

W. J. Mander

The Philosophy of John Norris.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008.

217 pages

US\$65.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-923030-3)

John Norris has suffered what must be one of the most ignominious fates that a philosopher could suffer, namely that critiques and criticisms of his work are more widely and carefully read than his works. Even to specialists Norris tends to be known primarily as the target of two of Locke's posthumous essays, the *Remarks on Norris* and *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of seeing all things in God*. Generally what's read of Norris' own work are his *Cursory Reflections on Mr. Locke's Essay*, which was the first published criticisms of it and that to which Locke was responding in *Remarks*, and his correspondence with Mary Astell concerning the love of God, a correspondence relatively well-known in some circles but not generally among philosophers. Norris' properly philosophical works, such as *Reason and Religion* and his magnum opus *An Essay toward the theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World*, seem to be hardly studied at all by philosophers. For instance, I count only eight works concerning Norris in all of the *Philosopher's Index*, including Richard Acworth's 1979 monograph *The Philosophy of John Norris* and Charles McCracken's 1983 *Malebranche and British Philosophy*.

This is unfortunate, as W. J. Mander shows in this neat little volume, because Norris was a genuine player on the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century philosophical scene. Despite the prominence of Lockean empiricism, Platonism and Malebrancheanism were alive and well in Britain in the 1690s and early 1700s, and Norris was the central figure in that movement. There is little doubt that Norris' works deserve to be better known and more widely read by historians of philosophy.

Mander hopes to rectify this unfortunate situation, for what he holds to be two important reasons. First, there is the intrinsic interest and value of Norris' thought. Claims Mander, 'Norris' intellectual perspective is as fascinating as it is unique' (Preface, n.p.). I don't see it, however. While Mander is correct to decry the marginalization of Norris as merely 'the English Malebranche', there is more than a kernel of truth behind the suggestion that Norris' philosophy is largely warmed-over Malebranche. Of course, there is more to Norris' thought than merely that, as Mander rightly emphasizes, but it not clear that the amalgamation of Scholastic, Augustinian, and Cartesian views which Mander highlights in Norris is terribly unique or philosophically interesting. Indeed, in the conclusion Mander himself qualifies his claim regarding at least Norris' originality: 'it would, of course, be wrong to suggest that Norris was a highly innovative philosopher' (199).

However, as Mander rightly emphasizes, this does not devalue the study of

Norris, which brings us to the second, sounder thesis. The second reason Mander holds the revival of Norris' fortunes to be so important is contextualist: 'To look only at great philosophers while ignoring the more rank and file thinkers must distort our understanding of past philosophy' (199). In this he is spot on. Norris deserves to be better understood largely because doing so betters our conception of the evolution of past philosophies. That is meant broadly, and I think that Mander would agree: the value of Norris' thought is not simply for the relief into which it throws the canonical philosophies of Lockean empiricism, Berkeleyan idealism, or English Newtonism; just as important is what it reveals about Platonic and Augustinian traditions late seventeenth-century British philosophy. Indeed it seems to me that what is truly fascinating and interesting about Norris' thought emerges from this sort of contextualist approach. Much more interesting than his eclectic mix of Scholasticism, Platonism, and Cartesianism are questions, both historical and philosophical, about the forces pressing Norris in the direction that he took and the consequences of his writings on the intellectual climate of his day. But interesting or not, Mander is absolutely right to tout the scholarly importance of exploring those questions.

Mander hopes to rectify this unfortunate situation by introducing us to Norris' philosophical thought. Thus the book is pretty much a straightforward survey of Norris' ideas rather than a defense of a particular interpretation of Norris, or an analysis of his thought. The first chapter consists of a brief biography and the identification of Norris' main influences (Augustine, Suárez, and Malebranche). The core of the book, and what will be of interest to historians of philosophy, is Chapters 2 – 6. Unlike Acworth, Mander approaches Norris' philosophy topically. Chapter 2, 'Metaphysics', concerns Norris' arguments for the intelligible world and its relation to the natural world, for God's existence, and for the doctrine of the identity of the divine and intelligible worlds. Chapter 3, 'Knowledge', concerns Norris' Cartesian understanding of mind-body dualism and his largely Malebranchian conception of our knowledge of self, God, and the external world. Unlike the previous chapter, which largely avoided critical discussion of Norris' arguments, this chapter concludes with eleven pages assessing Norris' epistemology and considering whether he was in the end an idealist. Mander's answer: 'Norris' position comes very close to idealism. Dangerously so, it might be said ...' since 'his admission of the existence of external material things is not a large concession, but one concerning appearances only' (97).

Chapter 4, 'Faith', concerns Norris' unconvincing defense of orthodoxy during the Socinian Controversy initiated by the publication of John Toland's Lockean *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696). Chapter 5, 'Love', concerns Norris' doctrines of motivation, freedom, and desire. This doctrine of love was central to his Augustinianism and was what Norris was most famous for during his lifetime. It found expression in his previously mentioned correspondence with Mary Astell. Chapter 6, 'Controversy with Locke', concerns just that, Norris' controversy with Locke. Key to understanding this, according to Mander, is Norris' strange, Platonic doctrine of truth. It's strange because it

centers on an obscure distinction between ‘truth in the object’ and ‘truth in the subject’. The former is constituted by necessary truths and the latter by merely contingent ones, which in itself is not so odd. The strangeness of the doctrine, however, lies in the requirement that ‘truths in the subject’ must match up with ‘truths in the object’ and, more oddly, the former derive their truth only from the latter. ‘Truths in the object’, in other words, are the truth-makers for ‘truths in the subject’. The unfortunate consequence of this relationship is that the necessity and contingency noted above is no longer a feature of propositional content but of the vehicle in which that content inheres or through which it is expressed. Thus it follows that (a) my thought that ‘ $2+2=4$ ’ is merely contingent because it is merely ‘my thought’, i.e. because it is merely a ‘truth in a subject’, and (b) my thought that ‘Obama is the US president’ is not ‘really true at all’ (182), because containing merely contingent propositional content it fails to correspond with any ‘truth in the object’. ‘A difficult doctrine to swallow’ (182) indeed! No wonder Locke was so hostile to Norris’ objections.

In many ways Mander’s book is much too slim. His treatment of Norris’ arguments for the intelligible world is a case in point. He is content simply to canvass four arguments from the *Essay toward the theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World*: the Argument from Uniformity, the Argument from Geometry, the Argument from Eternal Truths, and the Argument from Science. These sections read like philosophical reportage rather than interpretation or philosophical analysis. Norris’ Argument from Uniformity, for example, is a direct response to Locke’s anti-Aristotelian Argument from Monsters (*Essay concerning Human Understanding*, III.iii.17; III.vi.16-17 and 26-7; IV.iv.16). Yet no connection is drawn between the argument and Locke’s, to say nothing of any philosophical assessment of Norris’ argument as a response to Locke’s. This is not to say that Mander never moves beyond reportage in the book. Clearly he does engage in both analysis and assessment of Norris’ thought, as I indicated above. But he doesn’t do enough of it to suit me. In this regard Ackworth’s treatment of Norris might be considered superior. Furthermore, in my estimation Ackworth on the whole more fully contextualizes Norris’ arguments. This is not to say that Mander fails to contextualize Norris’ thought, or that he does not draw appropriate and illuminating connections between Norris and, say, Suárez or Malebranche. But it is to say that Mander’s book could have done more and that I would have enjoyed it more had it done so.

Another disappointing aspect of Mander’s treatment is the failure to systematically engage the interpretations of Ackworth and McCracken. Both are mentioned and occasional points of contrast with Ackworth are indicated in the footnotes, but there is never any engagement with either of them. An exception might be the treatment of the dismissive claim that Norris was merely ‘the English Malebranche’. But singling out Ackworth and McCracken in this context raises straw man worries, because they were just as concerned as Mander to confront that appellation as ground for dismissing Norris and both were, arguably, as successful as Mander in that regard.

But truly these criticisms are both limitations in Mander's work rather than defects. They are truly limitations rather than criticisms because they follow from the reasonably limited aims of the book, namely introducing and surveying Norris' thought. Mander, in other words, is attempting to revive Norris' reputation here, all on his own and in a single work. He's trying to get the scholarly process started, rather than complete it, and the burden of analyzing and further contextualizing Norris' thought lies with those of us who will follow Mander's lead.

The unfortunate thing about these two limitations, however, is that they threaten to undermine the book's thesis. There's a danger of historians concluding that there is little of historical or philosophical value in Norris' thought because Mander didn't seem to find much in it. That, as Mander repeatedly emphasizes, would be as mistaken as it is unfortunate. There's more than meets the eye in Norris' appropriations of Malebranche and in his battles with Locke. There's also more to his differences from Malebranche as well as his similarities with Locke. But they are not fully drawn out in Mander's presentation.

Mander aims to open the door to Norris' intelligible world for later scholars to explore, and he has done that very nicely. He has accurately and intelligently presented the main lines of Norris' philosophy and with verve introduced us to the delights of Norris' odd blend of Platonism, Scholasticism, and Cartesianism. In the end, these strengths outweigh my criticisms and I strongly recommend Mander's book for anyone interested in Locke, Berkeley, or the late seventeenth-century intellectual climate in Britain.

Benjamin Hill

The University of Western Ontario