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978-0-521-13008-0 - Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding: A Selective
Commentary on the 'Essay'

John W. Yolton

Frontmatter

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JOHN W. YOLTON

*Professor of Philosophy
York University, Toronto*



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PREFACE

The topics discussed in this study have occupied my attention for some years, when I have taught students about Locke and when I have thought about the issues his *Essay* raises. An uneasiness with the analysis usually accorded to Locke drove me to try various devices for approaching his work in fresh ways. At one time, in a graduate seminar at Princeton, we read the *Essay*, taking Book 4 first. That device was useful for remedying the tendency to see Book 4 as inconsistent with Book 2, to find the 'rationalism' of the definition of knowledge incompatible with the 'empiricism' of the programme for the derivation of ideas. But having discovered that the definition of knowledge explicitly includes contingent as well as necessary relations, thereby linking the account of coexisting qualities of Books 2 and 3 with the formal account of knowledge of Book 4, it was still necessary to find the wider context within which the whole of the *Essay* was placed. That context is of course found in the very last chapter of that work, in the threefold classification of sciences.

In two graduate seminars which I offered at the University of Toronto in 1964–5 and 1965–6, and also in a similar seminar given at my own University, York in Toronto, I began to explore the topics in the *Essay* which seemed to me to bear upon that classification and also some concepts which I found were still obscure in our usual understanding of Locke. From those seminars, and from the reactions I received from the members, the pieces quickly took shape. A sabbatical leave from York University during the academic year 1968–9, aided by a Leave Fellowship from the Canada Council, gave me the leisure necessary for bringing the research and writing for this study to completion. That leave also enabled me to return to England, to Oxford in particular, where source materials are plentiful. Consultation with philosophers and historians in England during that leave was very helpful in the development of this study. During that year I read various sections of this study at a number of universities. Almost all of the first six chapters were, at different times, given

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trial runs in this way. I would like to record my thanks to those who listened and reacted to those papers at the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Aberystwyth, Sussex and Durham.

In addition, I have benefited greatly from discussions with M. R. Ayers of Wadham College, Oxford. His willingness to read a large portion of an early draft of this study, as well as the opportunity he gave me of participating in a class with him on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy has been most useful.

Other philosophers and historians of science have also taken time from their busy programmes to read and give comments on various parts of this study: J. E. McGuire of Leeds; R. Harré of Linacre College, Oxford; A. C. Crombie of All Souls College, Oxford; P. Laslett of Trinity College, Cambridge; Roger Woolhouse of the University of York, England. Discussions and correspondence with Laurens Laudan of University College, London (now of the University of Pittsburgh) have also helped to correct some earlier excesses. The comments of David Bell of Glasgow and the detailed correspondence and discussions with W. von Leyden of Durham have helped to smooth out the analysis of action in chapter 6. The bibliographical skills of my wife, as well as her eye for style, have been invaluable aids throughout.

An early version of chapter 2 was read at a conference on The Thought of John Locke, held at York University, Toronto, in December 1966. The comments of Gerd Buchdahl of the Whipple Science Museum, University of Cambridge, on that paper at the conference were instrumental in producing the printed version in the collection of essays in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives* (1969). Some sections of 'Locke on the Law of Nature', *The Philosophical Review* (1958), reappear in chapter 7. Portions of chapters 4 and 5 were read to a meeting of the Jowett Society at Oxford in May 1969 and will be published in a volume of their proceedings.

References to the text of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* are given in arabic numbers in the order: book, chapter, section, as in 2.21.4. In a continuous discussion of some book and chapter, where the fact is obvious that I am discussing the same chapter, I give only the section numbers, as in 4, or 4, 7, 10, 12. References are to the fifth edition as reprinted in the two-volume Everyman edition.

J. W. Y.