



Locke and the Enlightenment

edited by
Brunello Lotti and Paola Rumore

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Introduction

Locke and the Enlightenment

Brunello Lotti and Paola Rumore

“Locke and the Enlightenment” allows of a twofold reading: the first has a strong historico-philosophical commitment and interprets this title as the investigation of the reception of Locke’s thought in 18th-century philosophy and science; the second interprets it instead in the sense of a less historically committed debate on the intrinsic relevance of Locke’s ideas to the Enlightenment. The two readings are by no means mutually exclusive but should coexist in order to find an answer to the question concerning the still extremely vague and stereotyped relationship between Locke’s philosophy and the Enlightenment. On a closer examination the ambiguity of the title reflects the ambiguity of the notion of Enlightenment itself, which can be understood on the one hand as *the historical Enlightenment*, and on the other hand as *a broader historiographical category* that moves beyond the chronological boundaries of the “Age of Enlightenment”.

In a well-established historical perspective, which defines the Enlightenment according to the centrality of the *philosophes* and the *Lumières*, and which places the cultural movement that carries that name in the 18th century, Locke appears quite rightly a ‘proto-Enlightener’. He is the one who paves the way for debates and orientations concerning relevant issues in the theory of knowledge, in political philosophy, in philosophy of religion and education etc. that will flourish in the 18th century. This long interpretive tradition, which in fact goes back to Voltaire and has been strongly promoted even by a certain kind of neo-Kantian philosophical historiography (Ernst Cassirer, Alois Riehl),

is still lively. A few decades ago, it inspired one of the few investigations that clearly address the relationship between Locke and the Enlightenment. In his *Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment* (1992), Peter A. Schouls remarked that Locke “is often referred to as the great progenitor of the Enlightenment,” and emphasises the link between Locke’s ideas and the Enlightenment by stressing the pivotal role the ‘enlightened’ ideas of freedom, progress, mastery, reason, and education play in Locke’s writings¹. Obviously, terms such as ‘progenitor,’ ‘fore-runner,’ ‘forefather,’ ‘proto-Enlightener,’ ‘anticipator,’ and suchlike do not make sense if taken literally; they are rather meant to stress the fact that Locke’s ideas work as a ‘premise’ for prominent debates of the Age of the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, if conceived as a ‘source of inspiration’ for the later Enlightenment, Locke’s ideas are unsurprisingly set out of their original context; Voltaire’s conception of tolerance, for example, is not Locke’s; Voltaire’s relationship to Christianity is certainly not Locke’s; nor is Locke’s idea of the boundaries of reason the same as that found at the basis of Kant’s critical philosophy. But still, Voltaire and Kant themselves promoted Locke’s prestige into the continental milieu by stressing the belief that he had pinpointed relevant issues that would soon come to the center of the philosophical debate².

In the broader and therefore more vague interpretation of the historical category of the Enlightenment – which doesn’t match the idea of the uniqueness of the French 18th-century *Lumières* – Locke himself was considered ‘a leading figure’ of the Enlightenment. In Isaiah Berlin’s selection *The Age of the Enlightenment* (1956) – despite the subtitle “The Eighteenth-Century Philosophers” – a good 80 pages are devoted to Locke and to the theory of knowledge of the *Essay*; the *philosophes* are

¹ P.A. Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom. John Locke and Enlightenment*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1992, p. 1. Nevertheless, Schouls wrote: “Locke is not the greatest of the Enlightenment’s forefathers”, since “the place of pre-eminence belongs to Descartes”; “indeed, Locke might not have exerted much of an influence on the Enlightenment had it not been for the impact of Descartes’ methodology on him” (pp. 1-2).

² For what concerns Voltaire’s opinion on Locke see C. Borghero, *Interpretazioni, categorie, finzioni. Narrare la storia della filosofia*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2017, pp. 156-57 and fn. 6; on the importance of Locke for the development of Kant’s critical philosophy see A. Riehl, *Der philosophische Kritizismus. Geschichte und System*, Kröner, Leipzig 1924 (1908²), vol. I, pp. 19-99.

presented as Locke's faithful, sometimes even uncritical disciples³. It has already been remarked that Berlin's selection is rather peculiar because of its Anglocentric perspective⁴, and because of its almost exclusively theoretical focus (critique of metaphysics, empiricism, the connection between philosophical critique and the intellectual progress of science); nevertheless, many contemporary scholars still claim – sixty-five years of Locke's scholarship on from Berlin's selection – that Locke is 'a philosopher of the Enlightenment'. According to the editors of the recent volume *The Lockean Mind*, "the Essay is one of the most important English language philosophical texts of the Enlightenment"⁵. Charles W. Mills, in discussing the shortcomings of Locke's political philosophy concerning the question of racism, places him on the same level "as the other philosophers of the Enlightenment"⁶; Kim Ian Parker wonders why Locke, "one of the founders of the Enlightenment and, certainly, of the rise of secularism in the West, takes religion, theology and even the Bible so seriously"⁷, a question that appears rather naïve only if one employs a more rigorous definition of the historical Enlightenment and manages to grasp the difference between Locke's 'reasonable' Christianity and the criticism of religion in 18th-century deism or atheism. For these scholars Locke is truly 'a philosopher of the Enlightenment', since the central issues of his philosophy belong to that philosophical orientation: tolerance, the boundaries of reason, the criticism of the principle of authority, the priority of science over metaphysics, the pragmatic component of any philosophical investigation, etc.

³ *The Age of Enlightenment. The 18th Century Philosophers*. Selected, with Introduction and Interpretive Commentary by I. Berlin, A Mentor Book, New York 1956, pp. 19 and 107.

⁴ See H. Hardy, *Editorial Preface to The Age of Enlightenment. The Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*. Selected, with Introduction and Interpretive Commentary by I. Berlin, with the assistance of M. Dick. Second edition edited by H. Hardy, The Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, Oxford 2017, p. vii.

⁵ J. Gordon-Roth and S. Weinberg, Introduction to J. Gordon-Roth and S. Weinberg (eds.), *The Lockean Mind*, Routledge, New York and London 2022, p. 1.

⁶ C.W. Mills, *Locke on Slavery*, in *The Lockean Mind*, cit., p. 497.

⁷ K.I. Parker, *Locke on Theological Method and Biblical Interpretation*, in *The Lockean Mind*, cit., p. 564. Parker writes that "Locke presents himself as one of the architects of the Enlightenment while still remaining close to the biblical text", since his "understanding of the Fall is one that allows a greater degree of human freedom and human optimism than was generally thought to be the case at the time" (p. 570). This statement doesn't make much sense if one takes the very rigorous historical definition of the Enlightenment as the 18th-century cultural movement.

Whatever definition of Enlightenment we adopt, the relationship between Locke and the Enlightenment remains central. The essays collected in this volume prioritise the distinction between Locke's thought and its interpretations in the European Enlightenments, with special attention to the *philosophes* (see the papers by Anstey, Quintili, and Sciuto), but also with reference to other linguistic and cultural areas (see the papers by McKenna and Mori, Russo, Di Biase, Thiel, Szabelska, and Muceni), without, however, neglecting the broader interpretation of our task, that is the intrinsic relevance of Locke's philosophy to the Enlightenment (see Wolfe's paper).

The essays focus on unexplored aspects of Locke's reception in the 18th century. They are intended as a preliminary investigation in a promising area of research that may lead to improvements in various directions. We suggest considering the following example as a confirmation of the fruitful developments of such a line of research. The French mathematician Sylvestre François Lacroix (1765-1843) – a friend of Condorcet and Laplace, professor at the École Polytechnique (1799) and later at the Collège de France (from 1812), and the author of very successful handbooks of mathematics – published the *Essais sur l'enseignement en général, et sur celui des mathématiques en particulier* in 1805. The book had four editions, the last one in 1838. Its original purpose was to contribute to the reform of public education promoted by Napoleon. In the broad picture of the philosophical and scientific debate from Descartes to the late 18th century presented in the *Introduction*, Locke plays a pivotal role. According to Lacroix, Locke contributed to the popularisation of a kind of 'scientific' metaphysics that would be then developed by Condillac: "La métaphysique rendue par Locke accessible aux esprits justes, qui ne goûtent que les connaissances solides appuyées sur des faits certains et traitées par une déduction rigoureuse, fut cultivée dans ce sens par Condillac"⁸. Locke, the philosopher of the understanding, carried

⁸ S.F. Lacroix, *Essais sur l'enseignement en général, et sur celui des mathématiques en particulier*, Bachelier, Paris 1838⁴, p. 18. Lacroix is explicitly extending what D'Alembert says about Locke in the *Discours Préliminaire*: Locke "réduisit la Métaphysique à ce qu'elle doit être en effet, la Physique expérimentale de l'âme" (*Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, par une Société de gens de lettres, chez Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, Paris 1751, t. I, *Discours préliminaire*, p. xxvii).

on Descartes' project and paved the way for the interaction of philosophy and science: "La métaphysique, dégagée par Descartes du jargon inintelligible qu'on lui avait fait parler si long-temps dans les écoles, est rendue accessible à tous les bons esprits par Locke, qui la soumet à des observations précises, faites sur les opérations de notre entendement"⁹. In Lacroix's view, long before Kant Locke claimed that metaphysics should be properly understood as an investigation of the understanding. One-hundred years after Locke's death, this example reveals that his wide popularity extended far beyond the philosophical milieu. It reached prominent intellectual figures who then conveyed the empiricist and scientific culture of the Enlightenment into the 19th century.

⁹ Lacroix, *Essais*, cit., p. 48. We are grateful to the historian of mathematics Paolo Bussotti for this indication.

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