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Searching for the Proper Foundation, or Mortimer Adler versus John Locke

Abstract

The paper addresses a crucial problem of the philosophical grounds of knowledge, particularly in the context of humanistic research and education. It unfolds an argument against modern nominalism inherited from John Locke and other thinkers of the Enlightenment and defends the epistemological stance of realism as represented by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and more recently by Mortimer Adler and Alasdair MacIntyre.

Key words: nominalism, John Locke, *tabula rasa*, Mortimer Adler

In Fall 2015 I gave a lecture at the newly created Houston Institute for the Liberal Arts.¹ The lecture was tailored to graduate and undergraduate students, and the stipulation was that it should contain thoughts on what students “really need” to properly develop their intellect and moral discernment. This of course amounts to a philosophy of life congruent with European and American traditions. However, as one takes a second look at these traditions, one is reminded of the several competing and contradictory philosophical starting points that have become associated with them. Some of these approaches gained popularity to the point of being considered authoritative and self-evident, while others faded away even though they have not been discredited by means of a convincing argument. Gresham’s law states that bad money drives out good; I submit that the same happens in philosophy. I decided to discuss these issues with students, and here is a summary of these discussions including some afterthoughts.

Among the *idées reçues* of modernity and, partly, of postmodernity is John Locke’s hypothesis that the mind is a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate that is gradually filled with information provided by the senses. Like other Enlightenment thinkers, Locke was a nominalist who did not believe in pre-existence of any general ideas in the mind or in reality. Nor did he believe in natural law. He believed that all that is present in our intellect had previously been received by our senses. It is out of these sensual impressions that we create general ideas with the help of which we describe the world.

In the English-speaking world, John Locke’s philosophizing has been treated as self-evident ever since the Enlightenment. More generally, since the Enlightenment

¹ For more information see <http://houston-institute.org/people/>.

most European philosophers have assumed that nominalism should be the bedrock of any credible philosophical theory. This of course leads to invalidation of the idea of natural law, or “the law of the heart” that used to serve as a metaphor of what the unchangeable God inscribed in the minds of men. Texts making an appeal to natural law have been written over the last few centuries, but their relation to what passed for “the most recent discoveries” has generally been consigned to silence.

As President Lincoln is alleged to have said, while most people can be fooled most of the time, it is impossible to fool all the people all the time (Schwartz 1). The nominalism of contemporary philosophy has had its critics. Among them are Mortimer Adler and Alasdair MacIntyre. In a deceptively simple book *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* Adler poses the following question: when we are conscious, that is to say, when we are not asleep, what are we conscious of (6)? Are we conscious of the outside world that acts on our senses, or are we conscious of the image of the outside world that somehow arises in our minds? We have been told by Locke that sense perceptions are not the same as thoughts. So how does the world that we see become transformed into an object of our thought? Locke fails to explain this process.

In Locke’s opinion, all knowledge is empirical, that is to say, it comes solely from experience. Human consciousness transforms sense experience and out of this material produces ideas that fill our mind. One should note here that Locke is rather cavalier in his definition of ideas: for him, all that we remember or imagine, all that we think about, all our feelings and the products of our imagination – are ideas.

However, if the human mind is like a *tabula rasa*, or an empty box that fills up with sense perceptions, it is difficult if not impossible to explain how we communicate. If each of us is a separate entity conditioned by our physical characteristics and biological peculiarities, our ways of perceiving reality must differ. If my hearing is impaired, I may not grasp the beauty of the symphony orchestra and only hear annoying noise. If my sight is impaired, I may not see what you see. And who is to decide that what you hear is “better” or “more accurate” than what I hear? Whence, then, comes our ability to communicate our perceptions to others and how do we know we are talking about the same thing? And if all reality is socially constructed, how do we know that your reality is the same as mine?

Locke tries to answer these questions by saying that certain ideas belong to the “public sphere” and as such are understandable to all. The public sphere includes the three-dimensional physical world that the human mind “transforms” into ideas. But on second thought, the doubt remains. How does this process take place? Within Locke’s system there are no guarantees that your perception of the physical world is identical or even similar to mine. Literature provides us with numerous images of loneliness in which some human beings spend their lives. Readers of twentieth-century literature in particular have the right to suspect that we are solitary islands, just as those who surround us; that all our perceptions and feelings are highly subjective and impossible to convey to others. Franz Kafka and Albert Camus come to mind as primary examples of such literature. In other words, Locke’s theory, if thought through to its logical conclusions, leads us into solipsism, and twentieth-century literature provides many examples of such solipsism.

Mortimer Adler offers a solution. He improves upon John Locke. First, he distinguishes between bodily feelings (or “ideas” in Locke’s use of the word) that cannot be

communicated and are inescapably subjective; and all other ideas. While bodily “ideas” inevitably remain our personal and private property we cannot share with others, all other ideas are cognitive. However, Adler rejects Locke’s definition of idea as arising in the mind somewhat like *deus ex machina* as a reflection of reality. For Adler, ideas are merely *instruments* of cognition and not its *objects*; they are formulas with the help of which the mind cognizes things that exist and are the real objects of cognition. These “things that exist” arise in the mind through the use of the intellect, that mysterious ability of human beings not only to process sense perceptions but also to become aware of universals. Locke rejected the possibility that God might have endowed us with this mysterious intellect, but earlier philosophers took its existence for granted. As Christopher Morrissey put it recently, “[t]he notion is that intellection and perception provide interpretations that are not found in sensation” (par. 11).

There is a profound difference between Locke’s rationalism and Adler’s. Locke denies the pre-existence of general ideas – in his view, they are merely shortcuts we use in writing and speaking, entities totally dependent on information we get from our senses. Adler believes that these general ideas are instruments with the help of which we cognize general concepts, or universals.

It so happens that Thomas Aquinas reasoned in a very similar way seven centuries ago, long before nominalism became one of the widely accepted foundational tools of philosophy. He suggested that ideas are the *means* of cognition and with their help we become aware of *objects of thought* that are general concepts. Cognitive ideas are those by means of which we apprehend objects of which we are conscious. For we perceive and remember objects and not the means of perception or remembrance. We do not remember ideas; we remember “things.” I put the word “thing” in quotation marks to emphasize that I mean not only material objects but also the *content* of such “ideas” as beauty or justice or goodness. We remember a chair in our house and not the idea of that chair. This chair can thus “exist” in the memory of many people; we can talk about it with confidence that we are talking about the same object. This is also the case with abstract concepts such as the triangle. While the ideas with the help of which we think about such concepts are “private,” the concept is common property. We feel certain that even moderately intelligent people understand what “triangle” means.

If so, then we have to conclude that human intellect is possessed of certain inborn features that allow it to interpret the world and to communicate. The content of our ideas does not depend solely on sense perceptions, but also on the characteristics of our spirit/mind that manifest themselves in certain structures of our brain but are not reducible to these structures. Locke was wrong: there is something in our minds that allows us to structure our sense perceptions and create taxonomies that do not exist in the three-dimensional physical world. Recent progress in neuroscience suggests that much of the brain’s ability to act in this way can be researched; the very principle, however, remains a mystery. We do not know why we developed this way.

It is somewhat more difficult to ascertain that we are talking about the same things when we invoke beauty, justice, or goodness, but here we can rely on shared education and readings that make us communicate with one another. In contrast, in Locke’s philosophical world we remain solitary islands processing sense perceptions

without any guarantee that we can arrive at identical “ideas” about reality. Locke’s subjectivism leads to skepticism: within his nominalism, we have no guarantees that your ideas are identical with mine.

While reflecting on these matters, we also begin to realize how a lack of enculturation into our own tradition may atomize society and make it unable to “speak the same language,” and how the Lockean model makes it difficult to create a common culture that prevents society from returning to the law of the jungle. The social contract has been broken so many times that to rely solely on its benefits seems foolhardy. Somehow in the course of history we periodically discover monumental corruption of systems based on the social contract, and an upheaval follows. If we always are only a step away from skepticism, we cannot instill in the young the idea that our social system is consonant with reality and beneficial for human communities. *Lockean rationalism is poles apart from Aristotelian rationalism.* The so-called multiculturalism is based on the assumption that there existed separate cultures before multiculturalism was proclaimed; without these separate cultures there would not be anything to mix together as it were. But if people from separate cultures are brought together and allowed to proclaim their separate “rationalisms,” how do we make sure that the law of the jungle will not take over and bring about victory to those with the biggest stick? If we adopt an erroneous way of reasoning proposed by John Locke, we become exposed to these dangers. We have to accept the correction proposed by Mortimer Adler; we have to make sure that we create a foundation, rather than telling the young people that “anything goes” and they are free to select from a variety of *Weltanschauungen* the world offers – or not select anything at all.

Adler’s and Thomas’ reasoning appear to be more convincing than Locke’s. Like Adler and the Thomists of the twenty-first century, I see Locke’s insistence on *tabula rasa* as an unfinished argument. If we start with a clean slate and through our sense impressions (which vary from person to person because of our physical characteristics) build an image of the world in our minds, we are condemned to radical subjectivism, to unbreachable solitude and perpetual uncertainty. We shall never know what others feel, see, or understand. Others will not know anything about our life of the mind either. For how can we communicate our one-of-a-kind vision of the world? Yet we know that we can do so, that we can understand others and they us. We therefore have to conclude that our minds are not machines processing sensual perceptions. They are possessed of a mysterious ability called the intellect that allows us to think of abstract “objects of thought” such as triangle, or beauty, or justice; and that ability we share with others. Try as we may, it would be impossible to explain the concept of justice by the work of the senses only. It transcends any kind of acculturation. Our minds are endowed not only with an ability to synthesize, but also with a sense of what is correct and what is incorrect. This is called natural law, and it transcends the Lockean model. It leads us toward a realization that we possess an ability to distinguish between right and wrong. This ability may be distorted by the trajectory of our lives, but it is a universal feature of humanity. Friedrich Nietzsche was wrong in attributing it to a cruel training somewhere in the Middle Ages (180 ff). Not all human communities had the Middle Ages, yet all have displayed the sense of right and wrong.

Why are these questions important? Because Locke's reasoning helped to install in European philosophy a radical nominalism as the only acceptable stance. It implanted in the minds of scholars and intellectuals a fear of essentialism, or realism, comparable only to the fear magical practices instill in the superstitious. It resulted in the creation of innumerable scholarly texts that are devoid of wisdom and usefulness for the tutored and the untutored. Time and again, we are exhorted not to fall into the trap of essentialism; we are told that truth, justice, beauty, or the triangle *per se* do not "exist." The result is that we keep creating more and more abstract verbal structures that are supposed to explain reality, instead of using common sense and our ability to synthesize. Nominalism leads us into subjectivism, skepticism, and solipsism, thus isolating us from each other and from the world. It empties such words as "hero," "sacrifice," "the sacred" of any meaning. It deconstructs our humanity. And, of course, as nominalists we cannot possibly believe in a deity who created us and instilled in us the understanding of natural law, or universal consent about certain behavior being evil and another kind of behavior being good. We all condemn mass murder or deliberate starvation of children, but without the acceptance of natural law it would be difficult to explain why we do so. If there is no *a priori*, if we cannot rely on constants of the mind with the help of which we articulate and assess ourselves and the world, then we can never say that our judgment is correct and our knowledge of the world objectively true. Hence the total inability of Marxists to create a viable moral system. If history consists of class struggle and the stronger win, why should we be concerned that workers are being exploited? What is the basis of the rhetoric about "poor workers" whose unpaid labor is appropriated by exploiters? We also have to remain skeptical about the purpose of life. No one can demonstrate that the ideas you allegedly conceived on the basis of your sense perceptions are the same as my ideas conceived on the basis of my sense perception. Yet if we conceive of ideas as means by which we apprehend the world (rather than objects of perception as Locke wanted), we can be confident that we can share information and thoughts. For we do not remember ideas but objects, including non-physical objects. And our ability to remember these objects is something science is incapable of explaining (it can explain how the brain functions but it cannot answer the question of why it functions the way it functions). If we accept corrections proposed by Mortimer Adler and before him, Thomas Aquinas, we shall find validation of our knowledge about the world in the reflections of others. The chair exists and it has certain physical features. Likewise, such abstract concepts as the triangle also exist; even though the ideas with which we think about the triangle are "private," the *concept* of the chair or the triangle is common property. If we accept the fact that the principles of natural law have been instilled in our intellect by our creator, we can realistically begin to assess historical events and strive to avoid political and social mistakes of the past.

This is how Adler (and Thomas before him) answered the questions John Locke and other Scottish philosophers of the Enlightenment were unable to answer. He explained how it is possible that the content of my mind represents truthfully the world that surrounds me. From this explanation one can also derive the conviction that universals exist--not as physical objects, but as objects of the mind of which the

external signs are ideas. And from this there is but a step to a recognition of natural law and what it means for human history.

Our attitude toward these ostensibly abstract problems has important consequences for the kind of scholarship we do in humanities. If we accept Mortimer Adler's reasoning, we can confidently embrace the essentialism of scholars who for over a thousand years articulated the fundamentals of Western civilization. We can speak of Romanticism, Baroque, Sarmatism, beauty, soul without feeling embarrassed that we invoke such essentialist entities. We do not have to pretend that "identity" does not exist, that we are merely endlessly engaged in a construction of identity, destined never to reach the final point like Sisyphus pushing the stone up and up the mountain until it rolls down and he has to start all over again. Europe has cherished the essentialist approach to universals ever since the ancient Greeks taught us how to reason. We can finally exit the sterile twentieth-century in which humanistic scholarship ceased to interest the general public because of its detachment from three-dimensional reality. A great deal of twentieth-century scholarship could justly be called "scholarship for scholarship's sake." We know that the belief in "art for art's sake" did not survive for long.

Adler's approach is quite remote from primitive essentialism according to which ideas "exist" somewhat like material objects whose shadows were seen by people in the cave (in Plato's *Republic*). His argument allows us to renew kinship with the philosophers of antiquity and the Middle Ages whose foundational thoughts have been consigned to the duskiest shelves of university libraries. It hardly needs emphasizing that an encounter with some of these philosophers nourishes and energizes the reader in ways nominalist postmodernity has never succeeded in doing.

Those twentieth-century philosophers who abandoned nominalism and embraced realism found out that their Aristotelian and Thomistic assumptions allowed them to argue down such seemingly unbeatable arguments as those of Friedrich Nietzsche, not to mention the seventeenth-century rationalists such as John Locke. Alasdair MacIntyre's seminal books point out that Enlightenment theories have been invalidated by subsequent nominalist scholarship: philosophers belonging to "the school of suspicion" (Ricoeur 27) have demonstrated that Enlightenment rationality is flawed because in all enquiry one starts with some kind of commitment to a point of view, and points of view imply a commitment to a certain kind of moral stance. Thus Locke was wrong in stating that we can approach the world without any preconceptions whatever.

MacIntyre is not interested in the way concepts are formed: instead, he points out that we strive for objectivity but never achieve it. In MacIntyre's view, all philosophies imply a certain morality. There is no philosophy that is morally neutral. Ergo, each philosophical system is "biased" by containing hidden assumptions about reality, humanity, and morality. In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* the word *moral* is used interchangeably with the word *philosophical*. MacIntyre points out that contrary to what the Enlightenment thinkers maintained, there exists no agreement among educated human beings as to what is meant by rationality, development, progress, even good and evil (32–33). While these words are generally used, their interpretations vary. One could add that there is no agreement either concerning the meaning of such words as

deity, soul, or intellect. Having stated that, MacIntyre shows how thinkers like Nietzsche invalidated Enlightenment discourse by “deconstructing” it in ways different from those of Mortimer Adler. Nietzsche’s Achilles’ heel was his inability to reconcile critique with positive proposals. He did not go far enough. He invalidated the Enlightenment, but did not create a convincing alternative. Nietzsche’s insistence that all discourse is fragmentary and that there is no “I” implies an impossibility of continuity and a lack of identity of persons conducting the discourse. Neither he nor Locke managed to create a persuasive argument about identity, yet most human beings have no doubt about their identity, in line with Aristotle’s logical rule that “I” cannot be “I” and “not I” at the same time. Ultimately, Nietzsche is a perceptive critic of modern philosophy, but a poor guide to the post-critical stage. Therefore, MacIntyre suggests, one should seek a philosophical system that “explains” Nietzsche and corrects his mistakes. Such a system has already been articulated by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, on the basis of an Aristotelian vision of the world. Thus the two critics of postmodernity, Mortimer Adler and Alasdair MacIntyre, meet in acknowledging that the key to a proper foundation is Thomas’s (tediously long) *Summa Theologica*. Like Shakespeare in literature, Thomas turns out to stand far above all other philosophers who have tried to articulate fundamental truths about reality.

Mortimer Adler outlined the perilous path that European philosophy has taken ever since Locke’s nominalism began to hold sway among the educated. While a rejection of this path cannot guarantee the solution to all problems or answer to all questions, it can substantially invigorate discourse by making it more intelligible. Alasdair MacIntyre took a step further by critiquing philosophers such as Nietzsche who had in their own writings critiqued Locke from a point of view different from Adler’s. They both worked to correct the mistakes that nineteenth-century philosophers committed in their often brilliant but ultimately erroneous interpretations of the world. They worked to return to an average literate person the confidence that his/her vision of the world need not be dictated by those who “know better;” that common sense is to be trusted; and that not every learned person is also wise.

A return to some form of essentialism (or “realism,” as the medieval philosophers called it) would also mean the return of intelligibility to humanistic writings. It used to be that an average educated person could understand and learn from the essays of T.S. Eliot or John Crowe Ransom; today’s scholarly journals are replete with texts to which only a few have access, and in which even fewer are interested. The enormous waste of resources and intelligence would thus cease, and humanistic education would re-embrace the task of acculturating students to the principles that created Europe to begin with, and from whose momentum we benefit to this day.

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