

Patricia Sheridan

Locke: A Guide for the Perplexed.

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Patricia Sheridan's book on Locke is a welcome addition to Continuum Publishing's student-oriented series 'Guides for the Perplexed'. The focus of her work is to help readers through Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. She is motivated by the widely held view that 'the expansiveness of its subject matter, combined with the sometimes painstaking detail of its discussions, can make it a challenging work to read' (1). Sheridan devotes one chapter to each of six central topics in Locke's *Essay*: 1) ideas, 2) matter, 3) language, 4) identity, 5) morality, 6) knowledge.

The first chapter deals with Locke's theory of ideas. The content of this chapter is a nice interplay between clear explanations of Locke's target in Book 1 of the *Essay*, the theory of innate ideas, and his own empiricist based view of ideas developed in Book 2, and a survey of several more philosophically complicated issues that arise from his discussion. Take two examples. First, in a particularly nice passage, Sheridan deflates the objection sometimes leveled at Locke that Book 1 and Book 2 deal with two different issues. As she writes '(t)he conclusion that some commentators have drawn is that Book 1 proves only that propositions are not innate, leaving the doctrine of innate ideas unharmed. In other words, Locke does not seem to have laid the proper groundwork for Book 2' (15). Here Sheridan reminds us that Locke's aim is not simply to identify the origin of ideas, but to highlight the dangers of grounding one's beliefs in anything but empirical verification. The project of Book 1 is to challenge the belief that general principles are innate. This paves the way for the positive account in Book 2 where Locke investigates the source of ideas and the method for determining their truth or falsity. Second, Sheridan's discussion of the 'veil of perception' introduces two competing accounts of how Locke understands the relationship between ideas and the mind. There is the representational account, in which 'ideas stand between the conscious self and the world outside the mind'; and there is the adverbial account, in which 'ideas are seen as characterizing the manner of human perception rather than standing as the objects of human consciousness' (20). While she refrains from adjudicating this debate, her introduction of the different interpretations serves to illustrate the difficulty of this issue for Locke.

In Chapter 2, Sheridan explains that Locke's adherence to the corpuscularian view of material body was a result of the influence of the scientific revolution. In stark contrast to the Scholastic appeals to spiritual substances and causes, according to the corpuscularian view 'all material bodies are composites of ultimately small particles of matter' (34). Locke accounts for the idea of substance by appealing to associations drawn between our ideas, where our minds infer that there is something that hosts collections of singular ideas. For instance, something allows red, cool, sweet, crunchy to be perceived

as a collective, apple, and this is substance. Sheridan points out the following problem: it seems that Locke takes this substratum to be a real material thing and not just something psychological, thereby threatening his empiricism. She devotes the end of the chapter to critical responses to the ontological status of substrata in Locke. Discussing Locke's critics is useful here: his exchange with Stillingfleet indicates that he takes the substrata to have some ontological status; Jonathan Bennett's view introduces the possibility that Locke's appeal to substrata was no more than adverbial; and with Michael Ayers we see the proposal that real essences are coextensive with substance. Sheridan herself suggests that ultimately Locke seems agnostic about the existence of real unities in nature (42).

Locke believed that with precise language comes better science. To make language more precise, he thinks we need to see that 'words signify only ideas in our minds' (51). A consequence of this view is Locke's nominalism, which Sheridan deftly explicates in the latter half of her third chapter. The first part of the chapter deals with the problem of sense and reference. To hold that words refer only to ideas seems to lead to the strange consequence that words do not refer to things in the world. Sheridan writes: '(g)iven (this) somewhat insular implication...some readers of the *Essay* have concluded that Locke intended signification to indicate the sense or meaning of a word, quite apart from its reference' (53). If this is true, then he needs to provide an account of how and to what extent our ideas are representations. Sheridan maintains that because we are confined to ideas in our minds, on Locke's view, a robust theory of representation is difficult if not impossible. As a result, Locke is vulnerable to both skeptical and idealist interpretations. She suggests that Locke's 'causal account of the origin of ideas' saves him from these interpretations, but her discussion of this point is too brief to be wholly convincing.

In Chapter 4 Sheridan states that Locke's interest in identity is more psychological and less metaphysical than that of the Scholastics or Descartes. Locke does not appeal to essential natures or forms to ground identity, and instead offers the alternative view that the 'identity of things depends very much on categorization...categories we construct' (66). There are three general categories – inert things, non-human living things, and human beings—and identity conditions will vary depending on the category. The category of human identity, for instance, has its foundation in the sameness of the body over time together with its functional organization of parts. Human identity is to be distinguished from personal identity, which Locke bases on the ability to be aware of and remember thoughts and perceptions. Sheridan calls attention to the obvious problem with tying identity to memory, which nicely transitions into two discussions of, first, the real aim of Locke's theory of identity, which is not to define 'self' but to make sense of moral responsibility, and second, of the attendant objections to this view from William Molyneux, Thomas Reid, Joseph Butler, and David Hume (73-80). The discussions of Reid and Butler are of particular benefit, serving to emphasize Locke's focus on moral responsibility, and the connection between his view of identity and his view of substance.

While the *Essay* has a dearth of moral discourse, Sheridan suggests in the fifth chapter that Locke's concern with morality is not to develop a full-blown moral system

but to lay an epistemological foundation upon which morality could be discovered (82). Given Locke's view that moral propositions are like mathematical propositions, in that they can be deduced and are objective, Sheridan states that he holds a version of natural law theory. Any disagreement about moral principles is due to the lack of clarity of terms and/or biases and prejudices. But this is not enough for morality. Locke's view of motivation to act is hedonistic, and Sheridan ends the chapter with a discussion of virtue and vice and their connection to pain, pleasure, the will, and freedom. This is a vexed topic for Locke. Though abridged, Sheridan does a good job of canvassing the issue, even if her concluding suggestion of how to reconcile Locke's hedonism and rationality, that each speaks 'to separate aspects of morality', is far from conclusive (97).

The final chapter is a discussion of Locke's theory of knowledge by way of examining several topics from Book 4 of the *Essay*: intuitive, deductive, and sensitive knowledge; the reality of knowledge; knowledge of substance; judgment; and religious belief. This chapter is a notable departure from the style of the previous ones, in that it is exclusively summary. Sheridan does not provide any commentary on Locke's view, nor does she introduce any from other sources. This would have been helpful, particularly in the discussion of the reality of knowledge. She rehearses Locke's own answer to the anticipated objection that, given his definition of knowledge as the perception of the relationships between ideas, there can be no distinction between knowledge of fictions and knowledge of real objective things (Book 4, Ch.1 §§3-12). But Locke's answer is not straightforward and some help from Sheridan would have been welcome.

Though this book largely succeeds, it has some drawbacks. Overall, for a book that is aimed at students, the referencing is neither straightforward nor sufficient. Sheridan frequently (and helpfully) introduces Locke's contemporaries and antecedents as a way to help situate his work both within the early modern period and as a progression from the ancient and medieval periods. The problem is the almost complete lack of guidance on where to read more about these figures, especially given their pride of place as influences on Locke. With some specific footnotes leading to primary and secondary sources, this book would be a much richer resource. Further, instead of flagging topics within the text with notes towards secondary resources, there is a bibliography grouped by theme at the back. Again, with the novice in mind, a pointed reference to a specific topic—e.g., for more about Robert Boyle's influence on Locke's theory of language (51)—would be preferable to a general index of works on the scientific revolution. Finally, readers should be aware that this book deals almost exclusively with Locke's *Essay* and not, as the title suggests, Locke's thought in general. This work is nevertheless highly recommendable. Sheridan's tone and level of complexity are pitched perfectly at a student audience. Her book would make a valuable companion to an undergraduate course on Locke or general introduction to early modern philosophy.

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