Tabula Rasa and Human Nature

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Abstract
It is widely believed that the philosophical concept of '*tabula rasa*' originates with Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and refers to a state in which a child is as formless as a blank slate. Given that both these beliefs are entirely false, this article will examine why they have endured from the eighteenth century to the present. Attending to the history of philosophy, psychology, psychiatry and feminist scholarship it will be shown how the image of the *tabula rasa* has been used to signify an originary state of formlessness, against which discourses on the true nature of the human being can differentiate their position. The *tabula rasa* has operated less as a substantive position than as a whipping post. However, it will be noted that innovations in psychological theory over the past decade have begun to undermine such narratives by rendering unintelligible the idea of an 'originary' state of human nature.

Introduction

The metaphors mobilised by philosophy and psychology do not simply describe, but have shaped the direction of scholarship by legitimating or de-legitimating particular kinds of research, and by framing how this research is carried out and understood.[1] Here I will explore the concept of the *tabula rasa*; my goal will not be a comprehensive survey of every citation of the term, but rather a genealogical investigation that disturbs commonly-held assumptions and that can help shed light on changes in our contemporary assumptions about human life. I shall argue how the *tabula rasa* has served since the seventeenth century less as a substantive position than as a rhetorical extreme, an image of utter human malleability against which the speaker can differentiate and render more plausible their particular account of the human mind. *Tabula rasa* can thus be conceptualised as a significant, previously little-noted thread within the wider

[1] D.E. Leary (ed.), *Metaphors in the History of Psychology*, (Cambridge: CUP 1999). Some of the material in this article will also appear in a different form in a short entry on 'Tabula Rasa' for the forthcoming *International Encyclopaedia of Critical Psychology*.

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history of Western discourses positioning writing as a false analogy for the human mind, and which in so doing facilitate an account of the human being's essential cognitive or moral nature.[2]

In his influential *Basic Principles of Psychoanalysis,* among the most significant texts to have introduced the ideas of Sigmund Freud to American readers, A.A. Brill stated that for Freud 'the child's mind, when born, is, in the words of Locke, a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate'.[3] Brill's text has been superseded as a characterisation of psychoanalysis; indeed, it has been argued by Forrester precisely that 'in Freud's account, the child is not a passive *tabula rasa*' but rather begins with a range of intersecting and countervailing properties and propensities.[4] Nonetheless, Brill's influence lingers in the popular translation of *tabula rasa* as 'blank slate', which has now become an everyday figure of speech. However, Brill's is anything but a precise translation. *Tabula rasa,* in Latin, referred to the state of a tablet after the inscriptions in the surface of wax had been removed. The *tabula rasa* is generally taken today to mean a state of formlessness prior to text, in line with Brill's 'blank slate'. However, if we attend more closely, it can be observed that a more precise translation would be 'a slate that has been blanked', the effect of the erasure of text. Thus Nietzsche, ever the classical philologist, deploys the term to mean 'to make room for something new'.[5]

Brill is not alone in attributing the image of the human mind as a *tabula rasa* to Locke, or in situating this image as a characterisation of the mind as formless and without predispositions at birth. These were widely spread beliefs in his time, and remain so in ours. Both, however, are false. On the one hand, the image of the *tabula rasa* has a long, winding history; Brill's reductive translation itself is a move within a discursive tradition stretching back beyond Locke. On the other hand, Locke did not use the term 'tabula rasa' in the *Essay*, but rather spoke of the child's mind as 'white paper'; he does not use the image to argue that the child begins formless and pure, but that the mind is initially dependent upon experience for its operation. Helpful for understanding the endurance of these

[2] J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (London: Routledge ([1967] 1978).

[3] A.A. Brill, *Basic Principles of Psychoanalysis*, (NY: University Press of America, 1921), 16.

[4] J. Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis,* (London: Routledge, 1990), 81.

[5] F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality,* ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, (Cambridge: CUP, ([1887] 1997), 35.

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false beliefs is Agamben's theory of the signature. Commenting on the history of the idea of 'secularisation', he notes that the term remains marked by its history in theological discourse, in which it meant the return of the religious individual from pious seclusion to secular involvement. Thus when Weber refers to secularisation as part of the disenchantment of the world, he specifically does not mean the absence of religion but its continued presence as 'the ghost of dead religious beliefs'.[6] Agamben terms a 'signature' a sign or concept which is 'marked' or which 'exceeds' itself by virtue of 'referring it back to a determinate interpretation or field, without for this reason leaving the semiotic to constitute a new meaning or a new concept'.[7]

Agamben has suggested that the concept of '*tabula rasa*' operates as a signature in this way, but he has only traced its very early history. I intend here to further this project, focusing attention on discourses characterising the nature of human beings. Outside of discourses on human beings, the concepts of *tabula rasa* and blank slate have not operated as signatures but as metaphorical images of purity – Moss, for instance, writes that 'Greenland was, in my mind, an enigma. I couldn't say why I wanted to go there, but it had something to do with emptiness, the tabula rasa of a white, continent-sized island.'[8] In discourses on the nature of human beings, however, the dynamics of the philosophical field have continued to haunt appeals to the *tabula rasa* image even where they extend beyond the philosophical field and into the social sciences and media discourse.

Tabula rasa in philosophical discourse until Locke

In *De Anima*, Aristotle argues that 'What [the mind] thinks must be in it just as characters may be said to be on a writing tablet (*grammateion*) on which as yet nothing actually stands written'.[9] Agamben comments that it was the mind's potential for different uses, rather

[6] M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons, (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, [1905] 1958), 182.

[7] G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [2008] 2012), 4.

[8] C. Moss, 'Frozen lands that can thaw the conscience' *Daily Telegraph*, 14th January 2012.

[9] Aristotle, *De Anima* trans. J.A. Smith, (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1931), 430a.

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than the substantive state of blankness, that Aristotle intended by the image of the writing tablet.[10] The issue Agamben gestures towards in his characteristically telegraphic style is explained more clearly by Polansky: 'We should ask whether the table's condition of blankness represents the condition of mind before it knows anything at all and is merely possible, as in human infancy, or it represents mind's condition once it knows and can think at will.'[11] Polansky concludes that Aristotle intended possibility rather than purity, though he notes that 'obviously the blank tablet does a poor job of distinguishing the condition of knowledge from the absence of knowledge'. Likewise, Agamben suggests that this ambiguous image has 'had great fortune in the tradition of Western philosophy' for 'the image was ambiguous, and this ambiguity certainly contributed to its success'; our discussions of the mind have been haunted by the term '*tabula rasa*', since wherever there are discussions of human potentiality, 'the white sheet' returns either as an image of purity or as an image of openness.[12]

Agamben notes that the Latin translation of Aristotle used by Albertus Magnus rendered *grammateion* as *tabula rasa*. This translation was followed by Albertus's student Aquinas. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that the human mind is 'at first like a *tabula rasa* on which nothing is written', but qualifies that we must also 'assign on the part of the intellect some power to make things actually intelligible'.[13] Aquinas's position is subsequently transferred to the antagonist, Epistemon, in Descartes' essay *The Search after Truth by the Light of Nature*. Epistemon argues from Aristotelian and Scholastic principles that the early education of children is faulty, and that one might compare 'the imagination of a child to a *tabula rasa* on which our ideas are to be traced'. He complains that 'our senses, inclinations, teachers, and intellect are the different artists who may work at this task and among them the least competent are the first to take part, namely our imperfect senses'.[14] Eudoxus, Descartes'

[10] G. Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency' in *Potentialities*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, ([1993] 1996), 244–5.

[11] R. Polansky, *Aristotle's* De anima, (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 454.

[12] G. Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency' in *Potentialities*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1993] 1996), 249.

[13] Aquinas, *A Summa of the Summa*, ed. Peter J. Kreeft, San Fransisco, (CA.: Ignatius Press, [1274] 1990), 271–4.

[14] R. Descartes, 'The Search After Truth by the Light of Nature' in *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. Roger Ariew, (NY: Hackett Publishing Company, [1641?] 2000), 320.

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voice in the essay, argues instead however that such an approach leaves no grounds upon which to base a valid knowledge rather than arbitrary opinions, shaped by circumstance. However, the Scholastic *tabula rasa* image is not simply rejected by Eudoxus, Descartes' mouthpiece, but redeployed; Eudoxus uses the erasure of preconceptions 'by sponging out all its features', as an invitation to radical doubt. Such an approach is the precondition for achieving precise and certain knowledge: 'one who has reached a certain term of years known as the age of knowledge, should set himself once for all to remove from his imagination all the inexact ideas that have hitherto succeeded in engraving themselves upon it, and seriously begin to form new ones'.[15] Wolin is thus right when he suggests that 'Descartes's principle of radical doubt creates the *tabula rasa* by an act of will', though, as we shall now see, not quite correct when he states that 'Locke employed the notion in his famous account of how the mind formed ideas'.[16]

In the immediate context in which Locke was writing, the term *tabula rasa* was a familiar image. With Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* published in 1690, William Payne was already able to say in 1682 that 'it has been the conceit of many that the soul is but a *rasa tabula*, a kind of fair unwritten Paper til it has received impressions from without'.[17] In particular, the image was deployed by the Cambridge Platonists, under whom Payne studied in the 1660s. It served this group of scholars as a means of positioning themselves against the idea – which they attribute to Aristotle – that human cognition is shaped solely by environmental factors and has no shape of its own. Benjamin Whichcote preached that 'there are common principles, which everyone who considers may come to knowledge of: but before study and thought, the mind is *abrasa tabula* as white paper, that has nothing written upon it.' As a result, 'tis necessary the mind of man should be enlightened, as to matters of faith; and excited as to other things within its sphere within the compass of reason'.[18] Whichcote's

[15] Ibid., 321.

[16] S. Wolin, *Tocqueville between two worlds: the making of a political and theoretical life*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 41.

[17] W. Payne, *Learning and Knowledge*, (London: Walter Kettilby, 1682), 11.

[18] B. Whichcote, 'That those who are truly religious will be delivered from all dangerous errors about religion' in *The Works of the Learned Benjamin Whichcote*, Volume II, (Aberdeen: Alexander Thomson, [1651] 1703), 4.

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tabula rasa or 'white paper' is an image of the absence of religious and moral principle prior to education and instruction, but posits a capacity for consideration and a determinate compass of reason to already be present from the start, giving the mind a determinate set of predispositions and potentialities. It seems highly likely that Locke was familiar with Whichcote's use of the *tabula rasa* image: Damaris Masham writes that Locke 'very much admired sermons he heard from Dr. Whichcote',[19] and two volumes of the sermons were part of Locke's personal library.[20]

Another similar precursor to Locke in use of the image was Henry More. In *An Antidote Against Atheism*, More attends to 'that notable point in Philosophy, Whether the Soul of man be *Abrasa Tabula*, a Table-book in which nothing is writ; or Whether she have some Innate Notions and Ideas in herself'. *An Antidote Against Atheism* would later be part of Locke's library, and the subject of an exchange of letters between Locke and Damaris Masham. Arguing against the thesis that perception is 'a Passive way impressed or delineated upon her from the Objects of Sense', More sees himself as in agreement with Descartes on the existence of innate ideas, but frames this argument in the Platonic form that true perception is in fact recollection: 'the Mind of Man more free, and better exercised in the close observations of its own operations and nature, cannot but discover that there is an active and actuall Knowledge in a man, of which these outward Objects are rather the re-minders then the first begetters or implanters'.[21]

Over a decade before Locke first used the term, Andrew Marvell playfully presumes upon the reader's knowledge of such philosophical uses of the term *tabula rasa* in his poetry. Marvell had studied at Cambridge during a period in which the influence of Whichcote and More was pervasive, and he repeatedly engages with their ideas in his poetry. In his *Upon Appleton House*, Marvell writes that the flooded fields of the country house remind him of Eden: 'The world when first created sure/Was such a table rase and pure/Or rather such as the *toril*/Ere the bulls enter at Madril'.[22] The *tabula rasa* is here

[19] D. Masham, cited in Yolton, J.S., *A Locke Miscellany*, (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990), 349

[20] J. Harrison & P. Laslett, *The Library of John Locke*, (Oxford: OUP, 1965).

[21] H. More, 'An Antidote to Atheism' in *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings*, (London: William Morden, [1655] 1712), 17.

[22] A. Marvell, 'Upon Appleton House' in *Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Jonathan Bate, (London: Penguin [1951] 1972), lines 445–8.

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deployed by Marvell, with some playfulness and some seriousness, as a characterisation of an ideal of untouched purity, in noting how this ideal is evoked by the way that flooding erases the features on the Nunappleton estate. The distance, however, between the North Yorkshire countryside at the close of a decade of civil war and 'a table rase and pure' is indicated by Marvell's next image comparing the flooded fields to a bull ring. If an indefinite, flooded space resembles for a moment an ideal of purity, this is necessarily a passing image, able to be overcome by its resemblance to the political chaos of internecine war. Marvell does not therefore evoke the *tabula rasa* as an uncomplicated image of purity. Like the 'pure virgin limbs' of the fawn killed by 'wanton troopers' in *The Nymph Complaining*, the *tabula rasa* of *Appleton House* points at once to unreal innocence and political possibility.[23]

Locke's *tabula rasa*

The term 'tabula rasa' appears in Locke's the *Essays on the Law of Nature*. Its usage here further supports the idea that Locke did not intend to suggest that the mind begins without form or structure by the metaphor. Locke states that his aim is 'to inquire whether the souls of the newly-born are just *rasas tabulas*, afterwards to be filled in by observation and reasoning, or whether they have the laws of nature as signs of their duty inscribed on them at birth. But by our inquiry whether the law of nature is written in the souls of men we mean this: namely, whether there are any moral propositions inborn in the mind'.[24] Locke distinguishes here between observation and reasoning, the two elements that together comprise understanding. He also suggests that the *tabula rasa* is not an image of cognitive formlessness, but of a state that requires correct instruction in order to form representations of true moral principles.

In the unpublished Draft A of the *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke deploys the *tabula rasa* theme again, in attempting to specify that the newly-born do not begin with

[23] A. Marvell, 'A Nymph Complaining at the Loss of her Fawn' in *Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Jonathan Bate, (London: Penguin [1951] 1972), lines 1, 89.

[24] J. Locke, 'Essays on the Law of Nature' in *Locke: Political Writings*, ed. Mark Goldie, (Cambridge: CUP, [1664] 1997), 96.

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determinate, explicit knowledge but that such knowledge is formed through the combination of sensory experiences with the innate capacities of human beings for internal mental operations such as comparing or abstracting. Far from suggesting that the child is simply a product of his or her environmental influences, he suggests that there are two objects of sense: external objects on the one hand, and on the other 'the experience of the operations of our owne minds'. Our minds are irreducible to the experience of external objects and should themselves be considered as 'a substance wherin thinking knowing doubting hopeing feareing & c does subsist'. These are 'the two only principles or originals from which we receive any simple Ideas whatsoever & that all the knowledg we have beyond this is noe thing else but the compareing uniteing compounding enlargeing'. Locke suggests that the mind does not therefore begin formless, but void specifically of 'ideas' except as generated by internal and external experiences: 'when the minde which at first tis probable to me is *rasa tabula*, hath by repeated exercise got the rembrance of severall of these simple Ideas & observd that a certain number of them are joynd constantly togeather it comes as I have said before to looke on them as the marks effections or concomitants of that one thing'.[25]

Locke is, in Draft A, drawing a distinction between Ideas and any other forms of thought. He specifies that the formation of Ideas depends upon our experiences of external objects. However he qualifies that Ideas are irreducible to such sensory experiences, since they require internal processes such as comparison and abstraction. Locke is suggesting that all knowledge comes solely from the effects of external sensory experience and internal reflection. This is not an argument for the extreme formlessness of the mind at birth; hence Kant can affirm that he is agreement with 'the celebrated Locke' when he argues that, with regards 'the occasioning causes' of 'all knowledge', 'the impressions of the senses providing the first stimulus, the whole faculty of knowledge opens out to them'.[26] Rewording but not altering his argument from Draft A, in Draft B Locke states that 'there is noe notion, Idea or knowledge of any thing originally in the soule, but that at first it is perfectly *rasa tabula*, quite void.' From this he

[25] J. Locke, 'Draft A' in *Drafts for the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and other Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch & G.A.J. Rogers, (London: Clarendon Press, [1671] 1990), 7–8.

[26] I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd ed., trans. Norman Kemp Smith, (NY: Palgrave, [1787] 2007) 121–2.

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concludes that 'all our knowledge is founded on & ultimately derives its self from… externall sensible objects, or the internall operations of our own mindes'.[27]

In the final draft of the *Essay*, however, Locke does not use the term '*tabula rasa*'. Instead, at the beginning of the second book, he argues 'let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any Ideas; How comes it to be furnished?… To this I answer, in one word, From Experience'.[28] This statement has been read by many to suggest that Locke believes that the mind is formless at birth. As Plotkin asserts, commenting upon this passage: 'this is the statement of the famous blank slate or *tabula rasa*, and has proved, especially following the founding of scientific psychology two centuries later, one of the most enduring and contentious axioms of the science'.[29] However, if one reads on in the *Essay*, Locke's argument diverges from its historic caricature. Locke suggests that the formation of ideas is initially dependent upon sensory experiences, in exactly the same manner as seeing is dependent upon light. However, like Whichcote in his use of the *tabula rasa* motif, Locke also suggests innate capacities for judgement must be engaged for there to be any understanding of the meaning of such sensory experiences. He insists that there is 'no knowledge without discernment': the ability to distinguish between experiences, compare them and abstract from them.[30] Locke does indeed close his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* with the statement that a child can be considered 'as white paper or wax to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases'. However, if one considers the method Locke suggests will achieve this moulding and fashioning, it is one that recognises the determinate features with which a child is born and their inherent predispositions: 'God has stamped certain characters upon men's minds' and therefore

[27] J. Locke, 'Draft B' in *Drafts for the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and other Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch & G.A.J. Rogers, (London: Clarendon Press, [1671] 1990), 128.

[28] J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and other Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, (London: Clarendon Press, [1690] 1979), 104.

[29] H. Plotkin, *Evolutionary Thought in Psychology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 18.

[30] J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and other Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, (London: Clarendon Press, [1690] 1979), 202.

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attempts to 'study their natures and aptitudes and see, by often trials, what turn they easily take and what becomes them'.[31]

Leibniz's Locke

Whereas Locke is commonly believed to have originated the idea of the 'tabula rasa', and to have intended by it the argument that the human mind begins without form or structure, we have seen that neither is true. It has not been uncommon for scholars of Locke to have recognised this; however, these specialists have, to date, only addressed these false beliefs as a peculiar hindrance to a correct understanding of Locke's arguments.[32] They have not explored the genealogy or operation of these perceptions. A signpost towards such a genealogy is offered by John Dewey, in a little-known dictionary entry. He suggests that 'Leibniz, in criticising Locke's *Essay upon Human Understanding*, uses the phrase continually and technically, and from him it gained new currency' given that 'Locke himself does not use the phrase'.[33]

In his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz offers a sustained critique of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and particular criticisms of the image of the 'tabula rasa' as an accurate characterisation of the human mind. He suggests that 'Aristotle and the author of the *Essay* maintain' that 'the soul in itself is completely blank like a writing tablet on which nothing has as yet been written – a tabula rasa', which implies that 'everything which is inscribed there comes solely from the senses'. By contrast, Leibniz argues that the human mind 'inherently contains the sources of various notions and doctrines which external objects merely rouse up on suitable occasions'.[34] Leibniz's figure of 'Locke', against which he can position his argument, is an incarnation of Descartes'

[31] J. Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education, and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, ed. Ruth W. Grant & Nathan Narcov, (London: Clarendon Press, [1693] 1996) 44, 161.

[32] E.g. M.V.C. Jeffreys, *Locke: Prophet of Common Sense*, (London: Methuen 1967); W. Walker, *Locke, Literary Criticism and Philosophy*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1994).

[33] J. Dewey 'Contributions to *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*' in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 2, 1899 – 1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston & Sidney Hook, (Carbondale, IL.:Southern Illinois University Press, [1902] 1976), 256.

[34] G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Remnant & John Bennett, (Cambridge: CUP [1765] 1996), P54.

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Epistemon from the *The Search after Truth by the Light of Nature* (a text we only have any access to in the original French because Leibniz himself copied it out). However, the Scholastic enemy has been transposed in Leibniz's *New Essays*. Whereas, in Descartes, valid philosophical knowledge was threatened by the formless abstractions on the nature of human life presented by Scholasticism, in Leibniz the threat of formlessness lies internal to the activity of philosophical discourses on human nature, and is embodied in 'Locke'. In using the term 'white paper' from prior *tabula rasa* discourse, Locke became aligned with Scholasticism whose conceptual abstractions served as a key 'constitutive outside',[35] rejected by philosophical discourses as a positive move in establishing their own position on human nature. 'Locke' became the spectre of modern philosophy's debt to and rejection of Scholasticism. These stakes are entirely missed by the long history of discourses on 'Locke's *tabula rasa*'. They were, however, addressed by Hume's rather sympathetic suggestion that Locke accidently allied himself with the Scholastics in deploying the unfortunate term *tabula rasa*: 'I must own it to be my opinion, that Locke was betrayed into this question by the schoolmen', who made available such 'undefined terms'.[36]

Leibniz's characterisation of 'Locke' as believing that 'everything which is inscribed there comes solely from the senses' is in one way highly familiar to us. Like the account commonly believed today, he suggests that Locke used the term *tabula rasa* in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and that by it he intended the argument that everything which is inscribed in the mind is a product solely of the senses. In another sense, however, the characterisation by Leibniz is unfamiliar, in that this image and argument is placed in a historical context that stretches back to the Latin translation of Aristotle. Leibniz is not alone in this awareness of the *tabula rasa* as a concept that radically predates Locke: William Molyneux, in a letter to Locke himself regarding the translation of the *Essay* into French, states that 'I do not go by Aristotle's *tabula rasa*' and asserts that there is something 'solid' in the argument that there are certain innate faculties to the human mind.[37]

[35] E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, (NY: Verso, 1990), 18, 56.

[36] D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Steinberg, 2nd ed., (NY: Hackett Publications Company, [1777] 1993), 13.

[37] W. Molyneux, 'Réflections de Mr. L–.' in *The Correspondence of John Locke: Letters nos. 2199–2664*, ed. Esmond Samuel De Beer, (Oxford: OUP, [1697] 1981), 779, my translation

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Both Leibniz's caricature of Locke's argument and his placement of this metaphor in its historical context can be explained through a single hypothesis: that reference to the *tabula rasa* should be regarded as a rhetorical extreme of originary malleability. Through situating themselves as obliged to qualify the extreme view suggested by 'Locke's *tabula rasa*', philosophers and social commentators have mandated discourse on human nature, and the extent to which it is responsive to change in response to environmental manipulation through education. The *tabula rasa* after Leibniz has served as an extreme position, obliging qualifications from the speaker as a supplement to its utter and absurd indeterminacy. This zero-degree is handy for the philosophical field, establishing the potential for philosophy both to make determinate claims about human nature and to claim to determinately open new possibilities for human beings. Kant, for example, suggests that whilst human malleability opens the possibility of philosophy, and of the social and pedagogic sciences, as a meaningful activity for altering human lives, the extreme of total malleability closes again the meaningfulness of reflection on the nature of human experience and action.[38] And as Wahrman has described, 'this image – of the *tabula rasa* – was endlessly recycled in the mushrooming pedagogical literature of subsequent decades, enthralled as it was by the shaping power thus conferred upon education'.[39] From Leibniz onwards the *tabula rasa* was never as much a live concept within philosophy as the first part of a genre of narratives which ran 'While Locke's image of the mind as a '*tabula rasa*' can be accepted to some extent and indicates the importance of education, in fact the mind is better regarded as…'

The *tabula rasa* thus operated as a polemical empty-shell of a philosophical concept, which establishes the far limits of originary formlessness and provides scaffolding for discourses on the true form of human nature. For instance, Hegel in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, opposes both the real meaning of Aristotle's image of the blank writing tablet and his own thought to 'realism in the most trivial sense, namely that the soul is a *tabula rasa* (Locke) and receives its concepts from the external world'.[40] Patterson asserts that 'the Platonic philosophy is likewise better fitted than that of

[38] I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd ed., trans. Norman Kemp Smith, (NY: Palgrave, [1787] 2007), 8.

[39] D. Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 186.

[40] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, II, ed. Robert F. Brown, (Oxford: OUP, ([1826] 2006), 226.

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Locke for the investigation of those principles such as those of Beauty is manifest from this: that whereas Locke's theory of the understanding regards the human soul as primarily a *tabula rasa*, whose subsequent ideas are the mere echo of the impressions of the outer world… according to Plato, she is a tablet legibly written on from the first'.[41] He makes use of the spatial metaphor of the *tabula* to discuss the occupation of British colonial space, though still as a rhetorical point of comparison to what he sees as the actual state of affairs: 'in succeeding to the empire of India, we [the British] found no *tabula rasa* whereon to write what we pleased, but a taxative system which in its general features had been in operation for two thousand years. The very slowness of our progress to supremacy – incorporating at intervals here a district and there a province – prevented the adoption of any comprehensive scheme founded on European notions of administration'.[42]

A minority of modern philosophical texts have deployed the *tabula rasa* theme as an ideal not of potentiality but of purity. An interesting case is that of Ayn Rand. Rand deploys the *tabula rasa* image as a tool for placing responsibility for good or evil solely on the individual, who on this basis warrants a highly circumscribed level of social or material support:

> Since men are born *tabula rasa*, both cognitively and morally, a rational man regards strangers as innocent until proved guilty, and grants them that initial good will in the name of their human potential. After that, he judges them according to the moral character they have actualized. If he finds them guilty of major evils, his good will is replaced by contempt and moral condemnation. (If one values human life, one cannot value its destroyers.) If he finds them to be virtuous, he grants them personal, individual value and appreciation, in proportion to their virtues. It is on the ground of that generalized good will and respect for the value of human life that one helps strangers in an emergency—and only in an emergency.[43]

However, it has been more common among philosophical discourses to have continued to use the *tabula rasa* image primarily to establish

[41] R.H. Patterson, *Essays in History and Art*, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1861), 82.

[42] Ibid. 174.

[43] A. Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: a new concept of egoism*, (New York: New American Library, 1964), 52. My thanks to inestimably erudite Benjamin Crowne for this reference.

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the extreme pole of a spectrum ranging from an origin of extreme formlessness to an origin of utterly pre-set structure. For example, King has distinguished between the histories of western and Hindu and Buddhist philosophies by arguing that 'the mind has rarely been conceived of as a *tabula rasa* or a passive recipient of perceptual knowledge in Indian culture, being actively involved in its acquisition, even in the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools. This conception of the mind's active role in perceptual experiences gave Indian theories of perception a more 'idealist edge' than one finds in western philosophies until Immanuel Kant'.[44]

Tabula rasa in psychological discourse

Philosophical usage of the *tabula rasa* as a rhetorically-useful whipping post has been inherited by psychological discourses. This is the case even with authors appearing to agree with the idea of *tabula rasa*: a telling case is Le Bon's *The Psychology of Socialism*. Here Le Bon warns against 'crosses between members of different races. The individual then becomes a sort of *tabula rasa*. He has lost his ancestral concepts' he is nothing but a hybrid without morals or character, at the mercy of every impulse'.[45]

The *tabula rasa* played a role in delineating the boundaries and content of psychology itself. Deploying the classic philosophical narrative to engage in a distinction between psychological from sociological discourse, and to privilege the latter, Durkheim writes that humans are shaped by 'religion, political organization, the degree of development of science, the state of industry, etc. If they are considered apart from all these historic causes, they become incomprehensible. Thus, how can the individual pretend to reconstruct, through his own private reflection, what is not the work of individual thought? He is not confronted with a *tabula rasa* on which he can write what he wants, but with existing realities'.[46] By contrast, the philosophical legacy of the *tabula rasa* has also been deployed as a constitutive outside to true psychology. Husserl writes that Locke has misdirected psychology away from the fundamental importance

[44] R. King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 149.

[45] G. Le Bon, *The Psychology of Socialism*, trans. Bernard Miall, (NY: Transaction, [1899] 1981), 62.

[46] E. Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, (London: Routledge, [1904] 1977), 78.

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of intentionality through his image of the mind as passively 'like a writing tablet', which 'dominates psychology and the theory of knowledge for centuries, even up to the present day'.[47] Similarly, in Allport's foundational work on the psychology of personality, he opposes his argument to the position he believes can be attributed to Locke. 'Locke', he argues 'assumed the mind of the individual to be a *tabula rasa* at birth. And the intellect itself was a passive thing'. Allport, by contrast, identifies with Leibniz, for whom 'the intellect was perpetually active in its own right… bent on manipulating sensory data'.[48]

Such a mobilisation of the image of the *tabula rasa* as a constitutive outside, against which the speaker's more appropriate perspective on the true form of the human mind can be positioned, has generally been maintained since Allport. For instance, Davies uses the image for navigation in passing through treacherous terrain. She asks: 'Is the child a passive, innocent *tabula rasa* on which culture is written, or does the child have innate, active, sexually impulsive drives of his/her own? How far is the child 'innocent' with regards to incidents of sexual abuse?'[49] She then uses the false opposition between sexuality and innocence, facilitated by appeal to the *tabula rasa* and the polyvalence of the term 'innocence',[50] to show that in fact that innocence does not require a *tabula rasa* model of human nature. Children may have certain sexually impulsive drives and yet not be considered complicit in their abuse by adults.

As well as facilitating narratives on human nature, 'Locke's image of the *tabula rasa*' has also been mobilised to police and enjoin changes within psychological discourses themselves. For instance, in an editorial in the *British Journal of Psychiatry,* Abed uses the accusation that 'we regularly find psychiatrists, psychologists and social scientists violating basic biological rules by (for example) assuming the human mind is a blank slate' to argue that psychiatry should integrate evolutionary theory more fully as its governing paradigm.[51]

[47] E. Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, [1954] 1970), 85.

[48] G. Allport, *Becoming: basic considerations for a psychology of personality*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 7–8.

[49] M. Davies, *Childhood Sexual Abuse and the Construction of Identity*, (Bristol, PA.: Taylor & Francis, 1995), 75.

[50] R. Duschinsky, 'Childhood Innocence: Essence, Education, Performativity' *Textual Practice*, 2012, in press.

[51] R.T. Abed, 'Psychiatry and Darwinism: Time to reconsider?' *The British Journal of Psychiatry* **177** (2000): 1–3, at 2.

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Here Abed deploys the 'blank slate' as a threat of scientific illegibility, necessitating adherence to evolutionary theory as a barricade against the violation of 'basic biological rules'. Another case is Sherry's argument against studies in media psychology that explore the 'impact' of representations on viewers. He argues that such an approach has been guided by a misguided account of human beings, as the passive product of experiences. The 'environmental determinism' of research on the effects of the media has been 'philosophically based in the empiricism of Locke who felt that an individual begins life as a tabula rasa or "blank slate," and that the process of development consists of filling the blank slate with information garnered through empirical interaction with the world'.[52] As a result of this debt to Locke, Sherry contends that media psychology has therefore presumed upon a simple model of 'impact' as immediate inscription rather than observe more closely the neuropsychological processes involved in media consumption. Sherry also alleges that the reification of every human being as equivalent to a blank slate has also directed media psychology away from individual differences in experiences of consumption, caused by factors such as cultural background or personal traits.

An interesting appearance of the *tabula rasa* motif in psychological discourse occurred in the debate between Vandell and Harris in a special issue of *Developmental Psychology*. What is notable about this case is that there was both use of the *tabula rasa* image, and also some recognition that this image serves psychological discourse as a polemical extreme, and abject subject-position. Harris argues that genetic inheritance and peer groups play a more significant role in shaping an individual than the parenting they receive. Yet she has been criticised for opposing her view to a caricature, in which parents freely mould their formless infant. Harris counters:

> Vandell claimed that I have constructed a 'straw man' – that I have accused developmentalists of holding a view of development that has been dead for years. But 'this view of the child as a blank slate on which parents are free to create' (Vandell, 2000, p. 700) is not what I accused developmentalists of holding. The 'blank slate' view of development – the idea that babies are born with no innate knowledge, no built-in predispositions – is indeed long dead. The mental set I call the 'nurture assumption,' on

[52] J.L. Sherry, 'Media Effects Theory and the Nature/Nurture Debate: A Historical Overview and Directions for Future Research' *Media Psychology* **6** (2004): 83–109, at 88, parentheses suppressed.

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the other hand, is still very much alive. It is the pattern of thought that underlies the use of the loaded term nurture – a word that means 'to take care of' or 'to rear' – as a substitute for the neutral term environment.[53]

Tabula rasa in post-Foucauldian feminist theory

The *tabula rasa* has also become a key polemical figure in the reception of Foucault's statement that 'the body is the inscribed surface of events' by feminist theorists.[54] The statement comes from his essay 'Nietzsche, History, Genealogy', as Foucault describes Nietzsche's attention to the conflict and interplay between different forces, which play themselves out in the shaping of both subjectivity and embodiment.

Foucault's work is used to discuss the social determination of the embodied subject, as a way of thinking about the meaning of agency. 'For Foucault', Butler argues, 'the cultural construction of the body is effected through the figuration of "history" as a writing instrument that produces cultural significations – language – through the disfiguration and distortion of the body, where the body is figured as a ready surface or blank page available for inscription'.[55] Turner agrees that Foucault's subject is 'a featureless *tabula rasa* awaiting the animating disciplines of discourse'.[56] The accusation from Butler and Turner is that Foucault's human being is inherently passive, receiving their embodied identity like the inscriptions upon a blank page. Such criticisms of Foucault have been responded to in various ways by later feminists. One common approach distinguishes two forms of power in Foucault's work. On the first model, 'power is the maker of persons. Power is productive and its products are the specific forms of historical subjectivity. Since

[53] J.R. Harris, 'Socialization, personality development, and the child's environments' *Developmental Psychology*, **36** (2000), 699–710, at 701; citing D.L. Vandell 'Parents, peer groups, and other socializing influences' *Developmental Psychology*, **36** (2000): 699–710.

[54] M. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, History, Genealogy' in *Aesthetics: Essential Works Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion, (London: Penguin, ([1971] 1998), 375.

[55] J. Butler, 'Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions' *The Journal of Philosophy*, **86**(11) (1989): 601–607, at 603.

[56] T. Turner, 'Bodies and Anti-Bodies' in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, ed. Thomas J. Csordas, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 37.

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Foucault rejects the claim that there is anything like a human nature that is transhistorical in character, power on this model has in effect a *tabula rasa* – the individual, not yet a subject – on which to inscribe its various constructions.'

By contrast, 'the second model of the functioning of power is not that of power as person-maker but of power as one player in a social field – really a battlefield'.[57] Adding to this discussion, Kirby has criticised both Foucault and Butler. She suggests that for both theorists the body is conceptualised as unintelligible in itself, waiting discourse to give it meaning just as the *tabula rasa* waits passively for its inscription. She identifies that such a narrative is complicit with the 'dubious sexual economy that informs this notion of writing. The model of the *tabula rasa* whose inert matter merely receives and then bears an inscription without in any way rewriting its significance is surely a familiar story. Within patriarchal thought the body/woman, as that specular surface, is routinely denied any efficacy in the reproduction of value.'[58] Kirby proposes instead a realist position in which all matter, including the body, is by degrees generative of meaning; she insists that our embodied subjectivities do not resemble a *tabula* awaiting inscription, whether blank or otherwise.

In opposition to such readings, Geuss has argued the inscription metaphor is precisely a way for both Nietzsche and Foucault to show that no reinterpretation will ever 'encounter… just a *tabula rasa*, but a set of actively structured forces, practices, etc. which will be capable of active resistance to attempts to turn them into other directions, impose new functions upon them'.[59] The metaphor of inscription is mobilised, Geuss argues, to mark any cultural form as always already a palimpsest, rather than to imply that there was a time prior to text. In agreement with Geuss, McLaren identifies that 'Foucault uses many verbs to describe the effect of power on the body – it is marked, engraved, moulded; it is shaped and trained; it responds and increases its forces… a closer consideration of his genealogical works reveals that the inscription model does not adequately capture the different ways that Foucault talks about the body, and there is no compelling reason to privileged the social inscription account over the others'. McLaren implies that there

[57] S.L. Bartky, 'Agency: What is the Problem?' in *Provoking Agents: Theorizing Gender and Agency,* ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner, (Champaign, IL., University of Illinois Press, 1995), 188–9.

[58] V. Kirby, *Telling flesh: the substance of the corporeal*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 44, 147.

[59] R. Geuss, *Morality, Culture and History*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 13.

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must therefore be some utility gained by those who only tell 'part of the story'.[60] I would agree. For instance these discussions of Foucault have missed the fact that, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault himself offers a critique of the *tabula rasa* image as a characterisation of human nature (which he attributes to Locke). He diagnoses this metaphor as a 'parallel', at the level of discourses on the 'genesis of consciousness', of a wider societal move towards regarding knowledge as capable of comprehensive tabulation.[61]

Feminist discourses regarding Foucault and the figure of the *tabula rasa* do not, themselves, occur on some 'blank slate', but are interventions within and appropriations of the history of utterances making use of the term that have been traced above. Instead, like my previous sentence, they allow the speaker to enact their obligation to qualify the extreme and indeterminate position by making determinate claims about how things really stand. As we have seen, 'Locke's *tabula rasa*' has been deployed in the history of philosophy and psychology to signify an origin of utter human mental malleability. I would suggest that these accusations at Foucault play out the same argument on different terrain: not the mind, but embodiment. Against the extreme malleability of 'Foucault's' subject, scholars can situate themselves as obliged to elaborate determinate positions on the nature of embodiment.

Conclusion: the *tabula rasa* today

Curiously, however, appeal to the *tabula rasa* image has gone into something of a decline within social scientific discourses over the last ten years. In particular, whilst the *tabula rasa* image has certainly continued to see use in the past decade among psychologists, its prevalence in major peer-review psychology articles and books by leading scholars has notably declined. With the rise of theories of epigenetics, nature/nurture debates in the manner of Vandell and Harris have been rendered obsolete, in turn making the *tabula rasa* a less handy constitutive outside. Epigenetics suggests that human beings are determined by neither nature nor nurture but by their ongoing, *mutual* interaction of each with the other: genetic predispositions can shape individual perception and social responses, and experience

[60] M.A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, (NY: SUNY, 2002), 206.

[61] M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London: Routledge, [1966] 1989), 79.

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can impact upon the genetic predispositions of an individual or their descendents.[62] Stephen Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* ostensibly highlights the enduring significance of the *tabula rasa* image as a constitutive outside for psychological discourses on human nature. Though he corrects the misconception that Rousseau invented the image of the 'noble savage', Pinker deploys the classic narrative we have seen above to accuse Locke's 'doctrine of the Blank Slate' of having 'set the agenda for much of the social sciences' and of having misdirected psychology into an attempt 'to explain all though, feeling, and behaviour with a few simple mechanisms'.[63] Instead, he aligns himself with Leibniz in arguing for a brain which evolution has granted certain predispositions and biases. Yet Pinker makes the image of the *tabula rasa* glow into brightness precisely by setting fire to it. He deploys the *tabula rasa* not as a constitutive outside for his own position on the nature/nurture debate but to shift the terrain of this debate. He surveys psychological research that suggests that there is no originary human nature about which to argue, but rather an epigenetic interaction.

Yet, despite its decline, within psychological discourse the image of the *tabula rasa* remains available as a rhetorical resource. In Schaffer and Kipp's influential textbook *Developmental Psychology*, they note that an 'influential view on children and childrearing was suggested by John Locke, who believed that the mind of a child is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, and that children have no inborn tendencies'. The authors regret, however, that Locke 'collected no objective data to back up' his argument, and contrast Locke to the more accurate and substantiated views of human nature presented by later psychologists.[64] The same narrative can be seen, transposed to a discussion of what chickens can teach us about human psychology, in Lennox: 'If a few more philosophers had had a little more empirical interaction with chickens, John Locke may have reconsidered his notion of *tabula rasa*, the idea of the incipient individual as a blank slate'.[65] Surpassing even this, my favourite instance of the *tabula rasa* theme in contemporary psychological discourse is from Kenrick et al., who argue against Locke from an evolutionary

[62] M. Rutter, *Genes and Behaviour*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

[63] S. Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, (London: Penguin, 2002), 6.

[64] D.R. Schaffer & K. Kipp, *Developmental Psychology*, 7th ed., (Belmont, CA: Thompson Higher Education, 2007), 8.

[65] P. Lennox, 'Pecking order' *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 4th February, 2010.

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perspective on cognitive science. They suggest that 'sufficient numbers of discordant findings have proliferated to make the blank slate look like the graffiti-filled wall of a New York subway station'.[66]

Beyond psychology, it remains commonplace today to hear it asserted from academic and media discourses that 'the notion of childhood innocence originated with theories developed by the philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau',[67] and that 'Locke proposed the *tabula rasa*, the blank sheet on which experience writes human characters'.[68] Wasserman and Clair, sociologists, even suggest that 'the tabula rasa concept, with its most famous origins in John Locke's essay *Concerning Human Understanding*, is at the core of Western ontological conceptions of the human being in general'.[69] Yet the *tabula rasa* remains an ambiguous image. Thus on the one hand, Williams offers an analysis of the rise in unconventional children's names by suggesting the 'I think everybody really wants a *tabula rasa*' so 'that they can invest them with as much of their own personality and, more to the point, as little of yours, as possible'.[70] On the other hand, Graham-Dixon claims of Locke that 'the most famous metaphor of his epistemology, according to which the human mind is a *tabula rasa* – a blank piece of paper – boldly contradicted the traditional Christian belief in Original Sin. Whereas writers from the time of St Augustine onwards had argued that children are corrupt from birth, because of their inherent sinfulness, Locke argued that the mind of the child is essentially innocent, pure'.[71] As Agamben suggested, in discourses on human nature the term *tabula rasa* continues to slide between an image of originary potentiality or openness and an image of originary purity.

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[66] D.T. Kenrick et al., 'Evolutionary Cognitive Science' in *From Mating to Mentality*, (Hove, East Sussex: Psychology Press, 2003), 21.
[67] C. Mitchell & J. Reid-Walsh, *Girl Culture*, (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Publishing, 2008), 365.
[68] *The Guardian*, 23 June 2011
[69] J.A. Wasserman & J.M. Clair, 'The Medicalization of Homelessness and the Sociology of the Self' *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, **37** (2011): 29–62, at 33.
[70] Z. Williams, 'I called my daughter Harper first' *Guardian*, 11th July, 2011.
[71] A. Graham-Dixon, 'Age of Innocence' *Sunday Telegraph*, 5th August, 2007.

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