

JOHN LOCKE *

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If we are asked to give a list of the ten most influential philosophers of all time, we are likely to have the name 'John Locke' in our list, even, perhaps, fairly high in the list. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that one cannot pick up a sermon, a novel, pamphlet or a treatise and be in any doubt, after reading a few lines, whether it was written before or after the publication of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, which was in 1690. The intellectual atmosphere since Locke has had quite a different smell from what it had before Locke. If we could fly back in a time-rocket to England in 1700, we could already breathe its air, and we could already converse with our new acquaintances there without feeling lost. In the England of, say, 1600, we should gasp like fishes out of water. But if we are then asked what Locke's great contribution was, we find it very difficult to answer.

A good many years ago, I happened to be sitting with Earl Russell in the restaurant-car of a train to North Wales. Somehow our conversation turned to John Locke and I put to Russell this very question, perhaps with some hyperbole,— 'Why is it that although nearly every youthful student of philosophy both can and does in about his second essay refute Locke's entire Theory of Knowledge, yet Locke made a bigger difference to the whole intellectual climate of mankind than anyone had done since Aristotle?' Russell agreed that the facts were so, and suggested, on the spur of the moment, an

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answer which dissatisfied me. He said 'Locke was the spokesman of Common Sense.' Almost without thinking I retorted impatiently 'I think Locke invented Common Sense.' To which Russell rejoined 'By God, Ryle, I believe you are right. No one ever had Common Sense before John Locke—and no one but Englishmen have ever had it since.'

Now there was something true both in my unpremeditated retort and in Russell's unpremeditated rejoinder. But it is not at all easy to nail down this truth. The major thing I want to do in this talk of mine today is to try to nail it down.

Let me first of all, though, run through and dismiss three other more or less standard answers to that original question of mine, namely, 'What was Locke's great contribution?'

1) The first of the four books into which Locke's *Essay* is divided is occupied almost entirely with the refutation of a theory, known as the "Theory of Innate Ideas", the theory, namely, that we are born not only with arms, legs, eyes and ears, but also with a fund of truths and concepts. It hails originally from Plato's dialogues, the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*. Some philosophers, whose reading of Locke seems to have terminated at the end of this first book, speak as if what Locke achieved was just the demolition of this quaint but erroneous old theory. But this cannot be the right answer. A number of mostly rather small fry had, indeed, in Locke's own day, given, with modifications, a brief revival to Plato's theory, often for theological ends; and the philosopher Descartes, who was not at all small fry, had given it a rather perfunctory and non-committal endorsement. But the Theory of Innate Ideas was not, in the 17th Century, a dominant or even a very influential doctrine. It was not a doctrinal Goliath whose menace to mankind urgently needed to be dispelled by a stone from John Locke's sling. Moreover we possess Locke's first draft of what was many years later to be his *Essay*, and in this draft the Theory of Innate Ideas goes almost, though not quite unmentioned. He had begun to write his *Essay* without yet having even seriously attended to the

Theory of Innate Ideas. It was only a secondary or tertiary target. He attacked it for interim tactical, not for ultimate strategic ends. I think myself that he filled up to many pages on his demolition of the Theory.

2) A quite different kind of answer to my original question is this. Locke, in his explorations into the workings of the human mind, and particularly into its workings when trying to acquire knowledge, was inaugurating the science of psychology. Yet Locke never claims to be doing anything of the sort. So far from aspiring, as Hume did aspire, to be a second Newton, namely the Newton of the mental world, he speaks as if his task was rather to remove certain intellectual obstructions to the progress of such natural sciences as Newtonian mechanics, chemistry, astronomy and medicine. Moreover, if it were true that Locke's chief legacy was his contribution to psychology, we should have to concede that this contribution was of very little value. Next to nothing of Locke's terminology or of his theory of thought and perception survives in modern psychology. In fact psychology had to disembarass itself of Lockeanisms before it could win its spurs as a science. A student who knew his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* and claimed to be well-grounded in psychology would receive very short shrift from the Department of Psychology of his university.

3) The third and the most favoured answer to my original question, and the last that I shall consider, is this. Locke was the champion of Empiricism against Rationalism. Philosophers, it is supposed, have to join one party or the other, and Locke was, if not the founder, at least the organiser and leader of the Empiricist Party. Yet Locke never calls himself an Empiricist, nor does he call Descartes, say, a Rationalist. Locke learned a lot from Descartes, and when he criticised Descartes' doctrines, it is only sometimes, though it is sometimes, for their abstract speculativeness that he takes them to task. Locke himself knew a good deal of medicine; he was a close friend of the chemist, Boyle, and

he was an early Fellow of the Royal Society, which was dedicated to the advancement of knowledge by observation and experiment. He knew, by personal participation, the unseaworthiness of scientific theories which get no ballast from the laboratory, the operating theatre or the observatory.

Descartes, a mathematical genius, was indeed in his physics and his physiology much more of a pure theorist and much less of an experimentalist than Galileo, Harvey or Boyle. But even he never pretended that the science of human and animal anatomy, say, or astronomy, could be done, like geometry, in the armchair. Indeed he made some creditable though not very systematic observations of his own on the carcasses of animals in butchers' shops. Some of his *a priori* arguments for the existence of God are repeated, without uneasiness, by Locke himself. Indeed Locke's whole account of indubitable knowledge diverges only slightly from that of Descartes. If Descartes was Rationalist, then in this matter Locke was a Rationalist too.

The historical truth is that the supposed two-party system of Rationalists versus Empiricists just did not exist. But even if it had existed, the principle that our knowledge of nature must be rooted in observation and experiment had been the overt maxim of the Royal Society for a generation or more before the publication of Locke's *Essay*. If this maxim is 'Empiricism' then Empiricism had long been the familiar and uncontroverted principle of the Royal Society. Locke would not have invented it or felt any special call to champion it. Champion it against whom? The principle was in no jeopardy; and the defence of it, if it had needed defence, would have required no special originality.

I now turn to my positive task of specifying what Locke's contribution was.

We should, to start with, consider the seemingly trivial question — for whom was Locke writing? His own prefatory Epistle to the Reader makes it quite clear that he was writing for the general public, or rather for the general literate

public, that is, for all who habitually read sermons, plays, histories, novels, books of travel or essays. He was not writing for a handful of experts in theology, scholarship or science; he was not, for example, writing exclusively for the Fellows of the Royal Society, the Professors of Oxford or for the divines of the Church of England. Least of all was he writing for professional philosophers —no professional philosophers existed in the age of Locke. The whole first edition of his *Essay* was in fact sold out in less than two years.

To say that the *Essay* was written for the general public is not to say that it was a work of popularisation or vulgarisation. But it is to say that Locke thought that its problems and his solutions of them were germane to the intellectual interests of everyone, not just to the professional interests of the learned. But what intellectual interests are common to everyone? Surely some people get heated by political issues who are lukewarm about theological issues; some people are eager to hear about new discoveries in astronomy or medicine, while others care nothing about these but love to study archaeology or to read travel journals, essays or biographies. By what hook could Locke have hoped to capture the attention, as he did capture the attention, of literate folk in general? Even more, by what lessons could Locke have hoped to improve the thinking, as he did improve the thinking, of literate folk in general?

Notoriously, Locke in his *Essay* dissects the thoughts of which the human mind is capable into their constituent ideas; and he traces these constituent ideas to their sources in sense-perception and introspection. He describes the compoundings of these elementary ideas into complex ideas, and the distillation from them of abstract ideas, the coupling of them into propositions, and so forth. But what were the bearings of this quasi-mechanics of our intellectual operations upon any, and *a fortiori* upon all of the variegated intellectual interests of literate people in general? If you were a

passionate supporter and I was a passionate opponent of the Arian Heresy, or of the Divine Right of Kings, as at that time, we might well have been, how possibly could we find in Locke's *Essay concerning the Human Understanding* a common illumination or a shareable lesson? Well, unless we were too bigoted or fanatical to be teachable at all, we could, I suggest, have found such a lesson, and Locke's actual readers found it too.

Violent controversy was a salient mark of Locke's age. In matters of religion above all, though followed closely by matters of politics, people who held opinions at all held them rabidly. The idea that opposing sects or opposing factions should or even could ever agree to differ, the idea, that is, of Toleration was, as yet, save in Holland, hardly thought of, or if thought of, then generally deemed to be itself intolerable. Roman Catholics and Calvinists were at one on the duty of Intolerance, though they applied it very differently. If your opinions differ from mine, then to the scaffold or to exile or to Hell you should go. Conflicts between your and my opinions could be settled only by the elimination of you whose opinions must be wrong and pernicious. Locke himself lived for some years in Holland as a political refugee, and his Oxford college, Christ Church, was forced to deprive him of his Studentship, because the King suspected Locke's politics. In the 20th Century no one tried to deprive me of my Studentship at Christ Church, or was even perturbed about any of my views.

It is against this background of controversy without toleration that we need to read Locke's *Essay*. Men in general needed to learn, what the handful of Locke's scientific friends in England and theological friends in Holland had quite recently learned, to realise not just that their own opinions and surmises might be mistaken, but still more that their opinions deserved only that *degree of adherence* that was warranted by the ratio of the amount of their evidence to their scope. For example, historical and theological opinions

resting on testimony were less or more secure as that testimony derived from few or many witnesses, uneducated or educated witnesses, biassed or impartial witnesses, remote or recent witnesses, concordant or discordant witnesses. Analogously, the strength of our scientific opinions that rest on observation and experiment should be proportioned to the amplitude and the precision of those observations. In the fields of geometry and arithmetic, what is neither axiomatic nor proved by axioms, is, as yet, mere hypothesis or else error. Here anything like a mere opinion and *a fortiori* a stubborn opinion is entirely unreasonable. 'Mathematical bigot' is almost a contradiction in terms.

Moreover disputants often fail to consider the nature of the propositions that they espouse. Some propositions, though unquestionable, are only verbal or 'trifling' propositions, such as the proposition that a bachelor is an unmarried man. But their dull unquestionability is then covertly bestowed upon propositions of sorts which are not verbal and are far from trifling, like the proposition that for human beings there is a life after death. A person who rightly avers that he could not be wrong about the former proposition may easily go on to aver that he could not be wrong about the latter proposition.

Sometimes Locke seems to us unduly to narrow the field of what can be known for certain in order to widen the field of the propositions that can, at best, be reasonably opined, i.e. be of sufficiently high probability for us safely to act on them; and perhaps the intellectual modesty which he recommends does come a bit too close to intellectual defeatism. There are, according to him, very few sorts of truths that we can conceivably acquire real knowledge of. But I suggest that his prime concern was just with the areas where not concord on certainties but discord between certitudes prevails. It was for these cockpit-areas, which on any showing, were and still are large enough, that he was prescribing. His prescription, which has been a blessedly trite one since

1690, is that men should learn to ask themselves what are the solidities and what are the frailties of the reasons they have for their opinions, no matter on what subject. They should learn to harness an their opinions between the shafts of evidence and clarity. If this is what it is to have some degree of Common Sense, namely to have learned when it is silly and when it is reasonable to feel quite or fairly sure of things; when certitudes are unreasonable and when they are reasonable; then Locke's *Essay* does not only teach us what Common Sense is; it teaches us Common Sense. It teaches us how to be sensible or reasonable in our adoption, retention and rejection of opinions. It is, I suggest, chiefly for contrast that Locke concerns himself with Euclidean certainties. His business is with the territories in which, though Euclidean certainties are unattainable, die-hard certitudes are all too prevalent.

A cautionary word is needed here. Our hackneyed phrase 'Common Sense' is not Locke's phrase. Moreover, when we use the phrase nowadays, we think chiefly of sensibleness in common, i.e. everyday matters, like not discarding winter clothing on a sunny morning in February. But for our purposes we should construe the word 'common' in a different way, namely to mean potentially common to or shared by all men alike, in respect of all their opinions alike, whether these opinions are theological or scientific or commercial or political or moral or aesthetic, and so on. Locke is teaching us what it is to be sensible, and what it is to be silly in anyone's adherence to views of any sort about no matter what. It is no accident that Locke wrote, besides his *Essay*, one thing on the *Reasonableness of Christianity* and another on *Toleration*, i.e. the Toleration of religious differences. Locke's *Essay* is, in intention and in effect, much less a theory of knowledge than it is a theory of opinion. He is not, as Descartes had been, primarily pointing out the strait and very narrow path to certainties. He is teaching us how we

can in some matters and why we cannot in other matters, make reasonably sure.

But now for a bit of trouble. Is this is the central moral of his *Essay*, how could Locke expect, and how could he have been correct in expecting that his quasi-chemical account of the ultimate elements of our thoughts would persuade people of this moral? How could people be taught to become critical of their own previous opinionatednesses by being told of the sources of our simple ideas in sensation and introspection, of the compoundings of these simple ideas, of their fixation by the attachment of them to words, of the different types of the true and false propositions into which they are combined, and so forth? Can ordinary or even highly sophisticated people be converted from bigots into fairly judicious and cautious thinkers by examining, so to speak, the mechanics of their own internal intellectual operations? We do not see better for knowing about our retinas. We do not swim better for knowing about our sinews, tendons, muscles and arteries. Why should we think less sillily for knowing what mental atoms our thoughts are composed of and how these mental atoms cohere into mental molecules? I think that there is an answer to these questions, though I am not positive that I have got it. But I shall try.

Even though we aim to be as factual or scientific as possible when we start to think about our actions, thoughts, perceptions, memories, resolutions and the rest, we still know, so to speak, in our bones that our theories about them, because couched in factual idioms echoing those of chemistry, mechanics, hydraulics, or physiology, have inevitably omitted something; and omitted something that is cardinal to their being actions, thoughts, perceptions, memories, or resolutions at all. For such theories, couched in such idioms, are necessarily silent about the *purposive* nature of our doings, thinkings, perceivings, etc. It is essential to them that they merit good, medium or bad marks. In our actions, unlike our mere reactions, either there is success or there is failure,

and either dexterity or clumsiness. Some actions are obligatory; others are wrong; some are prudent; others are imprudent. Even walking, unlike breathing, is something that the infant has to learn, by trial and error, to do, first on flat and firm floors, and later, perhaps, on loose stones or icy pavements. He learns, but of course sometimes forgets that in special situations it is necessary to walk *carefully*. Similarly with perception. However well equipped he is with sharp eyes or good ears, the child has to learn to estimate, and not to misestimate distances, speeds, directions and sizes, and to recognize at a glance, and not to misrecognize even slightly different kinds of objects and happenings. There is room for adeptness, precipitancy, imprecision and systematicness in our perceivings. It is not for optical reasons that the lynx-eyed Red Indian cannot detect misprints or see that a chess-player's Queen is in danger. If he has not learned to read or to play chess his lynx-eyes cannot tell him these things. Now the same things is true of thought. What a person thinks on a certain matter is true or else it is false; it is accurate or else inaccurate; it is definite or else it is vague; it is clear or it is muddled; it is well- or else ill-founded; it is expert or else it is amateurish, and so on. Some practice and often some tuition is a *sine qua non* of our being able to think out any problems at all, however simple, within certain fields. It is not from lack of quick-wittedness that my Red Indian cannot work out or even be defeated by a chess-problem, but because he has not learned the game. Thinking, like fencing and skating, is a consortium of competences and skills. Like them, it has tasks which it may accomplish or may fail to do so. It has room in it therefore for high and low degrees of these competences and skills, i.e. of low and high degrees of stupidity and silliness. In our thinking we exercise good, moderate or bad craftsmanship. Thought is not something that just happens to us and in us, like digestion. It is something that we do, and do well or badly, carefully or carelessly, expertly or amateurishly.

As I said, we know these and kindred platitudes in our bones. So when we read Locke's chemical-sounding theory of thought and perception and try to apply his theory to our own thinkings and perceivings, we automatically re-instate between the lines of the *Essay* this element that he has so far omitted, this cardinal element of purposiveness or craftsmanship. These lines say only that our simple ideas, the prime elements of our thoughts, originate in sense-perception and introspection. But we forthwith construe this theory of origins into a maxim of intellectual craftsmanship, namely the maxim of the Royal Society that theories about what exists and happens in Nature are relatively good theories only in so far as they are relatively well vouched for by relatively copious, systematic, careful and precise observations and experiments. Nor, I suggest, are we advancing beyond Locke himself in reading this and other maxims of intellectual workmanship between the lines of his *Essay*. I think that Locke himself thought and meant his readers to think that his chemical-sounding analyses of thought and knowledge carried with them these maxims about how to think well rather than badly. He talks of the origins and the agglomeratings of ideas, but only in order to illuminate the notions of judiciousness and injudiciousness.

It may also be the case, though now I am not suggesting that Locke had the point in mind, that the factual or scientific sound and 'feel' of his anatomy of cognition helped his readers to draw the inteded moral. In this way. Suppose you hold some opinion passionately and are then advised to examine its credentials dispassionately and to examine the objections to it dispassionately, you, being human, will resent, passionately resent, the advice as partisan advice. It will feel like a traitor's advice to sell your fortress to its besiegers. But if someone, John Locke say, advises you to trace to their origins the complex ideas that are the materials of your opinion, to test for their precision and unambiguousness the words in which your ideas are fixed, then the advice

does not feel to be partisan advice. It now feels like neutral advice from the laboratory. You may take this advice without suspecting treachery. So now you can allow yourself to practise some self-criticism—and from now on your opinion is no longer a passionate opinion. But, as I said, I am not suggesting that Locke thought of his anatomy of cognition as a device for lulling suspicions. I am only suggesting that his *Essay* succeeded partly because its anatomical tone of voice did in fact have this temperature-lowering effect.

Examiners award to the candidates their alpha, beta and gamma marks for, among other qualities, the qualities of their thinking. We can all learn, in some measure, to be our own habitual examiners, though without any formalized marking-code. Locke, I think, meant to teach us to become our own examiners. His *Essay* was meant to be an *Ars Cogitandi*, or even, if you prefer, an Ethics of Thinking. Certainly he couched the principles of intellectual self-marking in idioms reminiscent of a fairly primitive atomic and molecular theory—and a theory which, as I said at the beginning, can be refuted by any youthful student of philosophy. But this does not matter very much, if, as I am urging, for Locke himself and his readers the lessons conveyed in these pretty factitious laboratory idioms were not laboratory lessons. They were lessons in the craftsmanship, in the economics and even in the ethics of the formation, retention and rejection of opinions. They were lessons in reasonableness. If Common Sense is reasonableness in opining, then Locke taught and was the first to teach Common Sense.

I can imagine that some of you may grumble 'Then did Locke's great contribution just amount to his long-winded statement of the obvious truth that the tenacity with which people hold their opinions is not always, but ought always to be proportioned to the quantity and quality of the reasons that can be adduced for them?' To this grumble I reply 'Yes, yes, yes!—but who made this obvious if it was not John Locke?' Every philosopher of genius has made obvious to

mankind things that, in his youth, had not been more than, if as much as, quaint speculations. Every philosopher of genius can be ridiculed for having once painfully excogitated and laboriously argued positions which we absorbed effortlessly with our mother's milk. This is their contribution. They, with sweat and worry, designed and laid the pavements on which we easily stroll. Our difficulty is that of re-discovering what on earth it was that prevented them from strolling on these good, old pavements. The idea that there was a time, namely their time, when these pavements were missing is an idea to which, precisely thanks to them, we are not accustomed. To his pupils their teacher, if he is any good, is always the sedulous transmitter of the obvious. Its obviousness is his gift to them. How could they discern behind the ease of their reception of it, the pains that had gone to his giving of it? Standing on his shoulders, they cannot conceive why his feet had not from the start been where theirs are now.

I must not be construed as saying that Locke's *Essay* has made all of us, in respect of all our opinions, cautious, unobstinate, unbiassed or open to correction. There are bigots, fanatics and cranks in our midst in 1965; there are bigotries, fanaticisms and crankinesses under our own dear skins, still in 1965. But to all or nearly all of us the words 'bigot', 'fanatic' and 'crank' are now terms of condemnation or contempt. We know what it is like for people, including ourselves, to be or else to keep clear of being die-hards in opinion; and we know how, at least in most matters of opinion, to require for our opinions their due meed of backing in testimony, clues, experiments or statistics; and where there is room for differences of opinion, we do not habitually or naturally demand the extreme penalties for other peoples' dissents.

Oliver Cromwell in 1650, with characteristic forcibleness, had said to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 'I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you

may be mistaken'. This lesson —except alas! in matters of race and nationality— has been fairly widely learned. But Locke's lesson was harder and a profounder lesson than was Cromwell's. For Locke required of us not just that we remember, from time to time, the quite general lesson that we are fallible, but that we remember all of the time to subject our particular opinings to the disciplines appropriate to them. All of our opinions could be and ought to be *considered* opinions. None of us can claim with a good conscience that we always succeed in this labour of intellectual self-control. But the very fact that we have bad consciences about our lapses shows by itself how deep Locke's lesson has sunk into us. Of course, that our opinions should always be *true* cannot be secured. But that they should always be well-weighed and tested can in principle be achieved. John Locke taught us to wish to achieve this and to be sorry when we fail. Certainly we do often fail, but certainly too we are sorry when we fall below our standards. It was Locke who gave us these standards.

RESUMEN

Uno de los filósofos más influyentes de todos los tiempos ha sido John Locke. Con todo, si nos preguntamos cuál fue su gran contribución a la filosofía nos resulta difícil contestar. En una conversación con Lord Russell surgió una ocurrencia: "Locke habría inventado el sentido común". Este ensayo es un intento de precisar lo que haya de verdad en ella.

El primer libro del *Ensayo* de Locke está dedicado a una crítica de la "teoría de las ideas innatas". Algunos hablan como si la mayor contribución de Locke hubiera sido la demolición de esa vieja y errónea teoría. Pero ni ésta tenía tanta importancia en el siglo, ni el primer esbozo del *Ensayo* se la concedía. La crítica a dicha teoría era sólo una meta secundaria.

Otra respuesta sería: Locke inauguraba la ciencia de la psicología. Pero Locke no pretendió tanto. Aparte de que su contribución a la psicología fue más exigua, de hecho la psicología hubo de sacudirse de mucho 'lockeanismo' para ser ciencia.

Una última respuesta: Locke fue el campeón del empirismo contra el racionalismo. Pero Locke no se llama 'empirista'. Mucho aprendió de Descartes, y si Descartes fue 'racionalista', también lo fue Locke en muchos puntos. Por otra parte el empirismo, era cosa familiar antes de Locke y no precisaba de ningún campeón para su causa.

¿Cuál fue, entonces, la contribución de Locke?

Preguntemos primero algo en apariencia trivial: ¿para quién escribía Locke? Para el público letrado en general, no para expertos ni escolapios. Locke pensó que sus problemas y soluciones correspondían a intereses comunes a todos. ¿Cuáles podrían ser éstos? El *Ensayo* disecciona los pensamientos en sus ideas constituyentes y describe la composición de las ideas complejas y de las proposiciones. ¿Qué relevancia podría tener esta tarea para el interés del público letrado, para alguien enfrascado, digamos, en una controversia sobre el arrianismo o sobre el derecho divino de los reyes?

Controversias violentas marcaban la época de Locke. La tolerancia se juzgaba intolerable. Y el propio filósofo sufrió por ello. El *Ensayo* debe leerse sobre ese trasfondo. Hay que aprender, no sólo que las propias opiniones pueden ser erróneas, sino que una opinión sólo merece un grado de adhesión correspondiente al grado de evidencia en que se funda. Además, los disputantes a menudo

confunden la naturaleza de las propiciones que aseveran, concediendo, por ejemplo, a proposiciones sobre realidades el mismo alcance que a proposiciones 'triviales', meramente verbales.

Locke parece reducir el campo de lo que puede conocerse con certeza, para ampliar el de las proposiciones opinables, sujetas a discusión. A esa área se dirigía su principal cuidado. Prescribía la necesidad de preguntarnos por el grado de solidez de las razones en que se basan cualesquiera de esas opiniones. Si tener sentido común es haber aprendido cuándo una certidumbre es razonable, el *Ensayo* de Locke nos enseña sentido común. Enseña qué es ser sensato y qué insensato en la adhesión de cualquiera a cualquier concepción de cualquiera clase. El *Ensayo*, antes que una teoría del conocimiento, es una teoría de la opinión. No señala el estrecho camino hacia la certeza, como Descartes, sino la vía para llegar a una seguridad razonable.

Si esto es así, ¿cómo podría enseñar a someter a crítica las opiniones una doctrina sobre el origen y composición de nuestras ideas, su relación con las palabras, los tipos de proposiciones en que se combinan, etc.? ¿Habríamos de pensar con menor insensatez, por conocer la composición, en átomos y moléculas, de nuestros pensamientos?

Todos sentimos que cualquier teoría científica sobre nuestras acciones y pensamientos, por más apegada que esté a los hechos, parece omitir algo: su característica de perseguir un propósito, en el que pueden acertar o fallar, para el que pueden mostrar destreza o torpeza. Pensar es un consorcio de competencia y habilidades, sujeto a aprendizaje. Puede cumplir su propósito o fracasar. En nuestro pensar, ejercemos diversos grados de pericia y habilidad. Pues no es algo que simplemente nos acontezca, es algo que hacemos; y podemos hacerlo bien o mal, cuidadosa o descuidadamente, como expertos o como simples aficionados.

Por ello, al leer la teoría de Locke sobre el pensamiento, automáticamente introducimos entre líneas este elemento que el *Ensayo* omite: su dirección a un propósito, su mayor o menor destreza. Interpretamos entonces, su teoría sobre el origen y composición de nuestras ideas como una máxima de destreza intelectual. Con ello, no creemos ir más allá de Locke. Creo que él mismo quería que sus lectores pensaran que de sus análisis se derivaban máximas para bien pensar. Hablaba del origen y composición de las ideas para esclarecer las nociones de corrección e incorrección del pensar. Puede ser que la traza científica y fáctica de su anatomía del pensar ayudara a sacar esa conclusión. Invitaba a poner a

prueba las propias opiniones en un terreno neutro y desapasionado, como el que puede ofrecer un laboratorio.

El *Ensayo* pretendía ser un *ars cogitandi* o, incluso, una ética del pensar. Aunque expuestas en el lenguaje de una teoría atómica y molecular bastante primitiva, eran lecciones de destreza, lecciones sobre la economía y aun la ética de la formación, aceptación y rechazo de las opiniones. Si sentido común es opinar razonablemente, Locke fue el primero en enseñar sentido común.

¿Entonces, la contribución de Locke consiste solamente en la verdad obvia de que la adhesión a una opinión debe ser proporcionada a la cantidad y calidad de las razones que aduzca? Si. ¿Pero quién sino Locke volvió obvia esa verdad? Todo filósofo genial convierte en obvias para la humanidad cosas que antes eran meras especulaciones. Ésa es su contribución. Para sus discípulos, la penosa labor del maestro se traduce en la transmisión de lo obvio.

No vamos a pensar que el *Ensayo* ha alejado de todos nosotros el fanatismo, el dogmatismo y la arbitrariedad en nuestras opiniones. Pero, para todos, esos términos se han vuelto objeto de condena o de desprecio. La lección de Locke no fue sólo que recordáramos, de vez en vez, nuestra posibilidad de equivocarnos, sino que recordáramos, en todo tiempo, sujetar nuestras opiniones particulares a las disciplinas que les son apropiadas. Dar seguridad de que nuestras opiniones sean siempre verdaderas, no podemos hacerlo. Pero que siempre deban ser bien sopesadas y puestas a prueba es cosa que sí podemos lograr. John Locke nos enseñó a querer lograrlo y a que nos pese fracasar en el intento.