

Innate ideas in Stoicism and Grotius

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Philosophers have long debated whether any ideas are innate in the human mind and if so, what they might be. The issues here are real and important but it often seems that the discussion of them isn't. One of the main reasons that these discussions are frequently so frustrating is that the various sides seem to be talking past each other rather than engaging in genuine argument. When this happens, it seems to me that it is usually because the issues they are discussing have not been formulated clearly enough. To avoid that problem and also to motivate what follows, I want to begin with an overview of some philosophical concepts and questions before I get to the historical part of my paper.

The first point to make is a distinction between two types of innatist theories, according to what they hold is actually innate.¹ The first type of theory, which we may call 'content' innatism, argues that it is individual instances of knowledge or belief or concepts or behaviour which are innate. Without any experience or effort, this theory maintains, all of us know or believe certain propositions or have some concepts or behaviours. Supporters of this theory have disagreed over the moment when the innate items enter our soul: some think they predate our existence here on earth while others do not.² This dispute, however, is less important than their shared opinion that our souls possess knowledge or beliefs or concepts or behaviours of which experience, at best, only serves to make us aware.

1 These introductory remarks make no claim to originality. The texts which I have consulted include: Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1975), especially chapter six; Nicholas Jolley, *Leibniz and Locke* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), especially chapter nine; Dominic Scott, *Recollection and Experience: Plato's theory of learning and its successors* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1995), especially chapters three and eight; Stephen P. Stich, 'Introduction', *Innate Ideas*. Ed. by Stephen P. Stich (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press 1975) p. 1-22.

2 Plato would be the most famous defender of the pre-existence hypothesis; see, e.g., the *Meno* 80d5-ff. At some places in his writings, Leibniz agreed with Plato that our souls possess potential knowledge but denied that it pre-existed our lives here on earth. See, e.g., the *Discourse on Metaphysics* §26.

By contrast, the second type of theory, ‘dispositional’ innatism, holds that the innate properties are not items of knowledge or belief or concepts or behaviour but dispositions to form certain knowledge or beliefs or concepts or behaviour. On this view, the soul is structured in such a way that it will inevitably come to possess certain properties although it does not have them at birth. Descartes provides a nice analogy: he says that ‘ideas’ are innate in the mind just as diseases are innate in certain families.³ At birth, members of those families do not suffer from the disease; it is not innate in that sense. Rather, they have the propensity to acquire the disease regardless of what they do or experience. Similarly, Descartes and other dispositionalists say, the soul’s innate ‘ideas’ are actually innate dispositions to form a certain body of knowledge no matter what the soul experiences or how it acts.

If one is an innatist – whether of the content or dispositional type – one will think that the mind innately possesses, or is built so that it will come to possess, certain knowledge or concepts or beliefs or behaviour. This phrase is cumbersome but it is also less obscure and question-begging than talk of innate ‘ideas’. Knowledge, concepts, beliefs and behaviour are four distinct entities and it is not obvious why any of them should stake a better claim for being innate than the others. In fact, different innatists have had different views on the proper identity of that which is innate: Descartes, for example, thought that *knowledge* of God is innate while Stoics say we have an innate *concept* of him.⁴ In order not to prejudge the question, I shall henceforth use the vague but inclusive phrase ‘mental contents’, where it is understood that ‘mental contents’ could consist in any or all of the above.

Now, regarding mental contents, one can think that all, some or none of them are innate – that is, one could think that all of a human’s mental contents are innate, or that some of them are, or none. Few philosophers have defended either extreme. For example, even Plato, who was in many respects an arch innatist, still did not argue that all mental contents are innate. According to him, we first acquire concepts (say, of beauty) through sense perception and then, by examining these acquired concepts, we discover the innate concepts present but previously undetected in us.⁵ By contrast Locke, an arch anti-innatist, did not believe that there are no innate mental con-

3 See the ‘Comments on a Certain Broadsheet’ (at A-T VIII B: 358). An excellent attempt to make philosophical sense of this analogy can be found in Stich (1975) p. 3f.

4 For Descartes, see, e.g., *Meditation* III (at A-T III: 45) and for the Stoics, Cicero’s *De natura deorum* 2.12.

5 Here I am following Scott’s (1995) interpretation; see especially p. 7–8 and section one.

tents. He writes as part of his argument for hedonism in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,

Nature, I confess, has put into Man a desire of happiness, and an aversion to misery: These are indeed innate practical Principles, which (as practical principles ought) do continue constantly to operate and influence all our Actions, without ceasing... (I.ii.3).

By far the majority of philosophers would agree with Descartes when he says, 'Among my ideas, some appear to be innate, some to be adventitious, and others to have been invented by me.'⁶ Because most philosophers occupy the middle ground, where some but not all mental contents are held to be innate, the difference between innatists and anti-innatists, rationalists and empiricists, should in most instances be seen as a matter of degree instead of incommensurable extremes.⁷

A final point, which moves us beyond epistemology and toward metaphysics, concerns the ontological status of innatism. There is a natural connection between innatism and a realist attitude toward human nature, for if the mind has innate mental contents, it will have something innate to itself.⁸ If the mind has something innate to itself, then a strictly nominalist conception of the mind's nature, which denies the existence of any innate properties, is eliminated. So from the fact that a philosopher believed in the theory of innate ideas we can infer that he also was (or should have been) some kind of a realist about human nature. Inferences can also be drawn in the other direction: if we know a philosopher's views on human nature, we may be able to deduce his views on innate ideas. The number and richness of the deductions may vary according to the elaborateness of his views on human nature, for the more he says about such a nature, the more we may infer about the contents of that nature. But depending on what he says about human nature, we may be able to determine his views on the question of innateness even if he does not overtly attempt to answer that question.

Much more could be said about innatism but the foregoing has introduced us to the philosophical issues to which we must be sensitive in the

6 *Third Meditation* (at A-T VII: 37-8). Translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1984) p. 26. Since all translations from Descartes will be by Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (with Kenny assisting in the translation of his correspondence), for brevity's sake I will henceforth provide only in-text citations to Descartes' work plus the Adam and Tannery page number.

7 On this point, see especially Scott (1995) p. 95.

8 For more, see Hacking (1975) p.141f.

pages ahead. In those pages, I begin with the famous statement in the ‘Prolegomena’ to *De iure belli ac pacis* on the independence of natural laws from God and draw some tentative conclusions about Grotius’ views on innatism from it. Then, in order to reinforce these conclusions, I discuss how some of Grotius’ peers in the early modern period read him. After that, I turn to the Stoics and present the two dominant interpretations of their views on innate ideas. Remaining agnostic as to which is correct, I simply show in conclusion that Grotius’ coincides nicely with the ‘rationalist’ interpretation. As a final point, I extrapolate from this case study to the more general and ultimately more important problem of determining what the early moderns took Stoicism to be.⁹

- I. ‘Prolegomena’, § 11

There is no place in his corpus that I am aware of where Grotius directly and explicitly addresses the issue of innate ideas. He does, however, present some very interesting theses on human nature. Because of the connection between human nature and innatism noted above, we may hope to learn about innate ideas by studying his views on human nature. The text which seems most promising in this regard is the famous § 11 of the ‘Prolegomena’ to *De iure belli ac pacis*.¹⁰

Prior to § 11, Grotius has been introducing the concept of natural law, which is distinguished from civil law and will form the basis for a law among nations. As he notes, there is general scepticism about such a law, especially if it is used to found other laws that are binding on nations at war (§ 3). Because his treatise on the law of war and peace would make little sense if it were true that the natural law did not exist in the right form, one goal of these introductory remarks is to defeat scepticism about that law. After

9 Besides the philosophical issues flagged in this introduction, there are also many complex historiographical issues associated with this project. I intend to deal with most of them as my essay progresses but there is one that I should raise in advance: it is that my comparison will be *conceptual*, trying to ascertain the degree of similarity between Grotius’ views on innate ideas and the Stoics’. To the extent possible, I shall try to avoid historical questions such as the Stoic influence on Grotius and which Stoic texts he might have read. These questions are worth asking but there is no space to do so here.

10 A more comprehensive study of Grotius’ views on innate ideas would look at other philosophically interesting texts, such as the *Sententiae philosophorum de fato* and the *De iure prae- dae commentarius*. Nevertheless, the ‘Prolegomena’ is the obvious place to start, because the position enunciated there represents both his settled views as well as his most influential.

rehearsing several arguments against such scepticism and in favour of the existence of a substantive body of natural laws, Grotius writes,

What we have been saying would have a degree of validity even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to him. ('Prolegomena' § 11)¹¹

In saying that the arguments preceding § 11 would have a 'degree of validity' even if God did not exist or was not providential, Grotius is making two distinct though related claims, one negative and the other positive. The negative claim concerns what is *not* necessary in order to prove that a kind of natural law exists and enjoins our actions: namely, it is not necessary to prove God's existence and providence. The positive and, for present purposes, more important claim concerns the character of the proofs that can be given for natural law. By denying that the proofs depend on God for their validity, Grotius by implication asserts that another, non-theocentric basis for the proofs exists. In § 11 he does not tell us what this basis is; to find it, we must look elsewhere in the 'Prolegomena'.

An important clue is given in § 12, where he writes that the law of nature proceeds 'from the essential traits implanted in man...' (*ex principiis homini internis profluit*). As we would expect, given the desire evinced in § 11 for a non-theocentric basis for the natural law, the argument hinted at here does not require any recourse to God. Instead, it suggests that the law can be derived from human nature alone. Although it is of course possible that God may ultimately appear in such a derivation – he may do so because he may be thought to have created human nature itself and so, by having created that from which the law is derived, ultimately be responsible for the law – there is no necessary reason why he must make such an appearance. This is not necessary for at least two reasons: first, one could simply deny that God did create human nature and thereby deny him the responsibility for the law; second, even if one conceded that God did create human nature, one might still hold that this act is irrelevant to the relationship between human nature and the natural law. There are at least two reasons why God's creative act could be irrelevant to the origins of the law: first, one might think that the

¹¹ This and all translations of *De iure belli ac pacis* (henceforth: *De iure*) are by Francis W. Kelsey *et al.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1925). The Latin is: '*Et haec quidem quae iam diximus, locum aliquem haberent etiamsi daremus, quod sine summo scelere dari nequit, non esse Deum, aut non curari ab eo negotia humana*'. Because the in-text citations precisely fix their locations, I will not footnote individual quotations. Also, I have occasionally taken the liberty of silently altering Kelsey's translation.

question is whether the law can be derived from human nature, period, and not where human nature itself came from; second, one might grant that while God was indeed responsible for instantiating human beings – for making them exist – he is not responsible for the human nature which pre-existed individual human beings. Since it is human nature and not human existence from which the law is derived, God’s contribution to the law would thus be nil. Now, although the § 11 statement is compatible with either the denial of God’s creative act or the denial of the relevance of his creative act to the issue at hand, I think Grotius intended the latter. I say this because toward the end of the ‘Prolegomena’, where he is summarizing his method and the contents of the book, he seems to allude to the § 11 statement and, in this allusion, speaks only of how ‘the principles of the law of nature’ can be shown to ‘arise from nature’ (§ 30). This gloss on the § 11 statement emphasizes the tightness of the connection between natural law and nature, stressing that nature is sufficient by itself to produce the law. The thrust of the § 11 statement is not to distance the natural law from God but rather to shrink the distance between the natural law and nature, a goal more readily achieved by granting the possibility of God’s creative act but denying that it matters to the origins and nature of the law.

The § 11 statement, then, propounds nature in general and human nature in particular as the bases for the natural law. Let us look more closely into human nature, both as it relates to the law as well as its own essential or defining properties. Regarding its relation to the law, there is a question here. While I have been saying that human nature is the ‘basis’ for the natural law, Grotius himself uses a variety of metaphors. For example, in § 16 he says that ‘the very nature of man... is the mother of the law of nature.’ This idea is echoed in § 30, where he says that the law ‘arises’ from human nature. In § 9, however, he refers to ‘the law of nature, that is, to the nature of man’ (*ius naturae, humanae scilicet*). The explanatory particle ‘*scilicet*’ suggests an equivalence between the natural law and human nature; no such equivalence is implied by §§ 16 and 30, where an essential asymmetry is posited between the parent or producer (human nature) and child or product (natural law). Obviously, if Grotius were using language precisely, it would matter to our interpretation whether he thinks that natural law and human nature are equivalent or that one is the source of the other. However, the very fact that he uses so many different expressions shows that he is not using language precisely. We can use the metaphor of a ‘basis’ or a ‘mother’ or simply state that they are equivalent; it does not matter to Grotius. The main point is that human nature is sufficient by itself to ensure the existence of the law.

Since he wants to derive a normative system of injunctions and prohibitions – a system with enough content to guide moral deliberations as people try to figure out what to do or not to do in actual concrete situations – from human nature, it should come as no surprise that Grotius endows it with a number of properties. Some of its properties are due to the fact that a human being is an animal (§ 6). Grotius does not tell us what they might be; we can speculate, however, that humans’ faculties of perception, manner of action and perhaps even some of the structure of their souls are attributable to their animality.¹² These are clearly important elements of human nature but even more so are the specific differences that set humans apart from non-human animals. In § 6, after saying that ‘Man is, to be sure, an animal,’ Grotius goes on to write that he is also ‘an animal of a superior kind, much farther removed from all other animals than the different kinds of animals are from one another...’. According to Grotius, there are ‘many traits peculiar to the human species’ which set humans apart from non-human animals (§ 6). For example, he says that humans have been ‘endowed with the faculty of knowing and of acting in accordance with general principles. Whatever accords with that faculty is not common to all animals, but peculiar to the nature of man’ (§ 7). Of all the traits that are specific to humans, however, one is deemed ‘characteristic of man’ (§ 6). This is ‘an impelling desire for society, that is, for the social life – not of any and every sort, but peaceful, and organized according to the measure of his intelligence, with those who are of his own kind’ (§ 6). Lest the reader be uncertain of what he means, Grotius adds a clause with a Greek word at the end of the sentence to clarify the point. According to Grotius, the property which best captures or expresses human nature – the property which comes the closest to constituting human being – is *oikeiosis*.

Other chapters in this book will explore both *oikeiosis* itself as well as Grotius’ version of that Stoic doctrine; we do not have to anticipate their findings here. For present purposes, all that matters is that Grotius calls *oikeiosis* ‘characteristic of man’. There can be no doubt what this means:

¹² Stoics argued that many traits of human nature are due to the fact that humans are animals and since Grotius seems to be following the Stoics when attributing other traits to human nature, it is reasonable to suppose he would do the same for these. For discussion of the ancient Stoic view, see Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1985) chapters two and three. As an example of how a modern Stoic defends the same thesis, see Lawrence Becker, *A new stoicism* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1998) p. 12f.

Grotius had an essentially Stoic view of the content of human nature.¹³ Moreover, he did not have a view of human nature's contents shared by only a fraction of Stoics. While they disagreed over many other matters, all Stoics accepted *oikeiosis* and understood it to constitute human nature. Up to this stage of the argument, then, Grotius has been promulgating ideas that are uncontroversially Stoic. It is only at the next step that his relationship to the Stoics becomes more vexed.

The next step concerns the origins of human nature or how human nature comes to possess the properties in which its nature consists. As we have seen, Grotius adopts a robust conception of human nature; in addition to Stoic 'sociableness', the human being receives a soul with a certain specific structure, acts in certain ways, and has certain epistemic and perceptual capacities, all from nature. Now, while it may be possible that the natural process by which some of these properties are acquired involves natural experiences, most (and maybe even all) of them seem to be innate or, as Grotius says in § 12, 'implanted' in humans. For example, take *oikeiosis*. As evidence that humans are naturally social, Grotius asserts in § 7 that 'In children, even before their training has begun, some disposition to do good to others appears'.¹⁴ *Oikeiosis* is not learned through experience, though of course experience may help to refine or otherwise alter it. Rather, it is innate. Indeed, if *oikeiosis* is to be the ground of natural law, it must be innate; otherwise, it could not provide the natural law with the fixity and immutability that it needs to defeat scepticism.

More generally, I think the § 11 statement shows that what is true for *oikeiosis* is also true for all other properties that are part of human nature. To see why, grant what § 11 supposes: either that there is no God or that he does not care at all about humans. In either case, Grotius insists, there would still be a natural law and it would still govern human conduct. This would be true because the law is derived from human nature and not from God's nature or actions. So even on the assumption that God did not exist or was

13 For more on the connection between *oikeiosis* and human nature, see A.A. Long, 'Greek ethics after MacIntyre', *Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1983) p. 184-97. Reprinted in Long's collection of papers, *Stoic Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1996) p. 156-178. See especially p. 172f of the reprint.

14 It may be observed that this is a so-called 'cradle argument', very similar to the kind used by Hellenistic philosophers, including Stoics. The choice of argument cannot be a coincidence; Grotius' decision to employ it in this context reinforces the Stoical tendency of his thought here. For texts and critical discussion of the original cradle argument, see Jacques Brunschwig, 'The Cradle Argument,' *The Norms of Nature*. Ed. by Malcolm Schofield and Gisela Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1986) p. 113-144.

not providential, Grotius thinks human nature would still exist in basically the same form it does today. As a result, human nature must be conceived as independent of God and his actions: it must exist regardless of whether or not God took the extra step of creating individual humans. That is, human nature must exist as a kind of eternal truth, pre-dating human beings. Because human nature exists independent of the existence of human beings, the experience of human beings must contribute little or nothing to human nature. That is to say (as was said at the conclusion of the last paragraph), whatever properties are part of or constitute human nature must be *innate* and not acquired through experience.

Now, not all of the properties that comprise human nature will be mental contents, in the sense defined in the introduction. For example, humans may innately possess certain perceptual capacities but if so they could not be counted as knowledge or concepts or beliefs or behaviour. Further work is needed in order to prove that Grotius imbued human nature with these things and so to prove that he subscribed to a version of innatism. If we reflect on the texts and ideas already encountered, however, we may notice that some of this work has already been accomplished. For example, we saw that he wrote in § 7 children have an innate ‘disposition’ (*propensio*) to perform good deeds. This disposition is a tendency to behave in a certain way and as such it falls under the rubric of ‘mental contents’. More generally, *oikeiosis* – the orientation to self-preservation, reason and sociableness – is manifestly practical: it is the tendency to act so as to preserve oneself, nurture reason and maintain healthy social bonds with one’s family, friends and society as a whole. Here again, we find Grotius arguing that humans possess innate instinctive drives, behaviourisms that should be counted as ‘mental contents’.

Also in § 7, Grotius says that humans have been ‘endowed with a faculty of knowing’. This innate faculty is not fully developed in children, for Grotius pointedly says that the knowledge which leads the ‘mature man’ (*homini perfectae aetatis*) to act for the common good is missing in children, whose social behaviour is instead the product of innate behavioural impulses. The fact that humans have an innate faculty of knowing that is not fully developed at birth suggests that this faculty is not characterized as it would be by a content theory of innate ideas, where the soul contains inactive but fully formed items of knowledge at birth, but rather as it would be by a dispositional theory, where the soul’s faculty consists in a natural tendency to form knowledge.

So I think the work we have already completed reveals a fair amount about Grotius’ attitude toward innatism. Yet, for two reasons, it isn’t

enough. The first concerns the argumentative basis for the conclusions drawn so far. I have tried to extract Grotius' views on innate ideas from his views on human nature. While he does say much more about human nature than he does about innatism, still he doesn't say that much. Because his statements on nature are so few, some suspicion may envelop the amount of weight I have put on them. The second problem is this: even if the basic method of my argument is sound, it still might be objected that it has not proven very much. It has shown that Grotius belonged to the broad coalition of innatists, true, and even *roughly* what kind of an innatist he probably was. But if we want to compare his views on innatism with the Stoics, more specificity will be needed.

Unfortunately, these two problems cannot be resolved in the most obvious way, by looking at more Grotian texts. This is because Grotius the legal theorist and moral philosopher just doesn't have much to say about the metaphysical and epistemological issues before us. All is not lost, however, since although we cannot add to his texts, we can try to get more out of them. One way to do this is by seeing what his near contemporaries took them to mean, which is what I intend to do in the next section, by looking at how Descartes and Pufendorf read Grotius.

- *II. Seventeenth-century interpretations of Grotius*

Although he has no quarrel with Grotius on innate ideas – both think the mind has a substantial number and range of innate mental contents – Descartes does seem to object to his views on human nature in a trio of letters to Mersenne. Whereas Grotius argued that natural law theory would have 'a degree of validity' even if God did not exist because it is based on truths which are eternal and free of him, Descartes tells Mersenne that 'we must not say that if God did not exist nevertheless these truths would be true' (6 May 1630, A-T I: 149–50). If Grotius forms at least part of the target here,¹⁵ Descartes confirms the interpretation offered above by taking him to mean that the truths of human nature are eternal and independent of God's actions and will. And of course, Descartes denies exactly what Grotius affirms: that is, Descartes thinks the truths called 'eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures' (15 April 1630, A-T I: 145).

For Descartes, the eternity of a truth does not by any means guarantee its independence from God. It is possible for a truth to be eternal and yet still be dependent on God, because of the peculiarity of God's nature and

will. Because God is 'eternal and unchangeable', his will is also eternal and unchangeable (15 April 1630, A-T I: 145-6). Because his will is eternal and unchangeable, he always wills the same. Because he always wills the same, the results of his will – that which he wills – are always the same. While it does not necessarily follow that the results of his will always possess the same propositional or conceptual content (for God's will could be that their content varies), it is compatible with Descartes' view for some of the things willed by God to have a fixed content. In addition, concerning the duration of the existence of those things which he wills, it is not necessarily the case that they will always exist; to say that they are the same is only to make a claim about their essences, not about their longevity. On the other hand, God may will some things to exist always and if he did, such things would be eternal. If God wills the same thing both to have a fixed nature and to exist throughout all time, it will be considered an eternal truth. Such truths would legitimately be called constant and eternal but on Descartes' account it would not follow that they are independent of God's will. For on his account there is no contradiction in asserting that a truth is both unchanging and eternal *and* contingent on the free will of God.

It is important to recognize that Descartes criticizes not only that part of Grotius' thesis concerning the existence of the truth of human nature but also that part concerning its essence. Whereas Grotius conceives the possibility that human nature is fully independent of the divine will, at least in its essence if not its existence, Descartes insists that God 'is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths' (27 May 1630; A-T I: 152). Because of this difference in their views on the relationship of essences to God, Grotius and Descartes are faced with different challenges when it comes to explain-

15 Descartes does not mention Grotius once in his entire corpus but for at least three reasons, it seems reasonable to suppose he had him in mind as he wrote about the eternal truths. First, since he was in Paris at the time of *De iure*'s publication and this was such a major intellectual event, he must have read at least part of the book (such as its 'Prolegomena'). So although Descartes does not mention Grotius, this should not be taken to imply that he was unfamiliar with him or his work. Second, the thesis which Descartes criticizes in these letters is strikingly similar to Grotius' – so similar, in fact, that it would be amazing if it weren't Grotius'. And third, since Mersenne was a possible avenue of communication between Grotius and Descartes (Grotius, too, maintained a correspondence with him), it is possible that the ideas Descartes was communicating to Mersenne were meant to be passed along to Grotius (as Descartes says in the first letter, 'I hope to put [his views on the eternal truths] in writing, within the next fortnight... but I do not want you to keep it secret. On the contrary I beg you to tell people as often as the occasion demands' (15 April 1630, A-T I: 146)).

ing the presence in human nature of innate ideas. For Grotius, because the essence of human nature can exist independent of God, the contents of that essence including its innate ideas must also be able to exist independent of God. Whatever theory is offered to account for those contents (Grotius offers none), it will not necessarily have to explain why or how God decided to place them in that essence. By contrast, if his theory of innate ideas can make any claims to completeness, at some point Descartes will have to include in it an explanation for God's decision to imbue the essence with those ideas.

From Descartes' criticisms of a Grotian view of human nature, we can learn much about the modal and metaphysical underpinnings or implications of Grotius' epistemological commitments. But Descartes does not say much about Grotius' epistemology per se, perhaps because on this issue their views are so similar. By contrast Pufendorf disagreed with Grotius on both the metaphysical status as well as the epistemological content of human nature. Since we have already discussed Descartes' criticisms of Grotius' views on natures, we can bypass that part of Pufendorf's attack on Grotius and focus instead on their dispute over innatism.¹⁶

First, it should be noted that in contrast to Grotius, Pufendorf was a nominalist about natures: he denied that they were eternal, that they had any existence apart from concrete actuality and that they were free of God.¹⁷

16 One of Pufendorf's favourite arguments against Grotius' views on natures takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. On Grotius' view, God's act to create human beings consists solely in the instantiation of human nature. So far from God creating human nature, Grotius thought, human nature actually places some limits on his actions. It does this because human beings could exist only within the limits prescribed by their nature and since this nature is independent of God, even he had to abide by these limitations when he undertook to bring them into existence. Now, Pufendorf maintains that by saying human nature places limits on God's actions – that there were limits to what God could or could not do when he created human beings – Grotius is contradicting the universally agreed-upon proposition that God acted with complete freedom when he created humans. This proposition is fundamental to Christian theology and philosophy; it cannot be surrendered and whatever conflicts with it must go instead. Since the conflict arises from the idea that human nature is independent of God, Pufendorf says, it must be rejected and we must instead think that human nature is fully dependent on God. To say that human nature is fully dependent on God, however, is to say that he created not only human existence but also human essence. And this is precisely the opposite of what Grotius maintains. For two passages where this argument is advanced, see *De iure naturae et gentium* I.2.3 and II.1.3.

17 For more on this, see Alfred Dufour, 'Pufendorf', *Cambridge History of Political Thought: 1450-1700*. Ed. by J.H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1991) p. 561-588. For Dufour's discussion of Pufendorf's nominalism, see especially p. 567f.

While an innatist view may be compatible with these propositions – it may be so if God invested natures with some or all of their properties from the very moment of their creation – Pufendorf says that some natures, in addition to being temporal, concrete and dependent on God, also acquire some of their properties. Not all properties are acquired: for example, those properties that Pufendorf calls ‘physical’ are implanted in natures without addition or diminution by experience.¹⁸ The same is true of some of the properties that Pufendorf calls ‘moral’. There are, however, other moral properties that are not innate: as Pufendorf writes, these properties ‘do not arise from the intrinsic substantial principles of things but are superadded to things already existent and physically complete’.¹⁹ Beings with intelligent natures are able to add moral properties to their innate physical and moral ones; they do this as a result of their experiences and by an action of their wills. This dependence of some moral properties on the actions and will of intelligent beings crucially affects their innateness. As Pufendorf writes,

the imposition to which moral entities owe their origin also determines their stability or changes: When it ceases, as it were, they themselves vanish at the same time, just as a shadow disappears once the light has been extinguished... For although the nature of things does not allow something once done to be undone (for example, that a former consul not be a former consul), we nonetheless see everyday how people cease to be what they were, and also how the moral entities inhering in someone disappear entirely with no real trace remaining. (*De iure naturae et gentium* I.1.23).

Because some moral ‘entities’ (as Pufendorf calls them) are the product of acts of the will and the will is free, it is entirely possible for agents to come not to possess them. As it happens, these properties in fact comprise part of human nature but, because they are in our natures as a result of acts of the free will, there is no necessary reason why they must be in our natures. Because properties which in fact comprise human nature could easily not be part of human nature, these properties must not be innate but somehow acquired.

Now, this digression into Pufendorf is meant to shed light on Grotius. Pufendorf rightly thinks the distinction between physical and moral ‘enti-

¹⁸ See, e.g., *De iure naturae et gentium*, I.1.2.

¹⁹ *De iure naturae et gentium*, I.1.4. All translations of this text are by Michael Seidler in *The Political Writings of Samuel Pufendorf*. Ed. Craig L. Carr (Oxford: Oxford UP 1994). Since the reference precisely fixes the location of each quotation, I will henceforth provide in-text citations of this text.

ties' is important and criticizes Grotius in particular for overlooking it.²⁰ As he says, 'those who have heretofore undertaken to cultivate this discipline... have not given moral entities the attention they deserve' (*De iure naturae et gentium* I.1.1). Pufendorf thinks this distinction clarifies what can properly be said to be innate from what cannot be called innate: whatever we have by virtue of our physicality we have innately but much of what we have or come to possess because we are 'moral' beings is not innate. Pufendorf thinks that Grotius, failing to recognize this distinction, subsumed the 'physical' and the 'moral' into one category with the same ontological status – he made both innate. Pufendorf does not criticize Grotius for making the physical innate, nor does he object to his calling some moral properties 'innate'. He does, however, take issue with many other so-called 'innate' properties. Since he and Grotius both are interested in the nature and limits of politics and political theory, his disagreement with Grotius is most plainly expressed over political ideas. Under the category of acquired moral properties, Pufendorf includes moral and legal rights and duties as well as basic concepts of value. Since Pufendorf sees himself as disagreeing with Grotius on precisely the question of whether such things are innate or not, it must be the case that (if Pufendorf reads him correctly) Grotius held a theory of innate ideas according to which the mind is endowed with a remarkable range and quantity of innate mental contents.

- *III. Innate ideas and Stoicism*

Let me begin with a quick summary of what we have learned about Grotius. He was a realist with respect to natures: he thought that human nature was true independent of the actions of God or any other being. Furthermore, he subscribed to an innatist theory that was part content, part dispositional: some of the mental contents which humans possess innately are fully formed in them from 'birth' (e.g., certain behavioural drives) while others are dispositions to form specific kinds of knowledge or concepts. Finally, the range of mental contents that he thought were innate is very broad, including both the obviously mental as well as traits that are usually thought of as moral and political.

²⁰ An excellent discussion of the distinction between physical and moral entities, and Pufendorf's use of it to criticize Grotius, is found in J.B. Schneewind, 'Pufendorf's place in the history of ethics', *Synthese* 72 (1987) p. 123-155. See especially p. 125f.

In the early modern period, there seemed to be a consensus that this is the way Grotius ought to be read. In this section, we will see that there is no similar consensus over the proper interpretation of the Stoics but instead that commentators take them in two radically different ways.

The first reading sees the Stoics as giving empiricist solutions to both the problems of innate ideas and natures. The single most important text for the empiricist reading comes from Aetius:

When a man is born, the Stoics say, he has the commanding-part [*hegemonikon*] of his soul like a sheet of paper ready for writing upon. On this he inscribes each one of his conceptions. The first method of inscription is through the senses. For by perceiving something, e.g. white, they have a memory of it when it has departed. And when many memories of a similar kind have occurred, we then say we have experience. For the plurality of similar impressions is experience. Some conceptions arise naturally in the aforesaid ways and undesignedly, others through our own instruction and attention. The latter are called 'conceptions' [*ennoiai*] only, the former are called 'preconceptions' [*prolepsis*] as well. Reason, for which we are called rational, is said to be completed from our preconceptions during our first seven years.²¹

First take the problem of innatism. According to this text, the mind begins life bereft of all mental content and then gradually accumulates it. The first and primary means of accumulation is through the senses, which leave 'inscriptions' on the mind. Once the mind has a sufficient number of individual sensory perceptions, more abstract notions begin to take root in it. The notion of 'white', for example, is formed out of a plurality of perceptions of white objects. All of the mind's mental contents consist in either its individual perceptions or its abstract notions. Since perceptions are obviously derived from the senses, and abstract notions by inference from what has been perceived, it follows that all of the mind's mental contents are ultimately due to sensory experience and none of them are truly innate.

Furthermore, the empiricist interpretation sees nominalism about human nature as a corollary to this view. The reasoning is as follows: Stoics deny that the mind has any content apart from its experiences – at birth it is like a *tabula rasa*. Since the mind's contents are derived entirely from experience, its contents are contingent on its experiences. Since its contents are contingent on its experiences, if it were to have different experiences, it would also have a different content. To say that the mind could have an

²¹ Aetius, *Placita* IV.11.1-4 (=SVF II.83). Translation by A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1987) chapter 39, section E. Henceforth, when citing Long and Sedley's translation, I will write "L-S" plus the chapter and section numbers (so the citation for Aetius would be "L-S 39E").

entirely different content, however, is to deny that there is anything essential to the mind. So the mind does not have a true essence, in the sense of an eternal set of propositions true are prior to or after its existence here on earth. On the assumption that human nature is closely associated if not identified with the mind, it follows that there is no essential human nature.²²

While Aetius seems to provide powerful evidence in favour of Stoic empiricism, not all scholars are convinced that he must be read along the above lines. Recall from my introduction the point that there is a continuum of possible positions on innatism, ranging from the extreme empiricist hypothesis that none of our mental contents are innate to the extreme rationalist view that all of them are. Critics of the strict empiricist interpretation of Aetius would say that it has erroneously placed the Stoics on the empiricist end of that continuum when in fact they belong somewhere in the middle. These critics would grant that Aetius shows some of our mental contents to be gained from the senses and experience – for example, our concepts of colour are dependent on repeated sensations of similar kinds. But they note that we can perceive colour and notice patterns among our sensations only if our minds have certain perceptual and cognitive faculties, faculties which Aetius calls ‘natural’. The presence of such faculties in our minds seems to some commentators to suggest that Stoics thought some of our faculties were innate, in some sense of that word.²³

Critics of the empiricist reading bolster their case by citing Stoic doctrines which (they think) would be incoherent if Stoics weren’t innatists. For example, one of the Stoic paradoxes is that only the virtuous man is good; since there are no virtuous men, there are no good men. If all of our knowledge is acquired through the senses and experience, then since we never perceive or otherwise experience good men, we ought not to have any conception of the good. Stoics, however, are not prepared to grant that we

22 Various scholars have advocated the empiricist reading. See, e.g., F.H. Sandbach, ‘Ennoia and prolepsis in the Stoic theory of knowledge’, *Problems in Stoicism*. Ed. by A.A. Long (London: Athlone Press 1971) p. 22–37. More recently, there is Julia Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1992). See especially p. 86f.

23 As Michael Frede puts it in a criticism of Annas (1992), some knowledge is not ‘arrived at by inference from what we have perceived. Nor does it owe its epistemic status to the fact that it stands in the appropriate epistemic relation of justification or confirmation to the data of observation. It, according to the Stoics, rather owes its epistemic status to the fact that nature has constructed human beings in such a way as to arrive at these notions and the assumptions they involve.’ Frede, ‘The Stoic conception of reason’, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Vol. II*. Ed. by K.J. Boudouris (Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture 1993), p. 50–63. The quotation is from p. 56.

have no conception of the good and so they must not think that all knowledge comes from the senses and experience. Instead, they advance theses like this one from Seneca: ‘Now I return to the question you want discussed, how we arrive at the first conception of the good and of rectitude. Nature could not have taught us this; it has not given us knowledge but seeds of knowledge’ (*Ep.* 120.4; L-S 60E1).²⁴ When Seneca says that ‘nature’ has given us ‘seeds of knowledge’, he seems to mean that certain rudimentary concepts are innate in us, and experience and our own attention only nurture these seeds to ensure they grow healthfully.²⁵

Regarding the question of what our innate mental contents are supposed to be, Seneca provides part of the answer: they include moral concepts (such as the concept of the good). This is but one kind of innate concept: we saw earlier that Stoics believe we have non-moral concepts, such as that of God.²⁶ In addition, Stoics thought we have certain innate behavioural drives: for example, Cleanthes said that ‘all men have natural tendencies to virtue’ and Chrysippus reportedly believed that humans are naturally inclined to honour their parents.²⁷

All of these contents are not fully formed in us from birth but rather they are the product of innate dispositions. The quotation from Seneca implies as much and a different Stoic doctrine helps to explain why. Stoics believed that humans are naturally rational creatures, even though they are not born rational. Humans can reasonably be described as naturally rational even if they are not rational in the first years of their lives because the rationality that they later acquire is the product of something with which they begin their lives. As Michael Frede puts it, ‘The Stoic view is not that we acquire reason in addition to something we already have at birth, but rather that something we already have at birth, namely the *hegemonikon* of the irrational soul, is transformed into something else, namely reason.’²⁸ Through the first years of life, a human accumulates concepts and preconceptions (*ennoiai* and *prolepseis*) and as she does so, her *hegemonikon* is altered. Once she has enough concepts and preconceptions, the state of her *hegemonikon* is transformed from irrationality to rationality. Even though experience plays a role

24 See also Diogenes Laertius VII.53, who includes in a list of ways that Stoics say we can come to possess new items of knowledge, ‘The idea of something just and good is acquired naturally [*phusikos*]’ (L-S 39D8).

25 See Scott (1995) p. 208.

26 See Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.12.

27 See Stobaeus 2.65.8 (L-S 61L) and Diogenes Laertius VII.108, respectively.

28 Frede (1993) p.51.

in the development of her *hegemonikon*, the role it plays is not a necessary one and since it isn't necessary, it can't be deemed essential. Rather, the situation is analogous to Descartes' individual with a hereditary disease: in both cases, the agent is transformed solely as a result of factors within her nature.

Finally, let me say a few words on why rationalists believe that Stoics were realists with regard to mental substance or human nature. Stoics associate human nature with the *hegemonikon* or leading part of the soul. As we have seen, the *hegemonikon* has a complex structure: besides being naturally disposed to rationality, it also ??? different innate 'qualities' (*poiototes*). Since the *hegemonikon* has this complex internal structure, it has essential properties and so it is proper to speak, as a realist would, of a human essence or nature.²⁹

• *IV. Conclusions*

I wish to end with two brief conclusions, one on the narrow topic of this paper and a second on a broader issue.

Our study of Grotius' texts and commentators revealed that he possessed a unified if only partially developed set of views on innate ideas. If we discount deviations from the norm and focus only on the 'orthodoxy',³⁰ the same may be true of the Stoics. The difference between Grotius and the Stoics, however, is that commentators remain divided over the correct interpretation of the latter. Depending on which interpretation is correct, Grotius comes out appearing more-or-less Stoical. So the answer to one question – a question which is most pressing if our goal is to determine the extent of the affinity of Grotius' views to those of the Stoics – hinges entirely on how we read the Stoics.

The way in which it hinges on this should be evident from what was said above and rather than belabour the point, I will instead move onto my second conclusion. Along with many others, I believe that Grotius exerted tre-

29 Besides Frede (1993) and Scott (1995), Dirk Obbink is one other defender of the rationalist interpretation. See his ' "What all men believe – must be true": common conceptions and *consensio omnium* in Aristotle and Hellenistic Philosophy', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* vol. X (1992) p. 193-231.

30 For reasons of economy, I have discussed neither the views of non-orthodox Stoics such as Panaetius or Posidonius nor those of later Stoics such as Epictetus. Obviously, they form part of the ancient Stoic tradition and it would be necessary to consider them if one were to attempt a full account of innate ideas in ancient Stoicism. The person who has gone farthest toward this end is Scott (1995). See, e.g., p. 161f.

mendous influence over the interpretation of Stoicism in the seventeenth century: many if not most of those who followed him came to view Stoicism through Grotian lenses. If this is correct, then one way to learn about how Stoicism was understood in the seventeenth century is by learning how Grotius understood it. On the issue of innate ideas, we have good reason to believe that Grotius understood the Stoics roughly as modern day ‘rationalists’ do. The primary reason for believing this is that Grotius explicitly ties his views on innate ideas to the Stoics, using them to justify his ‘rationalist’ outlook. Given the role he assigns them in his argument, it would be very surprising if Grotius took the Stoics to be other than the rationalist he was. Since Grotius took the Stoics to be rationalists on the issue of innate ideas, then since Grotius’ interpretation of Stoicism became *the* interpretation of Stoicism in the seventeenth century, it follows that, as far as early modern philosophers were concerned, Stoics were rationalists.³¹

31 Many thanks to André Gombay for his comments and discussion, especially on Descartes’ relations to Grotius.

