelligent beings can produce or reduce motion in bodies or change their direction. "(P 7, 17; C 93; Cf. L 30; May 19, 1760; C 237) But intelligence cannot act "in opposition" to material agents." (P 7, 17; C 95)

I conclude with suggestions how Colden's colonial status both empowered and marginalized his scientific program.

P = 1751. *The Principles of Action in Matter*.

L = 1918. *Letters and Papers of Colden*. 9 vols. New York: New York Historical Society.

C = 2004. *Philosophical Writings of Cadwallader Colden.* Edited by Scott L. Pratt and John Ryder. Amherst, NY: Humanity Press.

Descartes' Omissions

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Abstract:

In the *Meditations* Descartes insists that readers closely follow the example and meditating steps set out in this text[1]. Given this emphasis on the right order of reasons, it is at least *prima facie* surprising to also find the following remarks in the *Second Replies:"Moreover there are many truths which although it is vital to be aware of them – this method*[2] *often scarcely mentions since they are transparently clear to anyone who gives them his attention"*[3].

A careful reading of Descartes' works shows that such remarks regarding things left out of Descartes' actual text are far from being unique. This paper aims to classify Descartes' omissions, to inquire into what these omissions tell us about Descartes' approach as well as into whether these omissions shed light on his explicit statements and theses.

The following criteria for classifying omissions emerge from a close look at Descartes' published works: i) content (thematic[4]; relational[5]); ii) scope (substantive: full or partial[6]); iii) means of identification (explicit mention[7]; hints; placement in the text); iv) motivation (political[8]; scientific rigour and intellectual integrity[9]; pedagogical reasons; ignorance[10]); v) intended purpose of omissions (argumentative: ease of reader reception[11]; eliciting reader engagement[12]); vi) who is expected to remedy these omissions (Descartes himself in later works[13]; his readers – very gifted ones[14]; very committed ones[15]).

After discussing and backing up with textual evidence these criteria of classification, I will apply them to Descartes' published works. It will become clear that in the *Discourse* 'less is more' since the work contains substantive omissions both metaphysical and scientific. There are also relational omissions (no deducing of scientific

1 (AT VII, 10; CSM II, 8).

2 analysis, the method used in the *Meditations*

3 (AT VII, 156; CSM II, 110 – emphasis added)

4 (AT I, 411; CSMK 61)

5 (AT VI, 76; CSM I, 150)

6 (AT VII, 11; CSM II, 8); (AT VII, 63; CSM II, 44)

7 (AT VII, 156; CSM II, 110)

8 (AT VI, 40-41; CSM I, 131); (AT VI, 60-61; CSM I, 141-142)

9 (AT VI, 69-70; CSM I, 146-147)

10 (AT IX B, 20; CSM I, 189-190)

11 (AT VII, 7; CSM II, 6-7); (AT I, 350; CSMK 53); (AT I, 530; CSMK 85-86)

12 (AT VII, 156; CSM II, 110 + (AT VII, 158-159; CSM II, 112)

13 (AT VII, 11; CSM II, 8); (AT IXB, 16; CSM I, 187)

14 (AT I, 411; CSMK 61); (AT VI, 71-74; CSM I, 147-149)

15 (AT VII, 11; CSM II, 8)

consequences[16]) and argumentative omissions, both substantive and relational (no explicit arguments against opposing views; putting these arguments together is left to the reader[17])**.**

The *Meditations* can be interpreted as 'more is more' thematically (in metaphysics) but 'less is more' argumentatively. This work contains thematic substantive additions corresponding to the metaphysical omissions of the *Discourse*. There are also argumentative omissions both substantive and relational (enthymemes, litotes, allusions, etc.).

The motto of the *Principles* could be: 'less is more' both thematically and argumentatively in metaphysics and 'more is more' thematically in science. This work contains thematic substantive additions corresponding to some of the scientific omissions of the *Discourse*. There are also thematic substantive omissions since some of the metaphysical topics of the *Meditations* (e.g. doubt) are pared-down.

The 1647 French *Meditations* have no *Preface to the reader*. This is a substantive omission amounting to no opening reading instructions, instructions which were present in the Latin version of this work.

In the *Passions of the Soul* 'more is more' thematically in science (specifically in the physiological underpinnings of the passions) but 'less is more' in ethics (since ethical considerations are interspersed with other concerns[18]).

The paper concludes that Descartes took into account his intended audience and tailored accordingly the content, the style, the tone, the reading instructions as well as the predictions about the likelihood of success of his readers. Audience adaptation is the larger goal Descartes aimed at throughout his works while omissions are an important rhetorical device he used to achieve this larger goal. Descartes' omissions are not instances of slanting since the intent is not to mislead but to increase the readers' chances of correctly grasping the topics addressed. Descartes wrote in an invitational and conversational way using rhetorical and argumentative means, including gaps and omissions, to elicit reader engagement and facilitate uptake[19]. Descartes pursued a large-scale and well-crafted rhetorical strategy emphasizing the replicability of his results as well as the as well as the applicability and adaptability of his insights.

16 (AT VI, 76; CSM I, 150)

17 (AT I, 411; CSMK 61)

18 (AT XI, 326; CSM I, 327); (AT XI, 450; CSM I, 386 a. 159); (AT XI, 449; CSM I, 385 a. 157); (AT XI, 446; CSM I, 384 a. 153)

19 (Tindale , Christopher, *The Philosophy of argument and audience reception*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 190-191).

Spinoza on Eternity and Duration as Extrinsic Denominations

It has recently been argued that for Spinoza there is a causal barrier between God and finite things (Primus, 2024). This conclusion follows from three views commonly attributed to Spinoza: (ii) The Intelligibility of Causation Principle: an effect must be intelligible through its cause; (ii) (Timeless) eternity is a property of God only and duration is a property of finite things only; and (iii) Duration is not intelligible through (timeless) eternity. This paper contends that, although Spinoza accepts (i)-(iii), it doesn't follow that there is a causal barrier between God and finite things. More specifically, I argue that (ii) applies only to intrinsic denominations (i.e. a predicate that is predicated of a thing in virtue of something inherent to that thing), whereas for Spinoza, eternity and duration are extrinsic denominations (i.e., a predicates that is predicated of a thing in virtue of some disposition or relationship, and not of something internal to that thing). This interpretation throws new light upon the nature of eternity and duration and the difficult passages where Spinoza refers to these.

First, I show that for Francisco Suárez (a philosopher whose influence on Descartes and Spinoza finds ample support in contemporary literature), eternity and duration are extrinsic denominations. I support this claim with two pieces of evidence: the fact that Suárez explicitly refers to eternity and duration as extrinsic denominations; and that he uses the distinction of reason (a mental distinction that necessarily implies extrinsic denominations) to distinguish between these properties and things. Second, I argue that Spinoza's use of the term 'extrinsic denominations' and the distinction of reason to distinguish between eternity and duration and things are both consistent with Suárez's. Further, I show that Spinoza's formulations of the definitions of eternity (E1d8) and duration (E2d5) in the *Ethics* are consistent with my interpretation. I conclude by discussing one advantage and one possible objection against my reading. The advantage is that it can successfully accommodate Spinoza's mysterious claims that infinite and finite modes are eternal. The possible objection is that if eternity and duration are only extrinsic denominations, and hence not part of the 'furniture of reality', it is difficult to see how Spinoza can account for motion and change.

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"Not at your bar must sov'reign *Wisdom* stand": Phillis Wheatley's Antitheodicy

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Jill Hernandez (2023) suggests viewing Phillis Wheatley as a philosopher of religion whose poetry offers a reply to the problem of concrete evil. Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in 1772 in London, and she was manumitted shortly after she returned to her home in Boston. Indeed, on "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA," Wheatley emphasizes that being taken to America from Africa enabled her to obtain knowledge of her savior, Christ. Despite that, I will argue that Wheatley's approach to evil is best categorized as antitheodicy.

Theodicy is a response to an apparent conflict between the existence of evil and a perfectly good, wise, and powerful God. Theodicy offers an account of what justifies God's allowing evil without denying the existence of evil or any of God's attributes. Antitheodicy rejects the justificatory project that theodicy assumes, either for moral or conceptual reasons. For example, one might argue that theodicy leads people to trivialize evils. An example of a conceptual critique of theodicy is that it mistakenly presupposes that God's actions are answerable to our understanding of justification. On my interpretation, Wheatley's antitheodicy is best understood as rejecting the intelligibility of seeking God's reasons for allowing evil.

In the elegy "On the Death of J.C. an Infant," Wheatley writes: "Cease your complaints, suspend each rising sigh, Cease to accuse the Ruler of the sky" (Wheatley 2001, 50). She exhorts the parents to cease accusing God. Crucially, Wheatley's antitheodicy is encapsulated in an evocative line, "Not at your bar must sov'reign *Wisdom* stand" (Wheatley 2001, 50). A theodicy approach would assume that we can intelligibly inquire into the reasons by which God acts. Her appeal to different "bars" for human and divine wisdom suggests a rejection of the parity of reason that theodicy assumes.

An objector might argue that the good of knowledge is precisely what Wheatley uses to make sense of why God allowed her to be enslaved. Further, "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA" is not the only place where Wheatley suggests that God's love brought her to America. In a 1772 letter to her friend Arbour Tanner, Wheatley writes that she is thankful for "… God's infinite love in bringing us from a land Semblant of darkness" (Wheatley 2001, 141-142). As a qualification, Hernandez interprets Wheatley as both criticizing the institution of slavery and offering a theodicy. On that view, Wheatley has it that slavery is not justified in itself, but that God allows slavery for the sake of some greater good, e.g., her enlightenment.

I have a reservation about the coherence of combining theodicy with abolitionist critique, as Hernandez's interpretation suggests. Simply put, theodicy justifies slavery as an instrument of enlightenment. If the claim is that enslavement is necessary for knowledge, it has the perverse and implausible implication that some people need to be enslaved to remedy an epistemic deficit, as if they could not learn in any other way. And if enslavement is not necessary for knowledge, then it ceases to provide a justification for God's allowing slavery. Notably, Hernandez emphasizes that Wheatley's theodicy may not be sound, so she may not take the preceding to be

a worry for that interpretation (Hernandez 2023, 119). Setting that aside, the problem is that the objection conflates attributing goodness to creation with appealing to goodness to justify evil.

Wheatley often suggests looking for the good in God's works, especially in "Thoughts on the WORKS of PROVIDENCE." Her theory of providence maintains that we can see God's love in all things, which implies that there is good in all of creation. In fact, in "On being brought from AFRICA to AMERICA," the latter half of the poem suggests that even white slavers can be saved (though this point is veiled due to her precarious position as a slave). Even with respect to morally corrupt slavers, their possibility for redemption reflects God's love. Though we can find some good even in the worst circumstances due to a providential God, that does not mean that God is justified in allowing the evil of slavery based on its enabling enlightenment for Wheatley, or say, offering opportunity for character development for the white slaver. In sum, the conceit of finding God's reasons for allowing slavery assumes access to divine wisdom that we lack.

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Passion, Vice, and Illness: *Lâcheté* in Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*

In article 187 of the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes states that the most generous persons (no doubt correctly, in his view) "consider that no possible accident could be so great a misfortune as the *lâcheté* of those unable to suffer [their misfortunes] with steadfastness." The questions I wish to pursue in this paper are: What exactly is *lâcheté* (variously translated as cowardice, laziness, or timidity, but which I will leave untranslated), according to Descartes? And why does he think it is so bad for us? These questions have not received the attention they deserve by scholars. I hope to show that pursuing them provides important insights both into Descartes' moral psychology and into Cartesian ethics more generally.

This is how I will proceed. I begin with a brief overview of Descartes' general theory of the passions (Section 1). I then turn to his account of what *lâcheté* is (Section 2). I argue that Descartes uses *lâcheté* to refer to three related but still different things. To begin with, it can refer to a specific passion. This passion "is a languor or coldness," Descartes says, "which keeps the soul from being inclined to the execution of the things it would do if it were free of this Passion" (article 174). More specifically, it keeps us from using our free will to choose first to form a firm and determinate judgment about what it would be best for one to do in the circumstances, and then choose to act accordingly. Secondly, *lâcheté* can refer to the habit of thinking about one's condition in the world as hopeless, as being such that it does not really matter what one does since it is not within one's power to ensure that one will avoid failures, illnesses, losses, or other misfortunes. In Descartes' view, thinking about our condition in this way is what causes us to be cold or listless. Thirdly, I suggest that *lâcheté* can also refer to a certain pathological condition that prevents one from having access to free will altogether. Thereby it also prevents one from the possibility of choosing to redirect one's attention in the way required, according to Descartes, to recover an inclination in the will to form and to act in accordance with firm and determinate judgments about what would be best for one to do.

Having considered Descartes' account of what *lâcheté* is, I turn to why he thinks it is such a great misfortune for us (Section 3).The answer, I argue, is that by keeping us from using our will to form and to act in accordance with firm and determinate judgments about what it would be best for us to do, *lâcheté* keeps us from fulfilling our moral duty and, because of this, also from securing happiness for ourselves (i.e. from securing a lasting contentment with what we have and what we do). Developing this answer will require that we enter interesting but so far largely unexplored terrain concerning Descartes' views of morality, happiness, and (not least) value.

The paper closes with a summary of the main points in the discussion (Section 4). I also highlight a couple of questions for further investigation.

Title: The Excellences of Softness: Three Versions of the Delicacy Argument.
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Abstract: In the early modern era, it was a prevailing belief that women were intellectually inferior to men. A common justification of this belief was the attribution of a "delicate" physiology to the female sex. Such delicate physiology supposedly affected the entire body, especially the brain and nervous system. Women's brains were believed to be constituted by soft and thin fibers that facilitate sense perception but impede concentration and complex reasoning. Although there were earlier versions of this misogynistic prejudice, Malebranche's discussion of the imagination in *De la Recherche de la Vérité* is its locus classicus.

Several philosophers contributing to the *Querelle des Femmes* during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries argued against this misconception. They claimed that the supposed delicacy of women was the source of no epistemic disadvantage but, instead, the origin of considerable epistemic virtues. I call this claim "the delicacy argument." In this paper, I contend that a study of the different forms this argument took during the early modern period is essential for assessing the contributions that early modern philosophical discussions can still make to contemporary feminist debates. The core of early modern contributions to feminist theory is supposed to come from the minimizing of bodily differences implied by the dualistic Cartesian philosophy of mind. If that is the case, however, early modern contributions to contemporary feminist theory are doomed to wane, becoming, at best, the subject of purely historical interest. That is so because a central aspect of recent feminist theory is the recovery of the feminine body as a fundamental element in women's intellectual lives. By studying versions of the delicacy argument from philosophers working under different philosophical frameworks, I show the existence of a strand in the pro-woman early-modern philosophical contributions in which embodiment is at the center of the vindication of women's intellectual capacities. That is the case, I claim, because the core of each version of the delicacy argument refers to a reflection about the nature of the mind in its ineluctable relationship with the body.

The versions of the argument that I discuss in this Chapter come from three philosophers representing some of the most important philosophical currents of the early modern era: Francois Poulain de la Barre represents Cartesianism, Claude Buffier common sense philosophy, and Benito Feijoo the skeptical empiricist tradition. The paper has five parts. It starts with a discussion of the misogynistic prejudice the delicacy argument aims to counter as exposed in Malebranche's text. In the next three parts, I examine Poulain's, Buffier's, and Feijoo's versions of the arguments under the light of the philosophy of mind deriving from their respective philosophical frameworks. The paper concludes with a discussion of the capacity of each version of the argument to accommodate contemporary concerns about the role of embodiment in women's intellectual lives.

The main texts to be used in the Chapter are:

- Malebranche: De la Recherche de la Vérité.
- Poulain de la Barre: De l'Egalité des Deux Sexes.
- Claude Buffier: Examen de Préjugés Vulgaires; Traité des Premières Vérités.
- Benito Feijoo: Teatro Crítico Universal.

Abstract

"Leibniz's *Tentamen Anagogicum* and Planck's *Address to the German Academy: Berlin,1922:* Two New A Posteriori Proofs for the Existence of a Divine Anticipating Intelligence."

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In the first part I consider whether we can find the premises for an a posteriori proof of the intelligent -design version of teleology in Leibniz' *Tentamen Anagogicum.* I conclude that we can, but that the proof suffers from an out-of-date physical assumption about the nature of light. In the second part I consider another proof for the existence of intelligent design, this time from Max Planck. This account does not suffer from an out-of-date account of the nature of light nor does it suffer from any other deficiencies that I can detect.