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Aspects of the Early Modern Common Notion

Herbert, Digby, Culverwell

Mogens Lærke (CNRS)

1. Introduction

The beginnings of modern philosophy are routinely depicted as a break with tradition and authority, as a moment when the individual mind took charge of its own powers, shedding itself of idols and scholastic prejudices, adopting a new criterion of certain truth either proper to the mind or based on direct observation and experience.¹ One corollary of that well-rehearsed narrative is the demise of universal consent as a criterion of truth or a foundational feature of knowledge. As Francis Bacon notes in the *Novum Organon*, ‘true consent consists in agreement reached (after proper examination) by free judgements ... But even if there were a true and general consent, it is so far distant from real and solid authority, that it should provoke a violent presumption to the contrary. For the worst of all omens in intellectual matters is taken from consent.’² Indeed, he muses, ‘just how ill-starred is the current condition of human knowledge can be seen from common assertions.’³ Pierre Gassendi observes along similar lines that ‘most people declare notions to be common which aren’t really so’ and that in fact ‘agreement among human beings is nowhere to be found.’⁴ Descartes, for his part, argues in the *Fifth Replies* that ‘one thing is not proved to be better known than another just because a greater number of people think it is true; what shows it to be better known is simply that those who know the true nature of both things see that it is prior in the order of knowledge and more evident and more certain.’⁵

¹ This paper was prepared within the framework of the research project « The Common Notion. Science and Consensus in the Seventeenth Century » (NOTCOM), ERC Advanced Grant no. 101052433, PI: M. Lærke, IHRIM, CNRS-UMR 5317, ENS de Lyon / Maison Française d’Oxford, MFO, CNRS-USR 3129, 2023-2028.

² Bacon [1620] 2004: Aph. I.77, 123.

³ Bacon [1620] 2004: 201.

⁴ Gassendi [1634] 1658: 411–19. French translation by B. Rochot in Gassendi [1634] 1957: 249–87.

⁵ AT VII, 384, trans. in CSMK II, 263–64.

And, as a fourth and final example, in his *Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, Robert Boyle declares: ‘As I would never reject a truth for being generally known or received, so will I not conclude an opinion to be a truth merely because great numbers have thought it to be so, nor think an opinion erroneous because it is not yet known to many or because it opposes a tenet embraced by many.’⁶

Important parts of this critical reckoning with consensus were mediated through criticism of so-called ‘common notions’ (Gr. *koinai ennoiai*; Lat. *notiones communes*). Common notions were mostly understood within the framework of a somewhat Platonized version of the Stoic theory of knowledge that some early modern thinkers, via neo-stoics such as Justus Lipsius, had inherited from Cicero and Simplicius.⁷ According to this theory, common notions are innate dispositions or faculties that, when prompted by experience, are realized in the same way in all people because, as Cicero writes, ‘reason ... is certainly common to us all,’ which is why common notions will be ‘imprinted on all minds alike.’⁸ It was against this kind of conception that Locke mounted a frontal attack in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* when arguing that ‘this argument of universal consent, which is made use of to prove innate principles, seems to me a demonstration that there are none such: because there are none to which all mankind give an universal assent.’⁹

When focusing only on the most canonical thinkers—Bacon, Gassendi, Descartes, Boyle, Locke—the history of the early modern common notion thus mostly presents itself as one of a demise. On the ‘empiricist’ axis going from Bacon to Gassendi to Locke, common notions, innate ideas, and consensus arguments were seemingly rejected *en bloc*. Among the ‘rationalist’ Cartesians—putting Spinoza to one side as a complicated case¹⁰—common notions remained in the picture, but their connection to universal consent receded into the background

⁶ Boyle 1996: 4–5.

⁷ See Lagrée 2017: 162. On Cicero’s reading of the stoic common notions, see Horowitz 1998: 21–26; and Brittain 2005.

⁸ Cicero 1928: I.30, 329. The doctrine arguably does not correspond to what today’s Ancient philosophy scholarship takes to be the authentic position of the Greeks stoics whose outlook was somewhat more empirical in nature. See in particular Dyson 2009.

⁹ Locke [1689,... 1700⁴] 1979: 49.

¹⁰ See Spinoza, *Ethics*, II, prop. 37–40 incl. scol. 1–2, in Spinoza 1985–2015: I, 474–78. The literature on Spinoza’s common notions is substantial and uneven. For the commentaries I have found most helpful, see Gueroult 1972: 324–89; Deleuze 1981; Sangiacomo 2019: 110–47. For my own take on the matter, see Lærke 2021: 98–100, 173–4, 283n39, 309–10n48–49; and Lærke [forthcoming A].

while their connection to innate ideas and self-evident knowledge, grounded in Euclid's original identification of mathematical axioms as *koinai ennoiai*, became more accentuated.¹¹

And yet, when looking beyond the traditional rationalist-empiricist alternative into which this narrative feeds, arguments from common notions and universal consent begin to resurface even in major thinkers in relation to specific contexts. For example, the *consensus gentium* argument for proving the existence of God, as inherited from Plato, Aristotle, Seneca and Cicero,¹² remained one of the most popular demonstrations throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³ It was embraced by theologians, jurists, and philosophers alike, including for example Jean Calvin,¹⁴ Richard Hooker,¹⁵ Philippe Duplessis-Mornay,¹⁶ Hugo Grotius,¹⁷ several among the Cambridge Platonists,¹⁸ even by Pierre Gassendi in the *Syntagma Philosophicum*.¹⁹ More importantly, however, arguments from consensus and common notions remained crucial for a host of reputedly 'minor' thinkers. In his 1956 *John Locke and the Way of Ideas*, John Yolton gave a sweeping survey of the numerous minor authors in Locke's English context who subscribed to more or less 'naïve'—more or less dispositional—forms of innatism, many of which also involved some level of commitment to arguments from universal consent and common notions.²⁰ But this was far from the only context in which such theories occurred. In fact, a number of less known but still notable seventeenth-century thinkers developed broader epistemological doctrines of common notions and universal consent, including some for whom these doctrines were *not* associated with innate ideas, thus belying a

¹¹ For Descartes, common notions are universally true from the point of view of an intellect that is commonly shared by all men of sound mind. This intellect is however not equally realized in them all. Hence, if common notions can be 'denied by nobody,' this only holds to the extent that people are not blinded by prejudice and actually pay attention to them, something they may very well never have an 'occasion' to do (*Principia philosophiae*, I.49-50, AT VIII, 23-24/AT IX.2, 46; see also *Regulae*, XII, AT X, 419; *Notae in programma*, AT VIII, 359-60; *Principia philosophiae*, I.13, AT VIII, 9/AT IX.2, 30-31; and I.49, A VIII, 22-23/AT IX.2, 46; and *Secundae responsiones*, AT VII, 162-63/AT IX, 126). In Descartes, common notions are notions grounded in the intellect that are potentially but not actually common to all (Descartes to Mersenne, 16 October 1639, AT II, 597-98; see also Descartes, *Conversations avec Burman*, 16 April 1648, AT V, 146, and the *Epistola ad P. Dinet*, AT VII, 580).

¹² See Plato 1926: X.889A-C, vol. II, 309; Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, I, 3, 270b, in Aristotle 1995: 991, in conjunction with *Topics*, I, 1, 100a20–100b20, in Aristotle 1995: 382; Seneca. Epistle 117.6, in Seneca 1917–25: III, 341; Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I.43–5 and II.12-13, in Cicero 1933: 45–6 and 135–6.

¹³ See Reid 2015; Carey 2017; Edwards 1967: II, 147–55.

¹⁴ See Calvin 1863: I.3, 43–5.

¹⁵ See Hooker [1594] 1975: I, 8, 127.

¹⁶ See Duplessis-Mornay [1581, 1585²] 1587, Preface, [un-paginated].

¹⁷ See Grotius [1625] 2005: II.xx.45., 1032–5.

¹⁸ See e.g. Whichcote 1753): Aph. 427 and 712; Cudworth 1678: 774.

¹⁹ See Gassendi 1658: I, 290–2; see also Bernier, *Abregé de la philosophie de Gassendi* 1678: I, 258–61.

²⁰ See Yolton 1956: 26–71.

modern historiography which, after Locke, often tends to tightly associate use of universal consent arguments, appeal to common notions, and commitment to some form of innatism.

In this chapter, I explore this complex and somewhat neglected tradition of the early modern common notion. I focus on three thinkers, two of them innatist in some sense, one of them not; all (mostly) products of the English context; all arguably part of the background for Locke's critique of common notions and innate ideas in the first book of the *Essay*; and all related to each other in various and complicated ways. They are: Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1582–1648), Kenelm Digby (1603–1665), and Nathaniel Culverwell (1619–1651). I show how they deployed three different theories of common notions that we can describe, respectively, as gnoseological, rhetorical, and allegorical.

The aim of this chapter is threefold. First, it is to show that the early modern theories of common notions did not reduce to the theories associating universal consent with innate principles that Locke attacks in the *Essay*, but that other ways of understanding common notions and their value were in circulation. Second, it is to show that some theories of common notions which *did* associate universal consent with innate principles were richer and less inept than the reading of Locke alone could lead to suspect. Third, and most importantly, it is to show, through the example of just three among these theories, that the different early modern theories of common notions were neither a set of disparate conceptions, nor a monolithic bloc of quasi identical positions, but that they formed a dynamic school of mutually influential, but distinct doctrines that, envisaged together, constitute a distinct and rich field of historical inquiry that challenges the standard narrative of the common notion's demise in seventeenth-century philosophy.²¹

2. Edward Herbert of Cherbury

In his own time, before a mostly eighteenth-century reception declared him the 'father of Deism,' Lord Herbert was best known for the conceptions of common notions, universal consent, and natural instinct at the core of his gnoseology, or doctrine of knowledge and mind.²² His *De Veritate* was first published in Latin in 1624, with a second edition in 1633, a French

²¹ For a notable exception, see Blank and Jalobeanu 2019.

²² See Serjeantson 20001: 217–38.

translation by Marin Mersenne in 1639, and a third Latin edition in 1645.²³ The book is a hard read, not just because of the abstruseness of Herbert's Latin— already in his own time, some readers felt that Mersenne's French translation was a definite improvement of the work in terms of intelligibility²⁴—but also because of the deliberate idiosyncrasy of his terminology. For, 'on account of the complete novelty of the subject,' Herbert felt that he had to adapt his terms 'in common use, whenever possible, to [his] own meaning' and therefore did 'not wish to adhere to common usage' (DV: Preface, 73). But the overall theory goes something like this.

Herbert argues that 'Universal consent must be taken to be the beginning and end of theology and philosophy' (DV, V, 118). Common notions are the foundation of common knowledge, because 'Common Notions are so called because they are understood by all normal men' (DV, V, 126). Common notions moreover form the foundation and, importantly, the intellectual conditions of conceptual truth. In his theory of truth, Herbert distinguishes between the 'truth of things' which is somehow in the things themselves, the 'truth of appearances' given in the mind which may or may not correspond to the truth of things, depending on whether the appropriate conditions apply, and the 'truth of concept' which expresses the conformity of things to the mind. The truth of concept is established under the auspices of the 'truths of the intellect,' which are fundamental principles according to which the mind establishes conformity. These truths of the intellect are the 'common notions.' They are 'found in all normal persons' and 'are derived from universal wisdom and imprinted on the soul by the dictates of nature itself' (DV, III, 106). They have six characteristics: priority, independence, universality, certainty, necessity, and their manner of conformation, which is immediate or instinctive (DV, V, 139-41; cf. VIII, 232). In a nutshell, the truth of concept is defined as the conformity of the truth of the thing with the truth of its appearance as established in accordance with the fundamental principles of intellectual truth, given in the form of common notions. Error, by contrast, stems from lack of such conformity between the truth of the thing and the truth of appearances, which occurs when we do not respect the common notions when applying our 'faculties' to appearances. By 'Faculties,' Herbert here mean all our concepts insofar as they are dispositions or abilities to grasp the things of which they are the concepts.

²³ Herbert [1624, ...1645³] 1937. For Mersenne's (anonymous) French translation, see Herbert 1639, and Lagrée 1994.

²⁴ See Descartes to Mersenne, 16 October 1639, AT II, 599 / CSMK III, 140.

In order to establish conformity, the ‘faculties’ of the mind must be brought into harmony with each other and with the appearances they grasp (DV, III, 98). These ‘faculties’ or concepts of the mind are individual cognitive principles by which, by analogy, we recognize the ‘differences’ among appearances (DV, IV, 108). The faculties are innate, i.e. they are abilities of the mind by means of which the mind presents to itself whatever appearances are communicated to it through the senses. They are ‘as it were, mental beams which thrust through the apertures of the senses and pick out the appropriate specific essences according to the mutual analogy of things’ (DV, IV, 109). When doing that, ‘we listen to the voice of nature’ because ‘we possess hidden faculties which when stimulated by objects quickly respond to them’ (DV, IV, 106). For every individual thing or ‘difference’ in the world there is an individual faculty in the mind corresponding to it: ‘there are as many faculties as there are differences of things and vice versa.’²⁵ There are, however, also more general faculties expressed by ‘Common Notions which refer to a whole class’ (DV, IV, 114). In this respect, Herbert is a realist about universals. Moreover, not all differences are properly individuating: ‘the greatest care must be taken not to assume as new what has often been experienced,’ for it may just be ‘a new arrangement of differences’ or ‘a change in position or in time or in medium.’ For example, ‘we do not say that the sight of a violet budding afresh every year ... excites a new faculty in us; it is the same we knew before’ (DV, IV, 109–10). And many faculties which at first seem to be really distinct are in fact the same and different only in degree, such as the faculty of hot and cold.

In the world, things relate according to their natural ‘affinities.’ Such affinities are reflected among individual faculties and form the basis for the analogies we establish among appearances in the mind, allowing us to identify more general truths, i.e. composite truths or ‘universals’ (DV, III, 107). Among the most general universals, we find the co-called ‘zetetic faculties,’ which represent Herbert’s (not particularly original) revamping of Aristotle’s categories (DV, IV, 279–88). Ultimately, all the faculties, including the zetetic ones, are grounded in, and derived from ‘common notions,’ which are the most general principles

²⁵ DV, IV, 108. See also VII, 209: ‘there is nothing in the understanding which has not first existed in the senses, *but only on condition that the universal analogy between external and the internal differences is added?*’ This passage carries striking echoes to the stance that Leibniz shall later adopt vis à vis Locke’s rejection of innate ideas, i.e. the idea that ‘there is nothing in the intellect which has not first existed in the senses, *except the intellect itself*’ (Leibniz [1703–5] 1990: II.i.2, 111). Herbert does not, however, adopt anything like Leibniz’s accompanying principle of indiscernibles or super-essentialism.

according to which the understanding organizes appearances. Those most universal notions are given to us without the prompting of experience:

These elements or sacred principles are so far from being drawn from experience and observation that, without several of them, or at least one of them, we could have no experience nor be capable of observations. For if it had not been written in our soul that we should examine into the nature of things ... and if we had not been endowed with Common notions, to that end, we should never come to distinguish between things, or to grasp any general nature. (DV, III, 104–5)

When we apply our faculties to appearances strictly in accordance with the common notions, we can be assured that there is conformity between appearances and things, or that we have attained the truth of intellect. Why can we be thus assured? Herbert operates with a triple conformity: the conformity of thing and appearance; the conformity of appearance and concept; the conformity of concept and thing (DV, III, 101). The conformity of appearances to things relies on the correct function and reliability of the senses: that we perceive correctly; that our senses are not impaired; that the objects are presented to us in ways that make them perceptible to us, not too small, not too far away, etc. (DV, III, 102–4). Our deeper cognitive responsibility lies with the conformity of concepts to appearances, which we can achieve by respecting the principles prescribed by the common notions. As for the conformity of concepts with things beyond appearances, however, it is God's responsibility to ascertain that whenever the conditions of correct conformity between concept and appearances obtain, this truth of concept reliably represents the truth of the thing. Fortunately, Herbert argues, it would be contrary to general providence to think it even possible that the correct application of our faculties to our appearances would not also reflect the actual truth of things. Through providence, in effect, God ascertains that 'the faculties can only properly conform with objects with which they have special affinity' (DV, III, 104).

The way that general providence expresses itself through us is by natural instinct and a drive for self-preservation. These powers have been bestowed upon us by God to ascertain that we can preserve ourselves within the created world in which he has placed us (and in the next): 'in so far as Natural Instinct is an activity which conforms, [it is] an immediate emanation of the mind, co-extensive with the dictates of nature, so that it directly supports the doctrine of self-preservation' (DV, V, 123; cf. III, 94). It is thus via the assertion of divine providence that

‘the deliverances of natural instinct attain the first degree of certainty’ (DV, III, 103). These deliverances of natural instinct are exactly the common notions. They ‘express the wisdom of nature, the teaching of natural instinct, and the exact and surest criterion of Catholic truth. I hold them also to be the basis not only of human judgment, but also of the divine, eternal counsel of the universe. Finally, they are demanded with one voice by all people as fulfilment of the divine image within us’ (DV, VI, 207). They are identified by universal consent. We can safely ‘attribute ... to natural instinct whatever appears in the same way in every man, so long as the situation or meaning of words is not misconceived’ (DV, V, 119–20). And this is why ‘universal consent (which has not been established without the aid of Divine Providence) is in the last resort the sole test of truth’ (DV, V, 117); that ‘universal consent is the teaching of Natural Instinct and ... essentially due to Divine Providence’ (DV, V, 117; cf. V, 139). The common notions are thus not discursive or demonstrable truths but ‘stand upon the conviction given directly by themselves, and they lead us beyond reason, in other words discursive thought’ (DV, VIII, 234; cf. V, 137). We all assert them immediately: ‘Anyone who bases proof on Natural Instinct must rely on some Common Notion which cannot be denied except by madmen, or persons bereft of their senses, who are incapable of assenting to or disputing the meaning of the assertion’ (DV, V, 116).

The overall image emerging is of a neo-Stoic theory of knowledge with systematic ambitions based on a kind of dispositional nativism articulated by means of a relatively sophisticated theory of natural faculties. It is hard to fit into our usual historiographical categories which to some extent explains why Herbert has subsequently fallen somewhat into oblivion. This said, in his own time already, Herbert’s theory of common notions was the object of sharp criticism long before Locke took aim at it in the *Essay*.²⁶ Gassendi subjected Herbert’s book to a particularly harsh assessment in a long letter written for Herbert himself in 1634, explaining in an accompanying letter to Elie Diodati how ‘the little praise [he] could give is accompanied by an almost complete refutation of the entire piece.’²⁷ Commonality of notions and natural instinct, Gassendi gathered, is ‘a decidedly weak guarantee and a very inconstant witness.’²⁸ Descartes didn’t see much prospect for Herbert’s project either: ‘The author takes universal consent as the criterion of his truths; whereas I have no criterion for mine except the natural light.’ Perhaps all people one encounters do indeed agree about some thing or other, but

²⁶ See Mantovani 2019.

²⁷ Gassendi 1658: III, 411–9, trans. in Gassendi [1634] 1957a.

²⁸ Gassendi, Pierre [1634] 1957b: 289–90. On Gassendi-Cherbury, see also Jones 1981: 116–34.

as often as not this simply reflects the fact that ‘so many people ... may share the same mistaken opinion.’²⁹ On closer inspection, however, the dismissal of Herbert’s theory arguably resulted as much from reductive readings as from inherent flaws of the theory dismissed. For example, Herbert is frequently taken to believe that common notions are necessarily present to the mind, or that universal agreement is necessarily actual. Moreover, Herbert’s theory of knowledge was quickly engulfed in religious polemics relating only to the last chapters. Indeed, what most disturbed Herbert’s contemporary readers, Descartes among them,³⁰ was the way that he extended his general theory of knowledge into the domain of religion in chapters X and XI.³¹ Those chapters earned Herbert a reputation as an impious naturalist who often found himself in the company of such notorious writers as Hobbes and Spinoza.³² Even a fellow defender of common notions such as Nathaniel Culverwell felt uncomfortable about this part of Herbert’s argument, admonishing him that ‘the Church ‘tis built upon a surer and higher Rock, upon a more Adamantine and precious foundation’ than just common notions (ELD, XV, 151–52). It was still the religious common notions that were the specific object of both Locke’s and Leibniz’s criticisms of Herbert.³³

3. Kenelm Digby

Our second defender of common notions is Kenelm Digby (1603–1665). Philosophically, Digby was associated with the so-called ‘Blackloists,’ a small group of English Catholic intellectuals that also included Thomas White and John Sergeant.³⁴ Dabbling in alchemy and natural philosophy, especially botany, Digby was a member of the scientific circles at Gresham College in the mid-1630s. In voluntary exile until the Restoration, he spent most of his time in Paris from 1635 to 1660 where he was frequenting the circles around Mersenne, including Hobbes. Digby’s single most important philosophical contribution was his *Two Treatises*,

²⁹ Descartes to Mersenne, 16 October 1639, AT II, 597–8, trans. in CSMK III, 139.

³⁰ Descartes to Mersenne, 27 August 1639, AT II, 570–1, trans. in CSMK III, 137.

³¹ Herbert [1624, ... 1645³] 1937: IX, 289–307. See also Hutton 2015: 107–108; Lagrée 1989: 79–95.

³² The trio of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Herbert shows up in many refutations, including Thomasius 1670, Rappolt [1670] 1693; Kortholt 1680, Berns 1692, and Bencini 1720.

³³ Locke [1689, ... 1700⁴] 1979: I.iii.15–19, 77–80, and Leibniz [1703–5] 1990: I.ii.15, 97. Specifically on Locke, see also Grzeliński 2016. Incidentally, in the *De religione gentilium*, written in 1645 and published posthumously in 1663 (English translation 1705), Herbert extended his argument into the domain of comparative religion, arguing on ethnological grounds that his religious common notions were truly actualized in the *consensus gentium* (Herbert 1705).

³⁴ See Hutton 2015: 81–7; Krook 1993: chap. 3. For recent, general reassessment of Digby’s philosophy, see also Georgescu and Andriaenssen 2022. On the Roman Catholic background of Digby’s natural philosophy, see Henry 1982. Specifically, on Digby’s conception of common notions, see Andriaenssen 2019, Blank 2007, Blank 2022a, Blank 2022b.

published in Paris in 1644. The first *Treatise* develops an original mechanical philosophy presented as an attempt, not to overturn scholastic Aristotelianism, but to recover the original, authentic Aristotelian philosophy from the excesses of Scholasticism. Rather than a straightforward ‘new’ philosophy of the kind perhaps best represented by Pierre Gassendi’s seminal *Exercitationes paradoxicae adversus Aristotelios*, which attempts to do away with the Aristotelian mantle altogether, the *Two Treatises* represents a piece of so-called ‘reformed philosophy,’ a kind of reinvented mechanical Aristotelianism. The approach was common: other attempts at such reformed philosophy include for example Adriaan Heereboord, Johannes de Raey, and the young Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.³⁵ Digby’s attempt, however, is particularly systematic and well developed. In his work, he draws on the natural philosophy developed in his friend Thomas White’s 1642 *De mundo*, but also discusses both Galileo and Descartes extensively. Indeed, Digby was among the first to comment on Descartes’s work—a letter that accompanied Digby’s shipment of Descartes’s *Discours de la méthode* to Hobbes in 1637 even represents the very first known mention of Descartes work in the English context.³⁶

Digby built his reformed philosophy on the basis of a natural philosophical methodology constructed around an original conception of ‘common notions’:

In delivering any science; the clearest and smoothest methode, and most agreeable to nature; is to begin with the consideration of those thinges, that are most common and obvious; and by the dissection of them to descend by orderly degrees and steppes (as they lye in the way) unto the examination of the most particular and remote ones. (TT, I.i, 1)

For Digby, common notions are epistemically fundamental but confused natural apprehensions registered within common language. His theory of common notions harks back to his criticism of scholastic logic and to the original alternative he develops. For Digby, taking a nominalist approach reminiscent of Hobbes, logic is grounded in discourse. A theory of knowledge must therefore first investigate how ‘discoursing and expressing our thoughts to one another by words ... is ordered and governed among us’ (TT, I.i, 2). We must, however, distinguish between two kinds of language, one common and the other technical:

³⁵ On ‘reformed philosophy’ in Leibniz in particular, see Mercer 2002; Mercer 2004; Lærke 2019. On Digby’s position ‘between the Old and the New,’ see the introduction in Adriaenssen and Georgescu 2022.

³⁶ See Digby to Hobbes, 4 October, 1637, in Hobbes 1994: I, 51. See also Nicholson 1929: 358.

there are two sorts of language to expresse our notions by. The one belongeth in generall to all mankind ... and in this, the words expresse the thinges properly and plainely, according to the naturall conceptions that all people agree in making of them. The other sort of language ... is understood onely by those that in a particular and expresse manner haue beene trayned up unto it. (TT, I.i, 5)

Now, ‘without the first manner of expressing our notions, mankind could not live in society together, and converse with one another’ (TT, I.i, 5). The second kind of language, by contrast, is only used ‘among such persons as have agreed together to explicate and designe among themselves particular notions peculiar to their arts and affaires’ (TT, I.i, 5). Still, most often, the technical words employed ‘have beene by the authors of it, translated and wrested from the generall conceptions of the same wordes, by some metaphore, or similitude, or allusion, to serve their private turnes’ (TT, I.i, 5). In other words, technical language of particular trades and arts are, and indeed should be, derived from the common language by means of particular tropes. However, just as often, ‘great errors arise by wresting wordes from their common meaning to expresse a more particular or studied notion.’³⁷ And this is the most general problem found in scholastic philosophy, namely, that it fails to establish any appropriate connection between the first and the second kinds of language.³⁸

The general structure of Digby’s argument is as follows. Naturally, language does not express things but only how we perceive them, i.e. the appearances of things. The greatest obstacle to true knowledge is that people ‘confound the true and reall natures of thinges, with the conceptions they frame of them in their owne mindes’ (TT, I.i., 2). This is also the central problem with scholastic philosophy. According to Digby, the lack of intelligibility which characterizes the philosophy of ‘the Schools’ must be explained by an unfortunate tendency among the scholastics to make separate entities out of mere accidents, properties, or aspects of things. This tendency stems from the fact that our understanding has a natural but misleading ‘bent and inclination’ toward framing different accidents of a single thing as ‘many severall distinct formal conceptions’ or to perceive as ‘actual Beings’ things such as ‘quantity, figure,

³⁷ TT, I, title of chap. 1, sect. 7, in the ‘Table of the Chapters.’

³⁸ The young Leibniz took up many of these conceptions from Digby in the context of his 1670 reedition of Marius Nizolius’s *De veris principiis et vera ratione philosophandi contra pseudo-philosophos* (orig. 1653). In his preface to the edition, Leibniz discusses how any technical language must be constructed via a ‘channel of tropes’ that organically links it back to natural language. See Leibniz [1670] 1966, and Lærke 2009: 443–6.

colour, smell, taste, and other accidents' (TT, I.i, 2–3). If schoolmen reify accidents, properties, or aspects, it is thus because they give in to this initial inclination and fail to recognize what, in our understanding of things, stems not from the thing itself but only from the way we perceive it. In order to rectify this problem, we must 'wrestle' our understanding away from its natural bent, by explicating and reframing the confused understanding embedded in common natural language in more adequate terms, while carefully distinguishing between that which in common natural language expresses how things are in themselves, and that which concerns only the way we apprehend them. In order to achieve this, we must take our point in departure in what is in fact initially given to us in our perception, namely the natural but confused apprehensions of things we share with the common multitude:

it is the indisciplined multitude that must furnish learned men with naturall apprehensions, and notions to exercise their wittes about: which when they have, they may use and order ad reflect upon them as they please: but they must first receive them in that plaine and naked forme, as mankind in generall pictureth them out in their imaginations. (TT, I.ii, 8)

Contrary to Herbert, Digby does thus not appeal to common notions because he believes they are somehow epistemically privileged or necessarily true. It is the opposite: grounded in the imagination and subjected to the whims of a naturally bent apprehension, our 'plaine notions of things, as naturally and without any art doe present themselves to every mans apprehension' are shot through with misconception. They are neither clear nor certain. And yet—and here the fundamental Aristotelianism of Digby's theory of knowledge shines through—they are all we are initially provided with. They must therefore constitute the necessary starting point for any possible theory of knowledge. No innate notions structuring the understanding prior to or behind the notions consigned to common language exist. Given to us are only 'the naturall notion[s] which serveth learned men for a basis and foundation to build scientificall superstructures upon,' for without 'such plaine notions of things, as naturally and without any art doe present themselves to every mans apprehension: without which for matter to worke upon, those artificiall reflections [of the sciences] would leave the understanding as unsatisfied.' And this is why 'the first worke of schollers, is to learne of the people! *Quem penes, arbitrium est & ius & norma loquendi*—what is the true meaning and signification of these primary names,

and what notions they begett in the generality of mankinde of the thinges they designe' (TT, I.ii, 8).

As should be clear from these passages, Digby's theory of common notions is very different from Herbert's. It does not posit common notions as epistemically privileged or necessarily true. It does not tie common notions in with any conception of innate dispositions. It operates with no conception of instinctive or non-discursive knowledge. It is based on a staunchly nominalist logic and a largely empiricist theory of knowledge formation marketed as authentic Aristotelianism. It does not operate with innate ideas or draw on Stoic theory of knowledge. Digby's construes common notions as commonly used significations rather than common conceptions. In the first instance, they refer to the structures of language and not those of the intellect. The common agreement they express is the basis of communication and language, which in turn are the basis of reason and logic. In some respects reminiscent of Hobbes's super-nominalist grounding of reason in language, Digby's theory does however remain firmly grounded in Aristotelian realism: 'when diverse apprehensions may be thus joyned together, it is indeed, that one and the same thing affecting us severall wayes and under different considerations' (TT, II.i, 366). Even if our notions are expressed in language by signs arbitrarily assigned to them, they still track our apprehensions, and the formation of our apprehensions is still guided by nature.³⁹ Digby's position is consequently less Hobbesian than it appears at first sight, but rather harks back to a rhetorical understanding of common notions whose first and most important representatives were probably Lorenzo Valla, Petrus Ramus, and Marius Nizolius. Valla took 'common usage' to be not only the basis of rhetoric, as in Quintilian, but also of dialectics and, indeed, of the theory of knowledge generally.⁴⁰ Ramus advocated an 'art of speaking well' that respected 'natural usage and the true practice of reason.'⁴¹ Nizolius argued against the scholastics that philosophical language had to be purged of non-descriptive significations with no root in the world as grasped in ordinary perception and registered in common language use.⁴² Digby's nominalism and two-language theory clearly represents an effort similar to these.⁴³ Finally, we should note the striking contrast of this rhetorical approach to common notions to Herbert's explicit refusal 'to adhere to common

³⁹ See Krook 1993: 30–1.

⁴⁰ See Nauta 2009: 269–91.

⁴¹ See Ramée 1655; see also Moss 2003, and Cifolletti 2006.

⁴² See Nauta 2021: 31–66, esp. 32.

⁴³ See Blank 2007; Andriaenssen 2019.

usage' in the terminological framing of his more gnoseologically oriented theory (DV, Preface, 73).

Digby's theory of knowledge was expanded and deepened in the better known work of his younger friend John Sergeant whose *Peripateticall Institutions* of 1654 were explicitly written 'in the way of that eminent person and excellent philosopher Sr. Kenelm Digby.'⁴⁴ It is helpful for grasping both the nature and impact of Digby's theory to briefly consider Sergeant's use of it. Sergeant's treatise rarely speaks explicitly of 'common notions,' although he clearly echoes Digby's rhetorical approach when asserting that 'to ask a Definition is nothing but asking what they mean, who understandingly use a word: wherefore, since some words expresse Notions that are common to all mankind (as, those of the ten Predicaments) 'tis evident that, in these and such like, we must observe, what the common-People, who make up mankind, mean by such a word.'⁴⁵ Sergeant, however, also mounted a vigorous defence of Aristotelian realism against Lockean 'ideism' in his 1697 *Solid Philosophy*.⁴⁶ In this context he more firmly asserts the existence of 'Common Notions, which Right Nature had given us to ground all other Knowledges on.'⁴⁷ Sergeant follows Digby in privileging common usage in naming common notions proclaiming it a 'Solid Maxim, that The true Signification or Sense of the Words is to be taken from the Common Usage of them.'⁴⁸ And he adopts Digby's two-language theory when stipulating that 'as for Names; 'tis not we that are to annex them, but the Common Usage of the Vulgar, or of the Generality of Learned Men, (in case they be Artificial ones;) for, these are they who gave them their Constant and Proper Signification.'⁴⁹ He also stresses the empirical basis of common notions. They are not innate but originate in the senses: 'our Common Notions are wrought by Natural Causes upon the samenatur'd Patients, the Senses, and thence upon the Soul. ... We have them from Nature.'⁵⁰ As in Digby, the mind does not contribute ideas of any things, which are all provided by nature through perception, but only the capacity to relate them:

⁴⁴ Sergeant 1656: Subtitle.

⁴⁵ Sergeant 1656: 21–2.

⁴⁶ Sergeant rarely mentions Digby's name, but his presence is unmistakable, and in one passage he explains how '[Mr. L] had not seen, or at least well weigh'd the true Aristotelian System, (which he might have seen in Sir Kenelm Digby's *Treatise of Bodies* ...)' (Sergeant 1697: 336). See also Kroll 1993: 96–113.

⁴⁷ Sergeant 1697: Preface, sect. 15, [not paginated].

⁴⁸ Sergeant 1697: 188.

⁴⁹ Sergeant 1697: 406; see also 454: 'The *Common Agreement* of Men gives Words to be *Signs*; *Common Usage* shews this Agreement; *Grammar* helps them with Congruity; *Critick* gathers from Authors, or Derivations, the Genuine Signification of such Words as are not so much worn by *Common Use*, but mostly used by the Learned: For, when they are *thus Common*, *Critick* is Useless.'

⁵⁰ Sergeant 1697: 305; see also 81.

the Mind, and it only, is indeed Capable of Universal Notions; but, 'tis only Nature, and not her self, which begets in her those Notions. Her only Work is, to Compare, or Discern the Identity or Diversity of those Notions; but Nature gives her those Objects, or Materials, on which she thus works. Thus, when we see two or many Things agree, 'tis those Natural Objects, that have in them something Agreeing to both, which causes in me a Common Notion, called Animal, or Homo; and the mind lends nothing but her Comparing Nature, to make those Common Notions.⁵¹

4. Nathaniel Culverwell

Nathaniel Culverwell (1619–1651) is often—but not always—counted among the so-called ‘Cambridge Platonists.’ He developed a doctrine of common notions and universal consent in his *Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature*, a work based on lectures delivered at Cambridge in 1645–46, but only published posthumously in 1652. One of Culverwell’s principal aims in that work is to defend the view that ‘though Natures law be principally proclaim’d by the voyce of *Reason*; though it be sufficiently discover’d by *the Candle of the Lord*; yet there is also a secondary and additional way, which contributes no small light to the manifestation of it: I mean the harmony & joynt consent of Nations’ (ELD, X, 79). His discussion is a patchwork of quotations, commentaries, and allusions to other doctrines. It draws eclectically on texts and arguments proposed by theologians, jurists, natural philosophers, and logicians, both ancient and modern. He constantly draws on Ancient sources, including Seneca, Cicero, Quintillian, Heraclitus, and Tertullian (ELD, X, 81–2), but also on more recent ones, including Hugo Grotius, John Selden, and Claude Saumaise (ELD, X, 79–86). Both Herbert and Digby loom large in the work.⁵²

Alone among his Cambridge peers, Culverwell defends a distinctly Stoic theory of knowledge and mind, declaring Stoicism to be ‘not only sound Philosophy, but good Divinity too’ (ELD, XI, 98). According to the Stoic conception, the human mind includes ‘seeds of light,’ ‘sparks of light,’ or ‘seminal principles.’⁵³ These ‘seeds’ or ‘sparks’ are not derived from

⁵¹ Sergeant 1697: 293.

⁵² See ELD, XI, 92, 105; XVII, 170–1; see also Hutcheson 1944: 81; Bedford 1979: 71; Lagrée 1996; Lærke [forthcoming B].

⁵³ See ELD, I, 12: ‘seminal sparks’; VII, 58: ‘seeds of light’; VIII, 68: ‘spermatical Notions’; ‘seeds of light’; IX, 73: ‘seeds of light’; IX, 77: ‘spark of Truth’; XI, 89: ‘sparkling and twinkling notions’; X, 79: ‘Seminal Principles’;

experience but are innate in some sense: they ‘shine with their native light, with their own proper beams.’⁵⁴ In this way, ‘Nature has some Postulata, some *πρόληψη* [preconceptions], (which Seneca renders *praesumptiones*, which other call *Anticipationes Animi*,) which she knows a Rational being will presently and willingly yield unto’ (ELD, XVII, 59). The various tropes that Culverwell uses here are instructive. First, they betray an inspiration from the understanding of moral common notions in Seneca who, according to Culverwell, had a ‘very gallant and brave apprehensions of the soul’s nobility.’⁵⁵ They moreover evoke the traditional Christian conception of *synderesis*, or innate moral conscience, as it originated in Saint Jerome and had been developed by a long list of medieval and renaissance theologians. *Synderesis* was understood as a ‘seed’ or ‘spark’ of divine light implanted by God in all men that was obscured by original sin but never entirely extinguished.⁵⁶ Finally, on a very fundamental level, the reference to ‘seeds’ connotes three well-known parables in the Gospel of Matthew, all concerned with spreading the Gospel and extending the Kingdom of Heaven, and with the obstacles such efforts encounter.⁵⁷ These last connotations are particular prevalent in passages of chapter X of the *Discourse* where Culverwell discusses the religious common notions of pagans. On his view, seeds of light are planted by God in man’s reason and shared in common by the whole posterity of Adam, among all Nations:

When you see the same prints and impressions upon so many several Nations, you easily perceive that they were stamp’t *eodem communi Sigillo*, with the same publique Seal. When you see the very same seeds thrown in such different soyles, yet all encreasing and multiplying, budding and blossoming, branching out and enlarging themselves into some fruitful expressions; you know then that ’twas Natures hand, her bountiful & successful hand that scatter’d such Seminal Principles amongst them. (ELD, X, 79)

Not without an element of antisemitism, he complains that Jews put particular effort into negating the importance of the common notions, denying the Gentiles their light and elevating

XI, 88: ‘*Scintilla divinae lucis* [a spark of the divine light]’; XI, 90: ‘seminal principles’; XI, 90: ‘seeds of light’; XI, 101: ‘an intellectual spark’; XI, 111: ‘divine lineaments sparkling on the soul’; XI, 116: ‘shinings and sparkling of divine light’; XV, 149: ‘sparks and beams of light’; XVI, 160: ‘sparks of Reason’; XVIII, 185: ‘spark of Reason’; XVIII, 185: ‘seminal principles.’

⁵⁴ ELD, XIV, 139. On the early modern reception of the Stoic *logos spermaticos*, see Horowitz 1998.

⁵⁵ ELD, XI, 108. See also Seneca. Ep. 120, sect. 4, in Seneca 1917–25: III, 383: ‘Nature ... has given us the seeds of knowledge, but not knowledge itself’; Cicero 1914: V, 443 and 461–3.

⁵⁶ See Greene 1991a, 1991b, 1997.

⁵⁷ The Parable of the Sower of the Seed (Matt 13:3–9); The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31–32); and The Parable of the Tares (Matt 13:24–43).

their particular notions alone—the laws written in the Old Testament—to the status of God’s Law (ELD, IX, 73, 76, 83–4).

Generally, Culverwell’s understanding of common notions is as metaphorical as it is conceptual. It is both ‘elegant’ and ‘learned,’ as the first editor William Dillingham put it in the title he gave the otherwise untitled work.⁵⁸ The notions of ‘seeds’ and ‘sparks’ clearly fall on the ‘elegant’ side of Culverwell’s discourse. They are metaphors. More precisely, they are allegories, that is to say, elaborate, extended tropes or frameworks formed by several related figures of speech whose meaning gains precision and depth from the way these figures interact with each other within the text, combined with the way they resonate with theological and moral philosophical commonplace—classical texts, the Bible, widely known humanist texts, and so on. Culverwell, however, also describes common notions as ‘secondary notions’: ‘[The Soul of Man] brings forth a numerous and sparkling posterity of secondary Notions, which make for the crowning and encompassing of the Soul with happinesse’ (ELD, VII, 58). This conception is more clearly articulated in a passage of another treatise entitled *The White Stone* found among additional texts by Culverwell included in the first edition of the *Discourse*:

But how sweetly does the minde relish those first and common notions, that carry a native light, and convincing evidence and certainty in them, and won't give the soule leave to doubt? and how does it bathe it self in those crystalline streamings out, those pure derivations of secondary notions, that freely bubble out from these fountain-principles, which for their certainty sometimes are honoured with the name of axioms?⁵⁹

Despite the metaphorical setting of the notion in *The White Stone*, the context for this conception of ‘secondary notions’ as ‘axioms’ at first situates it squarely on the ‘learned’ side of Culverwell’s *Discourse*. In essence, the notion is not figurative or allegorical. It is logical. More precisely, the conception of ‘secondary notions’ (*notiones secundae*) must be traced back to Jacobus Zabarella’s *De rebus naturalibus*, according to which a ‘second notion’ is a ‘mental concept,’ or a ‘concept of a concept, like genus, species, word, statement, reasoning, and other things of that kind,’ as opposed to a concepts of things, including general concepts.⁶⁰ Second notions are thus higher order notions sometimes described as instruments of logic allowing the

⁵⁸ See Greene 2017: 445.

⁵⁹ Culverwell 1652: 160.

⁶⁰ See Zabarella 1590.

mind to deal distinctly and regularly with things, i.e. to order them and their relations.⁶¹ The conception is not unlike what we also found in Herbert's conception of common notions as universal, higher-order principles of reasoning. It is however more likely that Culverwell picked up the notion directly from Zabarella—he refers explicitly to the Padouan philosopher when discussing the active and passive intellect (ELD, IX, 74–6)—or from the immediate reception of Zabarella. *De rebus naturalibus* was a popular textbook of natural philosophy in northern Europe throughout the end of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries,⁶² and Zabarella's distinction between first and second notions was very common among early modern reformers of logic.⁶³ We find it for example in Bartholomeus Keckerman's *Systema Logicae* or Adriaan Heereboord's *Meletamata philosophica*.⁶⁴ Moreover, numerous textbooks of logic widely read in the British Isles adopted the distinction, including Samuel Smith's 1613 *Aditus ad Logicam*,⁶⁵ or—as examples that admittedly postdate Culverwell's treatise—Zachary Coke's 1654 *The Art of Logick*,⁶⁶ John Newton's 1671 *Introduction to the Art of Logick*,⁶⁷ or Richard Burthogge's 1678 *Organum vetus et novum or a Discourse of Reason and Truth*.⁶⁸ Finally, second notions were used by other philosophers in Culverwell's immediate context, notably Henry More in his 1659 *The Immortality of the Soul*.⁶⁹ In an attempt to disprove Hobbes's super-nominalist conception of concepts as mere names,⁷⁰ More thus introduced second notions as 'Mathematicall and Logicall conceptions' which 'never came in the senses' and which therefor 'cannot be seated in matter.'⁷¹ Indeed, as More argued from universal consent, 'if these *Mathematicall* and *Logicall Notions* we speak of be nothing but Names, *Logicall* and *Mathematicall Truths* will not be the same in all Nations, because they have not

⁶¹ See Mikkeli: 46–7.

⁶² See MacLean 2002, Backus 1989.

⁶³ In the following account, I draw everywhere on Sgarbi 2013 and Verbeek 2005, *The Aristotelian Tradition and the Rise of British Empiricism. Logic and Epistemology in the British Isles (1570-1689)* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013) and T. Verbeek, 'Wittich's Critique of Spinoza,' in T. M. Schmalz, *Receptions of Descartes. Cartesianism an anti-Cartesianism in early modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 103–16, esp. pp. 107–9.

⁶⁴ See Keckermann 1611: 40, and Heereboord 1665: 186.

⁶⁵ See Smith 1613: 6-7.

⁶⁶ See Coke 1654: 11–14. Coke drew heavily on Keckermann (see Serjeantson 1999: 207).

⁶⁷ See Newton 1671: 3.

⁶⁸ See Burthogge 1678: 18.

⁶⁹ Brunello Lotti—mistakenly I think—suggests that for More 'Common notions' are axioms, that is, propositions whose truth is apprehended by the simple understanding of the component terms; 'second notions' are those logical and mathematical concepts that we use to reason about the objects of the senses (the so-called relative ideas of *An Antidote against Atheism*)' (Lotti 2017: 173). *The Antidote against Atheism* speaks of neither common nor second notions, and I see no compelling reason for comparing with relative notions.

⁷⁰ Hobbes 2012: chap. 4, vol. II, 48–63.

⁷¹ More 1659: 132.

the same *names*.⁷² Culverwell may have drawn on any or all of these various sources available to him.

The exact nature and provenance of Culverwell's theory is very hard to pin down, but I suspect this to be quite deliberate. His is a doctrine of multiple entries and exits; it is essentially allegorical in scope and intent. The many references evoked above, from Seneca and the Stoics to Zabarella and Keckermann, all testify to the very rich contextual backdrop of Culverwell's treatise. Certainly, as we have seen, the treatise is both elegant and learned, ostensibly both allegorical and logical. It is not clear, however, that the 'learned' reference to logic is not in the final analysis just one more iteration of the general allegorical framework already at work in the 'elegant' conception of theological and moral common notions. After all, the 'secondary notions' are merely evoked and the details of their logical signification never developed; the notion is used simply as a way to make the overall conception of common notions resonate in yet another context, logical this time, through connotations that a learned reader would identify. But the conception is neither specified in logical terms, nor employed for any precise argumentative purpose. In this respect, Culverwell's overall understanding of common notions, including the reference to secondary notions, contrasts with Herbert's gnoseological and Digby's rhetorical approaches to common notions by deploying them as an allegorical device as elusive as it is versatile.

5. Conclusion

Most philosophy students who have taken an elementary class in the history of early modern philosophy will have come upon Locke's demolition of common notions and innate ideas in the first book of the *Essay*. More advanced students will know of the long-standing discussion about the target of Locke's critique—Descartes or not Descartes?—and will in that context perhaps also have come upon the name of Lord Herbert as the only explicitly named adversary in Locke's text. In his seminal commentary, John Yolton has pointed to the rich context of minor thinkers committed to different forms of *innatism* in Locke's English intellectual context who represented a closer but more diffuse adversary for Locke's criticism. And yet, if we turn to common notions, the backstory to Locke's argument is even more complex than Yolton suggests, and this for at least four reasons, each exemplified by the three authors studied above.

⁷² More 1659: 133.

First, Herbert's theory is much more elaborate than Locke's denunciation of his five common notions of religion in the *Essay* suggests. Second, the association of common notions with innate principles attacked by Locke was indeed proposed by Herbert, but it was by no means a given for any doctrine of common notions: Digby represents an approach aligned with a reformed Aristotelianism which is just as committed to the basic principles of empiricist gnoseology as Locke himself. Third, some theories, such as Culverwell's, are operating within an 'elegant' register of metaphor and allegory that is foreign, and therefore some extent also immune to, Locke's 'learned' criticism. Fourth, these various theories cannot be reduced to a monolithic bloc of quasi identical doctrines in the way Locke does when characterizing his opponent by means of expressions such as 'an Established Opinion amongst some men' or 'there is nothing more commonly taken for granted.'⁷³ They are related but not at all identical. Herbert, Digby, and Culverwell's theories interact and communicate in complicated ways, but they each have their very distinctive character and in some cases explicitly set themselves apart from the others. It will have to remain an open question here whether and to what extent Locke's critique of common notions and universal consent aimed at all three. Locke of course knew Herbert and consulted his work,⁷⁴ but his exact knowledge of our two other protagonists remains a matter of controversy. An important influence of Culverwell on Locke has been argued,⁷⁵ but it remains unclear whether he ever read the *Elegant and Learned Discourse*—in any case it figures nowhere in his texts, notebooks, or library catalogue.⁷⁶ As for Digby, Locke encountered Digby's theory of ideas mainly by proxy, via his younger friend John Sergeant. But even if he did not read all three philosophers closely, Locke ignored the existence of none, and they all testify to a whole field of early modern theories of common notions—some associated with conceptions of innate ideas, some of them not—that the blunt critique of the *Essay* does not even begin to address.

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Abbreviations

AT: Descartes 1897–1909

⁷³ See Locke [1689, ...1700⁴] 1979: 48–9.

⁷⁴ See Locke [1689, ... 1700⁴] 1979: 77: 'being informed that my Lord Herbert had, in his book *De Veritate*, assigned these innate principles, I presently consulted him.'

⁷⁵ See Von Leyden 1988: 39-43.

⁷⁶ See Rossiter 2019: 432.

CSMK: Descartes 1985–91

DV: Herbert 1937

TT: Digby 1644

ELD: Culverwell 2001

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