

John Locke Society Conference ACU, 29–30 July 2026

Speakers, Papers and Abstracts

Armitage, David

Paper Title: John Locke's 'colonialism' as an episode in the history of knowledge (Keynote address)

Abstract

Locke's involvement with English overseas activities of commerce and settlement—in short, his 'colonialism'—has been a central topic of Locke scholarship since the 1990s. Most of this strain of scholarship has treated his colonialism as a matter of belief: that is, as a question of Locke's justification for Indigenous dispossession, his approval of the commodification of human beings or his endorsement of the hierarchical ordering of peoples. Locke's beliefs concerning property, slavery and reason have accordingly been assumed to compromise his putative liberalism, his assumption of natural human equality and his premiss of universal rationality. This lecture argues that, transformative though this work has been, such an approach to Locke and colonialism rests on a *question mal posée*. Rather than treat it as a matter of belief, I argue instead that we should understand it as a problem within the history of knowledge. I mean this in two senses. First, what, when and how did Locke know what he knew? Second, how did he process that knowledge and to what effect? To answer these questions, I focus especially on two episodes at either end of his public career, one as a servant of the Earl of Shaftesbury and the Proprietors of Carolina, the other as a member of William III's Board of Trade. I conclude with an analysis of what Locke seems to have believed—or perhaps even knew—to be his most original achievement in politics, the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*.

Canal, Adrián

Paper Title: A hybrid account of personhood: consciousness, substance, and embodiment in Locke

Abstract

This paper argues that Locke's notion of person, while explicitly framed in psychological and forensic terms, is ultimately grounded in a substance. Interpretations are often divided into two camps. On the one hand, scholars such as Udo Thiel, Galen Strawson, and Antonia LoLordo emphasize the primacy of consciousness, treating the person as a mode or as a purely forensic construct—a line of interpretation traceable to Edmund Law's *Defence of Locke*. On the other hand, scholars like Jessica Gordon-Roth, Matthew Leisinger, and James Hill argue that Locke's account depends on a more robust metaphysical framework, according to which personal identity presupposes a substance. The claim defended here is not that Locke identifies the person with a known substance, but rather that personal identity presupposes an unknown substratum capable of sustaining psychological unity.

This paper defends the latter position. It contends that Locke's appeal to consciousness as the criterion of personal identity does not eliminate the need for an underlying subject but rather presupposes it. Consciousness functions as the psychological principle that appropriates actions, unifies experiences, and constitutes the self. However, such a principle presupposes a bearer capable of sustaining diachronic unity. Without such a subject, the coherence of moral responsibility and personal identity over time cannot be adequately explained. In particular, the mode interpretation struggles to account for moral becoming: if the person is reduced to a mental mode defined by consciousness, it becomes unclear how changes in merit or responsibility can be attributed to the same agent.

To clarify the nature of this underlying subject, the paper further argues that Locke's account presupposes embodiment, even though bodily identity is not the criterion for personal identity. Drawing on *Essay* II. xxvii. 2, where Locke distinguishes the identity conditions of God, intelligences, and bodies, the paper shows that personal identity is attributed to real beings situated within the natural world. Consciousness does not belong to a free-floating psychological construct but to an embodied subject capable of action, receiving rewards, and suffering punishment. Locke's theory of personal identity is thus best understood as a hybrid account: predominantly psychological in its explanatory strategy, yet ultimately dependent on a substance-based and embodied conception of the human subject.

Chou, Chiayu

Paper Title: 'Locke et praeterea nihil'? Locke's liberty as independence and the problem of prerogative during the Revolutionary period

Abstract

Since Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*, John Locke has often been regarded as the liberal philosophical architect of the American founding. Yet this claim has been powerfully challenged by J. G. A. Pocock, whose *The Machiavellian Moment* relocates the Revolution within an Atlantic neo-Harringtonian republican tradition and dismisses Locke as marginal to its central categories. More recently, Quentin Skinner's *Liberty as Independence* has complicated this picture by recovering a freedom-centred genealogy of republicanism in which Locke appears less an outsider than an ambivalent participant.

This paper intervenes in this debate by advancing three claims. First, I argue that Locke's conception of liberty as independence from arbitrary will (defined in the *Two Treatises* as freedom from dependence on the will of another) fits well within the anti-domination tradition associated with English commonwealth thought. Second, I argue that this Lockean account of liberty resurfaces in the American crisis through the writings of the dissenting minister Richard Price, whose *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (1776) articulates civil liberty as self-government and resistance to extraneous will. Price's explicit acknowledgement of Locke complicates the view that republican discourse displaced Lockean foundations.

Third, I further explore Locke's controversial doctrine of prerogative. While it has been often seen as inconsistent with republican liberty, Locke's theory of extra-legal executive power can also be found in arguments found in *The Federalist Papers*, particularly in the defence of strong executive authority. Rather than marking a departure from republican principles, Locke's exceptionism reveals an attempt to reconcile liberty with political stability under conditions of emergency.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that early American republicanism was not anti-Lockean but deeply Lockean in structure. Locke was not merely 'in liberal garb', but may be understood as a 'new Roman', a thinker whose language of natural rights and independence was not only compatible with, but constitutive of, the republican vocabulary of the founding era.

Downing, Lisa

Paper Title: Banishing monsters: Du Châtelet versus Locke on thinking matter

Abstract

Locke famously defends the epistemic possibility of thinking matter, that is, the epistemic possibility that what thinks within us is material, and he motivates that possibility in part by invoking Newtonian

attraction: if material things can attract each other, who knows what else they might be able to do? Émilie Du Châtelet argues against this move of Locke's—she wants to reject the possibility of thinking matter along with the possibility of attraction seated in matter. In this paper, I identify Du Châtelet's particular argument against thinking matter and examine how that argument is grounded in the metaphysical categories and analysis of chapter 3 of her great work, the *Institutions de physique*. In considering how the argument might be made more complete, I raise and address some further questions about the structure of Du Châtelet's metaphysics. In considering whether Du Châtelet's argument against Locke hits its target, I also raise and address questions about Locke's understanding of the hypothesis of thinking matter.

Efal-Lautenschläger, Adi

Paper Title: Locke's *Conduct*, Descartes' *Regulae*, and the rational re-habitation of the mind

Abstract

Though there is no direct textual evidence that Locke ever saw a copy of the *Regulae*, there is a strong possibility that he was, at the very least, aware of the existence of the text (which was published parallel to the various editions of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* and had been circulating in the milieus that Locke frequented). There are, moreover, several thematic characteristics that make possible putting the two texts within an encompassing philosophical genre, which is that of the search for a method, through a process of the critic of corrupted mental habits and the complementary, constructive propositions of a set of elementary rules for the direction of the mind. The paper proposes a comparative look at both treatises. The paper concentrates on three central themes of discussion: the critic of erudition, the vices of the mind, and "ratio" as remedy.

Gordon-Roth, Jessica

Paper Title: Was Catharine Trotter Cockburn right about Locke and Clarke?: an invitation to revisit the Clarke–Collins correspondence

Abstract

In this paper I explore how considering an early criticism of Catharine Trotter Cockburn against the backdrop of her works and letters invites us to, among other things, explore whether we are warranted to assume that the views of John Locke and Samuel Clarke are always diametrically opposed. In other words, we are invited to stop and ask: Is it right to think of Locke and Clarke as consistent philosophical foes? This kind of exploration not only raises interesting questions about these canonical thinkers' views, and our reception of them; it also disrupts the picture long painted of Cockburn. After all, it's Cockburn's assumption that one could defend both Locke and Clarke that leaves her open to the charge of being a bad Lockean, or student of Locke, and thus a less than acute philosopher, in Leslie Stephen's estimation. In this paper, I take up this invitation or question with a focus on the correspondence between Clarke and Anthony Collins, and the role that Locke plays therein. I show that Locke is central to the debate between Clarke and Collins, but it's difficult to place him on one side over the other definitively or consistently. I then argue this makes the line between Locke and Clarke rather blurry. Moreover, if this is the case, then significant strain is put on even the most charitable interpretation of Stephen's diagnosis of Cockburn.

Green, Karen

Paper Title: Locke's feminism reconsidered

Abstract

In a recent paper, Katharine Gillespie and Bas Van der Vossen oppose those who have accused Locke of failing to be a feminist, by arguing that he is a feminist in the same sense as Rachel Speght, who was his close contemporary. In this paper I respond to their paper by placing Locke's comments on women and marriage within the broader history of political thought. Locke wrote during a period that witnessed the transformation of theories of legitimate political authority from the patriarchal parental model, justifying monarchy, that was widely accepted and developed by Filmer, towards the social contract model, promoted by Hobbes and Locke. I argue that this transformation was historically intertwined with, but conceptually independent of, an older conflict between masculinism and feminism. The latter pits the masculinist view, that men legitimately govern women, but women do not legitimately govern men, against their feminist opponents, who claim that sex is irrelevant to the capacity for the legitimate exercise of political power, so that women can and ought to legitimately govern men, at least in some circumstances. Since masculinism and feminism come in stronger and weaker forms, the debate over whether a particular thinker is feminist should be framed as an analysis of the masculinist and feminist tendencies in their thought. From this point of view, one can argue that, by claiming that the family is not a political institution but is natural, Locke paved the way for the development of the tradition of sexist republicanism, which distinguishes the masculine public and political sphere of reason from the pre-political, natural, private sphere of the family, in which women and children are legitimately governed by husbands and fathers. When, during the 1970s, feminists argued that the personal is political, they were objecting to this masculinist form of the social contract tradition, which had descended from Locke's introduction of an apolitical private realm. So, they were correct to characterise him as, in this sense, anti-feminist. Despite this, there are traditions of Lockean feminism, developed by women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that reject the masculinist elements still found in Locke and these point towards undeniably feminist traditions, that emerged out of his philosophy.

Hamou, Philippe

Paper Title: Locke on perception and perceptual judgement

Abstract

Locke's negative answer to Molyneux's problem has long been the subject of interpretative debate. It has been argued that this answer is inconsistent with central tenets of his theory of ideas, in particular the relation between two claims: first, that ideas of shape and extension are equally delivered by touch and sight; and second, that such ideas not only represent these qualities but also resemble them. Taken together, these claims seem to imply that a newly acquired visual idea of shape should be recognised as resembling a previously acquired tactile one. If so, Locke ought to have answered Molyneux's question in the affirmative. This apparent inconsistency can be resolved by attending more closely to the kind of perceptual judgement that, according to Locke's negative answer, does not occur in the newly sighted person. The missing judgement is not one that connects visual and tactile shapes, but rather one that relates two-dimensional sensory images to previously acquired perceptual ideas of three-dimensional objects. Clarifying this relatively limited issue provides a basis

for addressing broader questions about perception and perceptual judgement, and their role in Locke's account of ideas and mental representation. One aim of the paper is to situate Locke's distinctively empiricist approach to perceptual judgement within the wider range of early modern doctrines of 'natural judgement' and visual perception. Another is to examine the distinction between sensory and perceptual ideas: in what sense does judgement *transform* the former into the latter? Is this judgement propositional, akin to that involved in knowledge and belief? And how literally should we understand the comparison between perception and language—for instance, the characterisation of the sensory idea as a 'mark' or a kind of reminiscent name for the perceptual one?

Kashiwazaki, Masanori

Paper Title: John Locke as Mercantilist Utopian: an analysis of his 1698 Virginia plan

Abstract

A body of evidence demonstrating Locke's involvement in the early British Empire—including his draft of the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, his temporary stockholdings in the Royal African Company, and his service as a member of the Board of Trade and Plantations between 1696 and 1700—has sparked debates about the relationship between his liberal political ideas and colonialism. However, in these debates, his economic thought has rarely been considered alongside his political ideas. He advocated a mercantilist political economy whose objects are the encouragement of industry and population growth, with which his theory of government and anti-tyranny were compatible. His economic and political thought were integrated into a conception that I call Mercantilist Utopianism. As a document to demonstrate this, I analyse a manuscript written by Locke during his service as a Commissioner of Trade, entitled 'The Grievances of Virginia' (1698, in Bodleian Library MS Locke e. 9, fos 1–39). This manuscript addresses the 'want of people' as a major issue in Virginia, along with the problems of 'arbitrariness of government' and the corruption of the judicial and legislative systems. Locke recognised that economic growth and government by consent are mutually dependent, and this can be read as an extension of 'Atlantis', the semi-utopian fragments that he had drafted twenty years earlier. Locke's 'utopianism' also suggests the need to refer to his economic thought when analysing the controversial issue of his attitude towards slavery.

LoLordo, Antonia

Paper Title: Locke on embodiment (Keynote address)

Abstract

Locke holds that we are our bodies, either in whole or in part—but we are not essentially our bodies. (The various illustrations or thought experiments from *Essay* II. xxvii involve persons swapping bodies, and at the moment of resurrection, we will all receive new bodies.) This makes the question of embodiment central for Locke. What is it to have, or to be, a body? What does the evidential parallel Locke draws between bodily ownership and personal identity involve? Does bodily ownership, like personal identity, involve an element of subjective constitution? Do we appropriate our bodies, as we appropriate past actions—and as we appropriate property?

Phillips, James

Paper Title: John Locke's 'A Letter Concerning Toleration': the Christian vulnerability of despots

Abstract

In 'A Letter Concerning Toleration', Locke mobilises a number of Christian concepts to argue for a boundary to the exercise of a magistrate's power. The text confronts sovereigns with a choice: either concede certain civil liberties to their subjects or admit the inconsistency of their reign with Christianity. This is unlike the ultimatum behind the *Magna Carta*, for instance, because immanent critique has taken the place of force of arms as the means of extracting recognition of the rights of subjects. A ruler who dictates the forms of worship runs afoul of Christ's objections to the hypocritical externalism of the Pharisees. As 'all the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind', a sovereign who acknowledges sincerity as central to Christianity will wish to avoid the insincere professions of faith that a state-mandated religion cannot help eliciting. Christianity, according to Locke, is the chink in the armour of a sovereign whose rule may happen to be uncontested militarily. The restrictions to the exercise of sovereign power are nonetheless compensated by the enhanced governmental legitimacy that an invigorated practice of individual autonomy can bring to the social contract. In the face of the Christian nationalism that today underpins the authoritarian regimes of Putin and Trump, this paper asks: What has become of Locke's arguments?

Rockwood, Nathan

Paper Title: The demonstrability of morality: Locke's *Essay*, Burnet's *Remarks*, and Cockburn's *Defence*

Abstract

This paper examines an exchange between Locke, his critic Thomas Burnet, and his defender Catharine Trotter Cockburn. In *Remarks upon an Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1694), Burnet interprets Locke as a voluntarist, and then he argues that if morality depends on the arbitrary will of God, then we cannot have demonstrative knowledge of morality. Locke wrote a brief and dismissive reply. Unsatisfied, Burnet published *Second Remarks* and *Third Remarks* (1697) further developing his objections. In the absence of a satisfying response by Locke himself, Cockburn wrote *A Defence of Mr. Locke's Essay* (1702). She interprets Locke as an intellectualist and arguing that that demonstrability of morality is possible on this view. While Burnet rightly stresses Locke's voluntarism and Cockburn rightly emphasizes his intellectualist epistemology, both readings are incomplete. I argue that Locke's actual position is a hybrid: God's will grounds moral obligation, but reason allows us to demonstratively know moral truths. The controversy thus illuminates Locke's distinctive synthesis of voluntarism and intellectualism.

Trianni, Giorgio

Paper Title: Like Ropes of Sand: Henry Lee and the limits of Locke's account of probability and testimony

Abstract

Henry Lee's *Anti-Scepticism* (1702) is the earliest chapter-by-chapter critical reply to Locke's *Essay*

concerning *Human Understanding* before Leibniz's posthumous *Nouveaux essais* (1765). Popular enough among its contemporaries for Locke's correspondents to keep him regularly informed on its circulation at Oxford and Cambridge, *Anti-Scepticism* has nonetheless remained conspicuously at the margins of contemporary scholarship. However, as a handful of scholars have recently argued, Lee is a serious critic whose objections deserve closer attention. This paper contributes to that reassessment by focusing on his critique of Locke's account of probability and testimony. The first part argues that Lee's central charge is that 'by the help of Ideas' it is impossible to arrive even at probability. Every probabilistic judgment presupposes some basic certainty that is anterior to any ideational inference, namely that things outside us exist and are such as our senses and faculties represent them to be, and that the senses and faculties of those who testify to us are equally trustworthy, that Locke's restriction of knowledge to the perception of the agreement of ideas rules out. Lockean epistemology therefore fails to grant testimony the standing required to avoid collapsing into scepticism about any kind of socially transmitted knowledge and, in particular, about revealed religion. The second part shows that probability, for Lee, does not compensate for the absence of knowledge but merely marks 'the want of Evidence to make any thing fully known or certain'. On this basis, Lee rejects the 'probable' in favour of the 'proveable', a proposition being proveable when it is capable of being made certain through verification by a knower in the appropriate epistemic position. Testimony is the mechanism through which certainty is then incrementally transmitted across different positions. The paper ends with a reconstruction of Lee's positive account of cumulative testimony, focusing on two main set of objections. The first targets Locke's influential claim that traditional testimonies weaken with distance from their original sources; the second targets the alleged consequences that, under Locke's principles, testimony cannot ground anything that significantly departs from what is already known through regular experience, a conclusion with far-reaching implications for the attestation of miracles. Taken together, these objections show that Lee's account of testimony constitutes a substantive alternative to Locke's, rigorous enough to warrant a place in the history of early modern epistemology.

Uchisaka, Tsubasa

Paper Title: Reception and adaptation of ancient philosophy in the Lockean theory of ideas

Abstract

This paper examines how John Locke receives and adapts ancient theories of ideas and power by comparing his texts with those of Aristotle, the early Stoics, Epicurus, Herbert of Cherbury, and Descartes. It explores the origins of Locke's theory of *tabula rasa* and his theory of ideas through a close reading of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* alongside the works of these philosophers.

First, as Leibniz observes, Locke follows the Aristotelian doctrine of *tabula rasa* and the theory of phantasia (φαντασία), maintaining that the human mind is like a blank slate that acquires a diversity of ideas a posteriori. Second, the early Stoics also regarded the soul as a *tabula rasa* that stores *ennoiai* (έννοιαί), developing a theory of *ennoiai* that parallels Locke's account of ideas. Third, Herbert of Cherbury reinterprets the Stoic concept of common notions (*koinai ennoiai*) and emphasizes innate moral principles. Fourth, Descartes similarly underscores the innate character of religious ideas. Against both Herbert and Descartes, Locke argues that ideas are not innate but are

acquired solely through experience, namely sensation and reflection. For Locke, even the idea of God is not innate but arises from reflection on the idea of infinity.

The paper also investigates the origins of Locke's theory of natural object recognition. Locke's critique of 'pure substance' is directed primarily at Aristotle. Whereas Aristotle and his Scholastic followers maintained that the real essences of particular substances could be known through an analysis of the principles of 'pure substance' or 'substance in general', Locke contends that we can know only nominal essences, while real essences remain inaccessible. Instead, his account of qualities draws on the Epicurean distinction between primary and secondary qualities. His contribution to the theory of natural object recognition lies in his theory of ideas—particularly in his emphasis on the potential to identify the real qualities of bodies through the use of microscopes and the advances of the scientific revolution.

Weinberg, Shelley

Paper Title: Error and remedy in the *Essay* and the *Conduct*

Abstract

It is widely thought that Locke's *Conduct of the Understanding* is primarily about how to think well, that is, how and why we make errors in thinking and how to remedy those errors. There are also chapters in the *Essay* that concern errors in thinking and how to avoid them. What is the difference between the two texts? I argue that the *Essay* provides a method for how to avoid error and arrive at truth, where the *Conduct* explains more of the specifics of what gets in the way of it. But the accounts of the sources of error and remedy in the two texts are fundamentally the same. Both bottom out in the same general source of error: a failure to seek truth by engaging in a method of inquiry and examination.