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0521638720 - The Mind of John Locke: A Study of Political Theory in its Intellectual Setting

Ian Harris

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Introduction

To write about *The Mind of John Locke* may strike the reader as a large undertaking, but it is not so daunting as it sounds. For the dictionaries understand by mind the direction or tendency of someone's thoughts. This corresponds to the modest volume in the reader's hand, which sets out to illustrate the direction of Locke's thought, referred especially to his political theory. Its objective is, firstly, to show how the character of Locke's political thought is intelligible in terms of his views and assumptions about other subjects, remote as some of these may seem at first sight, and, secondly, to indicate how his thought subsequent to his *Treatises of Government* and *Epistola de Tolerantia* bear the impress of his political position. It thus treats his political theory as a central item in his thought as a whole. The volume is modest, for its concern with direction implies neither a comprehensive study of Locke's development nor a treatment of every aspect of his thought nor even a full examination of each matter it does include. It addresses only those parts of Locke's thought which are connected immediately with his political theory and thus are connected with one another.

I

Every political theory involves two complementary but essentially distinguishable elements. There is, firstly, the author's view about the basic features of life and society, about what is and what is not fundamental to existence. Let us call this the theorist's vision. There is, secondly, the theorist's technique, the apparatus by which he or she turns the vision into a work about politics.

The vision need not be restricted to matters internal to political organisation and behaviour. Indeed it is hard to see that it could be limited in this way. Whether we understand politics in terms of government or as an aspect of human conduct, much the larger part of life is distinct from it. Morals, religion, education, philosophy, the natural sciences, and art, besides many others, have their claims. It is

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these which compose a thinker's general vision, and if a view of politics is part of this, it is *only* a part. To understand it properly, then, is to understand the larger vision of the thinker.

Without this understanding, it is probable that the theorist's technique will be misunderstood or, at the least, situated misleadingly. Technique is the means of achieving a purpose and a thinker's purpose does not derive from political affairs alone. The theorist forms it from an attitude to these affairs which is informed by his or her prepossessions – prepossessions that embody a much wider vision (which may, or may not, include a prior general view of politics). Pamphleteers and polemicists may have only a view of affairs, but if so their purpose does not suggest the claim to general significance implied in theoretical writing.

Amidst the numerous particular strengths of scholarly writing about Locke, there is one general weakness. His vision has not been studied with the attention that it demands. To offer an account of that vision implies a sense of Locke's principal works and their connections with each other. Even if the study of Locke's vision is referred to a particular subject, as it is here, this is not a slight task, for the scale and diversity of Locke's writing challenge comparison with most. Neither has the trend of scholarship pointed towards a treatment of this sort.

The general direction of the historiography of Locke's politics, for instance, relates to two very partial attempts at characterising his position. The earlier of the two, Leo Strauss', suggested that Locke's professed concern with God and a duty-based morality was a front – deceiving the reader and possibly Locke himself about the real character of his views; these were in fact extremely close to those of Hobbes. The other, C.B. Macpherson's, characterised Locke's real concern as the development of exclusive property rights at the expense of older views of society. These attempts¹ shared an encyclopedic inattention to most of Locke's articulated positions in the second of his *Treatises* and a similar posture towards his concerns beyond that text (unless these could be turned to use in supporting the interpreter's view of it.²) The succeeding historiography, whose most distinguished examples in effect supersede rather than merely answer Strauss and Macpherson,³ escaped their assumptions and indicated that to understand Locke's political posture implies a clear sense of his theological suppositions.⁴ The centrality of that position is evident, in that the recent strain of writing which conceives Locke as a figure radical or subversive in relation to aspects of his day (and so continues the tendency, though by no means the specific destination of the earlier historiography) takes serious account of it.⁵ But by one of those effects so frequent in academic writing, the works which

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escape from the conclusions of the earlier historiography have continued to focus attention upon the *Essay concerning . . . Civil-Government*. The focus, of course, is not exclusive: yet it remains true that Locke's other writings receive mention from those who write about his political theory by way of elucidating this central text.⁶

In an obvious sense this concentration is quite proper: attending to Locke's principal treatment of civil government is obviously appropriate. But at the same time it leaves aside the evident fact that this work is one part of Locke's political theory: his writings on toleration belong to it too. Relatively little attention has been paid to these.⁷ That little does not concern itself with the question which putting Locke's *Epistola* beside his *Treatises* raises: namely how these parts of his political theory relate to each other.

The pattern of historiography for Locke's writings on the human understanding is similar, in that it displays a broadening of attention within the bounds of a single work. The doyen and exemplar of writing upon *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* for many years was James Gibson's large work.⁸ This concentrated upon Locke's treatment of ideas and knowledge in a way which effectively ignored his concern with ethics and its place in his view of the mind.⁹ Richard Aaron's work broadened its focus to address both Locke's morals and his politics, but did so in a way that separated them from his philosophical concerns.¹⁰ It is only recently that Locke's moral philosophy has been given a central place in the historiography of *An Essay*¹¹. Again, that work remains the focus of the overwhelming bulk of work about Locke's philosophy.¹²

Thus the principal foci of scholarly writing about Locke have been his *Essay concerning . . . Civil-Government* and *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. These two foci have been conceived separately, on the whole, and attempts to connect the two have aimed to show how certain concepts in the latter elucidate aspects of the former.¹³ Locke's other writings, of course, have not been forgotten and scholarly works about them endeavour not to leave them isolated from the two spotlights of attention.¹⁴

None of this is to say that Locke's vision has been entirely neglected. The accent which lies upon his theology in writing about his politics ensures otherwise, whilst several editions of his works and the publication of his correspondence cast much light upon his various concerns.¹⁵ Yet if one were to examine the literature about Locke¹⁶ one would find that the two essays on civil government and the understanding absorb by far the greatest amount of scholarly energy. In an obvious sense this is as it should be, and it is no part of the present writer's

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purpose to diminish the importance of these two works. It is rather to suggest that Locke's political theory benefits from a more determined attention to his wider work.

We may say, firstly, that many matters are simply absent (or nearly so) from the scholar's agenda. Toleration, as we have noted, is surely part of political theory and toleration is certainly the subject of a large part of Locke's writing. Again, Locke presumably meant his *First Treatise* to bear some close relation to his *Second* when he put them between a single set of covers. In the midst of a concern with the theology in Locke's politics the question of what secular elements they may contain goes unasked, just as by contrast the significance of theological assumptions in his philosophy requires attention. These latter questions remind us that to broaden the focus of our attention is to begin enquiries that relate Locke's different works to each other, and so we obtain a sense of his vision.

We can say, secondly, that to answer questions like these will draw attention to points which are important to understanding Locke's political theory, but which have been overlooked through too exclusive a concentration on the *Essay concerning . . . Civil-Government*. One example would be that Locke's relation to Hobbes comes into relief: he *did* address Hobbes, though at an earlier point than has been supposed, and the way in which he did so was significant for his own political position.¹⁷ Again, Locke's view of toleration had important implications for his view of the state. Another central example is that *Two Treatises* display a logical interconnection of a highly significant kind: the first specified a teleology which is vital to the arguments of the second.¹⁸ That teleology, moreover, was situated by Locke's preceding views on medicine, political economy and, especially, the human understanding. These examples could be multiplied, as the reader will see, and can be complemented by cases illustrating how political commitments were important for Locke's subsequent thought. For the moment, there is a more general reflection.

A thinker's vision, precisely because it is a vision, is continuous: its parts connect with each other. No doubt if our interest is with some specific part of the vision, we shall direct our attention principally to it and to those of the other parts that are most germane to it: but it is not prudent to forget the significance of these. For by understanding the vision we are better placed to understand the purpose to which a specific technique answers. To give an example in terms which are concrete (but, it is to be hoped, not sufficiently concrete to suppress curiosity), it will be seen that the character of the theological postulates in Locke's vision led him to treat the state as a secular organisation.

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That treatment is reflected in his political purpose, which was broader than has been supposed. Locke's aim was not confined to civil government, but involved a wider reassessment of the state, the church and their relations to each other.

We will see also that vision and technique are interdependent. For instance, this reassessment of church and state proceeded in the light of Locke's assumptions about the human understanding, so that vision informed technique, and also involved a view of agency and responsibility with important implications for his wider views, so that technique reacted upon vision. Thus, where Locke commenced with theological postulates that were not unusual and perhaps unexamined, we find that by the end of his life the place of Adam, whether in linguistics, political order or revealed theology has been strikingly revised. But these remarks are anticipations of the book that follows: perhaps a word about how visions are composed is in order.

II

Intellectual relations are such that an idea in one area of thought often affects the ideas held in others, superficially distinct from the first though they may be. Ideas, like people, are rarely without relations. More specifically, it frequently happens in the work of distinguished thinkers that a series of ideas span a wide intellectual area to form a pattern of thought. Because the ideas embodied in it agree, together they provide a connected view of many, apparently diverse, questions. Indeed the intellectual range they cover often spans several of those fields which are conventionally distinguished in academic study. This coverage often strengthens the plausibility of each part, for whilst these ideas need not be logically implicated their connection offers a picture, if not of the world, then of a good part of it.

Those relations are possible because ideas, at least those outside of the more austere parts of logic and mathematics, are neither so utterly univocal nor so self-contained as to exclude a wide range of connections. Ideas, firstly, are likely to admit of a number of interpretations, as anyone who has ever given even the slightest thought to a term like 'freedom' is bound to admit. For that reason, secondly, each is capable, under different interpretations, of joining in company with a variety of other ideas. 'Nature' refers in Rousseau's hands to a more or less primitive condition, whilst for Burke it means the consummation of civilisation. The student of the history of thought is more frequently struck by the ingenuity with which these possibilities are exploited than by ideas that are confined to only one reference.

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Neither should we suppose that ideas respect rigid boundaries. A concept, or a group of concepts, may pattern a thinker's view of an area which may seem very remote from the one where it was first formulated. Malthus' view of competition for survival, formulated with respect to human societies, struck Darwin as a powerful device to explain natural evolution. Again, a concept may make its mark in areas, apparently quite diverse and separate, within the thought of a single writer. Adam Smith's moral philosophy and his political economy alike reflect his assumptions about inequality in society and those assumptions, indeed, lend to those two departments a common direction.

Thus families of ideas are formed in a thinker's mind. The vision which they compose may come together in many ways. For instance, an idea interpreted in a given way will colour his or her view not of one subject alone, but of two or perhaps more, and so display a series of concepts, forming together a distinct understanding. For example, a reaction against the totalitarian view that society should embody a single, consistent and exclusive set of values embodies itself within the work of Isaiah Berlin not only in a highly distinctive interpretation of liberty, which would exclude the legitimate imposition of such a monolithic scheme, but also in an understanding of values as inconsistent with one another, which renders a univocal ethical scheme impossible. Besides which Berlin has developed, albeit in a manner more aphoristic than explanatory, an account of European intellectual history since the 1730s, which situates his account of values and focusses on figures superficially so disparate as Vico, Herder, Hamann and Montesquieu (not to mention Machiavelli).¹⁹ It will be seen that whilst none of these three concerns logically demands either of the others, together they produce a distinctive mapping of a broad range of conceptual concerns.

We should not suppose that because a concept appears in one family it cannot be found in another. Just as a given understanding of a concept may be possible because that concept admits of more than one reading, so the existence of the family does not exclude the use of the same concept as part of quite a different ensemble by another thinker. The notion that mankind is sociable has quite different bearings in Grotius and Kant because where the former treats conflict as a derogation from social existence, the latter assumes that conflict originates from sociability. Sometimes, too, different thinkers may use the same understanding of a idea for quite different purposes, whether by combining it with a different set of ideas or merely by directing it towards another subject matter. Where Blackstone had supposed that law was command in order to relate God and the human legislator

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analogically, Bentham used the same supposition to argue that the common law did not really qualify as law and, treating theology sceptically, to insinuate that God was not really a legislator.

The capital point is that a family of ideas offer a *connected* vision of reality. The connection can take many forms. It may be merely that the views held by an author in one area within a department of thought are dovetailed into another, as Hobbes' account of divine law is accommodated to his view of sovereignty. It may be something more extensive, as where Pareto's sociology and his economics both suggest a world in which inequalities are legitimate and ineradicable. It may be that there is throughout a large and diverse body of writing the development of one or two propositions, as we find with Durkheim, or a sort of intellectual game of tag in which the solution to one problem generates a further difficulty, which we find in the works of Rousseau. There is the case too where ideas on disparate subjects are united by a single style and direction of argument, as in Mill's later writings, or the quite different case where unity derives from a search for arguments to support and situate a single dominant assumption, which we encounter in Rawls. Not least there is the deliberate project of making all departments of thought answer to one intellectual signature, characteristic of Hegel. No doubt many other modes of connection can be envisaged, and it would be fruitless to limit them categorically. At any rate these relations, however created, have been amongst the most salient features of intellectual life, and are overlooked only because that life is organised nowadays according to the demands of delimited professions.

These matters concern the genesis and development of ideas, rather than their validity. It is true, no doubt, that all of the ideas mentioned are ones that have admitted of a reasoned idiom and, in that sense, they are described as rational. Rational discourse, however, is not a sufficient condition for truth, though it may be a necessary one.

A family of ideas, then, may constitute a grouping of ideas, each understood in a way that relates it to at least one of the others and which together provide a distinctive vision of the conceptual map. We shall see how Locke's vision came to be formed, but first it may be worth making some general points about vision in political argument.

III

We need not suppose that the bodies of thought we distinguish customarily are always substantively discontinuous. It is true, certainly, that some writers devote themselves entirely to work which lies within one body and that their ideas manifest a familial relationship which

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does not extend beyond it. But it is true also that we find frequently that these boundaries are effectively discounted by other writers, whose ideas pattern a wider range of concerns.

The subjects that bear upon human conduct tend especially to invite this treatment. It is quite difficult to form a satisfying picture of them which draws ideas from only one genre. If we were to begin by categorising Weber's typology of traditional, charismatic and bureaucratic domination as political sociology, we would find it difficult to confine his related concern with rationality within the same category, still less the connection of the latter with his view of religion. Certainly a picture of one aspect is likely to adumbrate a view of others.

Of the subjects that bear upon human conduct, politics is worthy of especial note because it is, in its nature, a composite. One of the characteristic habits of the more important thinkers is to pattern a number of conceptual fields in a way which they take to be coherent: hence the fascination of history of thought and its irreducibility to a single set of ideas. But it is true of politics especially that it *cannot* be isolated successfully from the other aspects of human conduct. To think about politics is to have not merely a technique but also sense of those many aspects of life and thought which affect political positions or are themselves the subject of political decision. The exception, perhaps, is where behaviour may be conceived in mathematical terms, but this concerns only a very small area of political life. The questions which most often interest political thinkers have wider reference.

In considering significant political thinkers, then, we are bound to encounter ideas with relations that extend beyond political organisation and behaviour. Political theory is informed by considerations that lie beyond it, if we suppose that reflection has categories that are sharply distinct. By a like token, political theory will have implications for other areas within a thinker's mind. For instance, this study of Locke will show how his political theory, which itself includes his view of toleration, is informed by his arguments and assumptions about the social order, religious practice, ethics, theology, political economy and the human understanding. It will show, too, how his political theory related to his mature view of the human understanding, as well as bearing upon his view of the church, education and revealed theology.

IV

Political argument, the result of technique's work upon vision, provokes at least two questions. They are, *how does it work?* and *how does it come to be formed?*

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The first question presents itself because the very point of translating a vision into a specific form in one way rather than another is to lead the reader (and perhaps the writer) to conceive matters in one way rather than another, and this is primarily a matter of argument. This purpose depends upon a theorist's ability to combine ideas in a given way. He or she may draw or adapt some of these ideas from others' work, some from their own vision and some may be devised for the occasion. To understand how the thinker executes this purpose, we must examine the ideas that compose the text and ask how they are related to each other.

To do justice to a writer's purpose, then, implies looking not merely at a few words or phrases from a given text but on taking into consideration its whole direction and its background in its author's vision. For the work may bespeak an overall design and reflect a wider view and to neglect these is to risk misinterpreting the pattern of thought before us. It is true that life is short and that books about books ought to be shorter, but before we write them we must assure ourselves at least that the principal constituents in a text have been related to each other or, if we suppose a work to be defective or to have a divided aim, understood to be separate from one another. Whether or not all the results of this enquiry are presented in print, its findings should inform our understanding of any text. In short, the terms on which a piece *works* need to be considered.

Complementary to this question is an enquiry into how a given family of ideas comes to be formed. Whilst it is probably not fruitful to catalogue exclusively the many ways in which this can happen, a question that can be answered properly only by examining evidence, one or two points *about* the process are worth making.

The first concerns the contingency of the terms on which visions and purposes are formed. If we were to take a section at virtually any point in the history of thought, we would find that any thinker, except perhaps one very badly informed, had before him or her a range of ideas or interpretations of ideas on a given spread of subjects that admitted of choice amongst those ideas, even assuming in that thinker no independent power of intellectual construction. Neither is it likely that so many of the patterns into which those ideas had been assembled before he or she considered them would be so obviously defective in their logic that only one of them would be intellectually respectable: if it were so, then the history of thought would have been a great deal simpler than in fact it is. To compose a family of ideas of one's own, then, may imply a degree of choice, and to do so in the face of a range of intellectual possibilities implies something by way of purpose.

How that purpose is constituted is another question, and one to

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which a great many answers are possible. We cannot always assume fixity of opinion from the word *go*. Each person imbibes opinions, but these can be augmented, revised or sloughed off. There are vast ranges of thought from which to choose and many reasons for choosing. Sometimes practical considerations may be necessary for a mind to assume a determinate shape in the presence of intellectual diversity. But to be categorical here is to pre-empt enquiry.

The second is that usually an historical account is the most appropriate way to understand the shape of a family of ideas. The ideas and their connections, of course, will be capable of being expressed in propositional form and so are intelligible if their terms are understood. But understanding *why* just those connections are formed is a rather different matter. Everything we have noted so far suggests that this not the product of rational inference alone. Certainly the ideas with which a theorist is working must admit of some connection: but the nature of the connection may not be inferential – it may be that a given idea protects another from a possible line of criticism, for instance. More generally, understanding why a thinker moves in a given direction may depend upon understanding the preceding trajectory of their thought. The examples could be multiplied, but the contingent element in the formation of families of ideas points to the historical mode of understanding.

Just because our business is to display connections and their formation, the character as well as the relations amongst ideas must be carefully considered. The character of the connections in hand cannot be understood without delineating both the ideas and how they are connected. It is necessary, too, that the properties of arguments be studied critically. This is not to say that thinkers need be subject to criticism for having the misfortune not to belong to a different school of thought or to a more ‘knowing’ epoch. Rather it suggests that understanding arguments implies understanding their deficiencies, especially their deficiencies for the purpose their author had in mind, for these are surely as much part of them as any other feature. For instance, difficulties or omissions in one area of thought may be a condition of a thinker’s intellectual development in another. There is, in other words, a style of criticism which, working with a light hand, illuminates and explains rather than besmirches and destroys. Delineation and criticism are both tools of explanation.

To pay due attention to the formation and character of a family of ideas, then, is to look at two matters. One is the connection of the ideas that a thinker or thinkers come to link together, seeking for these wherever they are found and whatever they are. The second is the