LEIBNIZ'S APHORISM IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

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Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu; nisi ipse intellectus. (There is nothing in the mind that was not first in the sense; except the mind itself).

The first part of this famous aphorism is commonly taken to represent LOCKE's position on the origin of ideas. For example, BRUNER (1982) chides Donald HEBB for his "curiously blind assumption that, *in Locke's terms* (emphasis added), everything that is in the mind must get there through the senses". Accordingly, the addendum by LEIBNIZ is usually seen as a brilliant rebuke to that narrow view of the human mind. This is exemplified by WUNDT's description of the aphorism as "the fundamental principle of the sensualist LOCKE" as modified by "the idealist LEIBNIZ" (1862, p. xxxii). LEIBNIZ used this aphorism at least three times, and we shall show that the prevalent interpretation must be questioned when it is read in other contexts than the most familiar one, in the *Nouveaux Essais*.

LEIBNIZ expected his readers to recognize the first part as an "axiom" of the scholastic philosophers, and not to suppose that it was taken from LOCKE's *Essay*, where it will not be found. However, it has been so persistently attributed to LOCKE that some review of its history should precede any discussion of the aphorism

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itself. ARISTOTLE asserted in the *Posterior Analytics* (Bk. II, ch. 19) that scientific knowledge is "neither innate in a determined form, nor developed from other higher states of knowledge, but from sense-perception" (1941, p. 185). In the twelfth century, an unknown western philosopher reflected this influence: "All human knowledge arises from the senses". (*Tota humana notitia a sensibus surgit.* See PRANTL, 1885, p. 210, n. 432). In the thirteenth century, Thomas AQUINAS gave the maxim its classic form: *Nihil est in intellectu quod non sit prius in sensu* (1949, Qu. 2, art. 3, obj. 19). Scholastic philosophers did not think of this dependence on sensory input as negating the ability of the human mind to comprehend incorporeal entities. For example, in REISCH's *Margarita Philosophica,* a widely used encyclopedia, an affirmation that "Our knowledge has its origin in the senses, as stated in the Analytics" is followed by another that knowledge of incorporeal substances can be acquired through recognition of cause and effect relationships (1517, XI, vi and vii).

In the sixteenth century this maxim was challenged by anti-Aristotelians. One example is its rejection by CASMANN (1594) as incompatible with the statement in the Epistle to the Romans that gentiles who have not been taught the divine law may nevertheless act according to "the law that is written in their hearts" (2: 14-15). However, the rise of empiricism in the seventeenth century gave it new support. GASSENDI, in his *Institutes of Logic,* illustrated its force by the need to think of God as an old man (1658, I, p. 92), and HOBBES wrote that "there is no conception in a man's mind, which hath not at first, totally or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense" (1651, p. 3). The Jansenist ARNAULD (*1662*, 1685) denounced ARISTOTLE's maxim as well as GASSENDI, and the Cambridge Platonist CUDWORTH called both HOBBES and GASSENDI "atomic atheists" because their arguments implied that "since there is no corporeal sense of a Deity, there can be no evidence of his existence" (1678, pp. 634-635). The maxim which for centuries had been held in respect by theologians had become a suspect slogan which exposed its adherents to the charge of atheism.

It is therefore not surprising that when LOCKE's *Essay* appeared, critics occupied with theological controversies gave little heed to such statements as that "*the Operations of our own Minds* within us....furnish the Understanding with another sett of *Ideas,* which could not be had from things without", and "*External Objects furnish the Mind with the Ideas of sensible qualities,....*And the *Mind furnishes the Understanding with Ideas of its own Operations*" (1690, pp. 37, 38). Although Thomas BROWN later (1820, p. 172) called this distinction between ideas derived from sensation and those derived from reflection "the very groundwork" of the *Essay*, LOCKE's first critic in print, John NORRIS (*1690*, 1961, p. 9f) wrote that "in conformity to the *Aristotelian* philosophy, he makes all our ideas to be derived from the Senses", and this obscuration of LOCKE's meaning ultimately became as widespread among LOCKE's so-called followers as among his antagonists. However, it must not be thought that LEIBNIZ shared this misunderstanding. For him, ARISTOTLE's maxim was an axiom of scholasticism and not a position taken by LOCKE.

Let us turn now to the earliest instance in which LEIBNIZ used the aphorism. In 1702, Queen Sophie Charlotte of Prussia asked him to explain the doctrine of a

single universal intellect. LEIBNIZ's reply disposed quickly of Averroism but also stated that a desire to defend the doctrine of individual immortality led "popular philosophers" to assert that our souls are "independent of the body and its organs" and already have "thoughts in this life which are abstract and independent of material concepts" (LEIBNIZ, 1969, p. 556). Because these philosophers "could not fully justify" their doctrine, LEIBNIZ went on to give his own solution to the problem. The following passage was written as one (French!) sentence:

> I have examined this matter carefully and have shown that there are in truth certain materials of thought or objects of the understanding in the soul which have not been furnished by the external senses, namely, the soul itself and its functions (*nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu, nisi ipse intellectus*). Those who favor a universal spirit will readily assent to this, for they distinguish the spirit from matter. I find, however, that there is never any abstract thought which is not accompanied by some images or material traces, and I have established a perfect parallelism between what happens in the soul and what takes place in matter. I have shown that the soul with its functions is something distinct from matter but that it nevertheless is always accompanied by material organs and also that this relation is reciprocal and always will be.

Since this letter makes no allusion to LOCKE, the aphorism cannot be directed against him. Our puzzlement vanishes when we recall MERZ's observation that it was LEIBNIZ's habit "to conduct his controversies rather with the object of defending his own opinions than refuting those of his antagonist" (1948, p. 197). With this insight, the hints of pre-established harmony rise prominently out of the background. The aphorism was advanced as something acceptable to Averroists, but it provided a platform from which LEIBNIZ could present his system of pre-established harmony as demonstrating the possibility (and hence the certainty, in his thinking) of self-contained intellects. Some two thousand words, the greater part of the letter, were devoted to that task.

Knowing that an earlier use of the aphorism was not part of an attack on LOCKE, we must study its role in the *Nouveaux Essais*, which were written expressly as a critique of LOCKE's *Essay*, with an open mind. HARTENSTEIN (1861) had this work in mind when he pointed out that although the aphorism was often regarded as stating the crucial difference between LEIBNIZ and LOCKE, LEIBNIZ himself acknowledged that it did not conflict with LOCKE's stated views. The true point of difference, said HARTENSTEIN, lay in their respective views about the nature of innate ideas, which LOCKE defined in a more limiting sense than did LEIBNIZ.

The divisions of the *Nouveaux Essais* (1962) are numbered in strict correspondence to the related parts of LOCKE's *Essay*, and the chapter in which the aphorism appears (Book II, ch. i) has no Sections 3 to 8, 20 to 22, or 24. In the *Essay*, these sections deal with the distinction between ideas of sensation and those of reflection, which relate to the mind's "own operations, proceeding from powers intrinsical and proper to itself" (Sect. 24). These sections also describe the part that ideas of reflection play in mental development from infancy onward -a subject apparently of no interest to LEIBNIZ.

Sections 9 to 19 of LOCKE's chapter were given to refutation of DESCARTES' assertion that since the essence of the mind is to think, it cannot exist even momentarily without thinking. This implies that much thinking takes place without awareness, a view which LOCKE characterized as an absurdity. To this issue LEIBNIZ responded with enthusiasm, making this chapter, together with a substantial part of the preface, his most thorough exposition of the doctrine of *petites perceptions*.

The aphorism, as one might expect after reading the letter to the queen, served to introduce that exposition. It occurs near the end of a page-long comment on a remark that LOCKE made, in Sect. 2, to indicate the relation between Book I ("Neither Principles nor Ideas are Innate") and Book II ("Of Ideas"). LOCKE had written, to summarize what went before: "Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper". It was characteristic of LOCKE to prefer a printers' term for unused blank paper (derived from *papier blanc*) to the scholastic metaphor *tabula rasa*. However, in the French translation (LOCKE, 1700) *white paper* became *tabula rasa* and it is probable that LEIBNIZ thought, as many still believe, that LOCKE used the latter phrase LEIBNIZ attacked the concept as a fiction because it makes no allowance for individual differences in dispositions and tendencies to action. The aphorism appears near the end of this comment. It must be noted that LANGLEY's translation of this passage (LEIBNIZ, 1949, p. 111) is quite misleading, most seriously when it gives the second person *you* in place of the impersonal French pronoun *on*, and simultaneously changes a future tense into the present, with the result that LEIBNIZ puts not only *tabula rasa* but also ARISTOTLE's maxim into LOCKE's mouth. Fortunately a new translation by REMNANT and BENNETT is now available.

Someone will confront me with this accepted philosophical axiom, that there is nothing in the soul which does not come from the senses. But an exception must be made of the soul and its states. *Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu, excipe: nisi ipse intellectus.* Now the soul includes being, substance, one, same, cause, perception, reasoning, and many other notions which the senses cannot provide. That agrees pretty well with your author of the *Essay*, for he looks for a good proportion of ideas in the mind's reflection on its own nature (LEIBNIZ, 1981, p. 110).

There are interesting parallels between this passage and that previously quoted from the letter to the queen. The aphorism is offered as something to which Averroists in that instance, LOCKE in this, would not object because it does not violate their basic assumptions. And although this passage gives no explicit hint as to how the "mind itself" will be presented in the sequel -nothing comparable to the clear hints of pre-established harmony in the other- there is such a hint in the next brief interchange between the spokespersons for LOCKE and for LEIBNIZ, in which the latter says "I believe I have shown that in so far as (ideas) contain something distinct they are in us before we are aware of them". LOCKE's spokesperson makes a weak attempt to direct discussion toward the functions of reflection, but his counterpart brushes this aside impatiently "in order to keep away from an argument upon which we have already spent too long", and plunges into the problem of thinking without awareness.

Here again, the aphorism cannot be pointing to a fatal flaw in LOCKE's approach because, as LEIBNIZ attests -briefly in this passage but at greater length in the preface -it is not incompatible with LOCKE's position. LOCKE's argument in Book I was against innate ideas and principles, not against innate dispositions, which he termed (as we saw above) "powers intrinsical and proper to (the mind) itself". Indeed, in his copy of a published letter addressed to him (BURNETT, 1699), which he chose not to dignify by any response, LOCKE made marginal notes responding to each point raised against his rejection of innate ideas, and in the last of this series of notes he wrote: "I think noe body but this Author who ever read my book could doubt that I spoke only of innate *ideas,* for my subject was the understanding and not of innate *powers".* (See PORTER, 1887, p. 45).

The aphorism appeared a third time in a letter which LEIBNIZ wrote to a friend who sought his guidance on readings in philosophy. This letter, in Latin, was written five years after LOCKE's death and a year after it became public knowledge that LOCKE had thought LEIBNIZ was overrated. (See LOCKE, 1708, letters of 10 April and 3 May, 1697, to Molyneux). The paragraph on LOCKE was blunt in its criticism. It said that LOCKE did not understand "the nature of the human mind or of truth", nor was he aware that "necessary truths", which we learn from demonstration rather than inductively, "cannot be proved except from principles innate in the human mind". It continued:

> Likewise, he was not sufficiently aware that such ideas as being, substantive identity, true, good, and many others as well, are innate in our mind because the latter is innate to itself and comprehends all this in itself. Of course, there is nothing in the mind that was not first in the sense, except the mind itself (LEIBNIZ, 1890, p. 488).

Here the aphorism only adds force to the point that LOCKE underestimated the importance of innate determinants. The charge comes, we should note, from the author of a system in which all mental events are totally dependent on such determination.

Our object was to learn what meaning the aphorism had for LEIBNIZ. In each case it emphasized that mental events are inwardly determined. In none did it imply that LOCKE denied participation of non-sensory processes of "mind itself" in human cognition, or that LOCKE subscribed to the scholastic maxim which, nevertheless, has been called -in reliance on LEIBNIZ's aphorism- "the aphorism made use of by Locke" (SORLEY, 1911), "Locke's formula" (KIRCHNER, 1911; *Meyer's Lexicon,* 1977), and, we recall, "the fundamental principle of the sensualist Locke" (WUNDT, 1862).

SUMMARY

LEIBNIZ's famous aphorism has been persistently regarded as a rejoinder to LOCKE's supposed sensualism, and linked with a mistaken assumption that LOCKE accepted the scholastic maxim that "there is nothing in the mind that was not first in the sense". It is shown that the first use of the aphorism was in a context that made no reference to LOCKE; the second (and best known) was accompanied by an acknowledgement that it did not conflict with LOCKE's views; and the third, after LOCKE's death, was in a context which charged him only with insufficient recognition of certain aspects of "the mind itself" but not with ignoring its existence.

RESUMEN

El famoso aforismo de LEIBNIZ se ha considerado como una respuesta al supuesto sensualismo de LOCKE, y se ha vinculado con la proposición errónea de que él aceptara el máximo escolástico de que "no hay nada en la mente que no estuviera primero en el sentido". Se muestra que el primer uso del aforismo estuvo en un contexto que no hizo ninguna referencia a LOCKE, el segundo (y el mejor conocido) estuvo acompañado por un reconocimiento de que no estaba en conflicto con las opiniones de LOCKE; y el tercero, después de la muerte de LOCKE, estuvo en un contexto que sólo le culpó de un reconocimiento inadecuado de ciertos aspectos de "la mente misma" pero no de haber ignorado su existencia.

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