Understanding Locke's *Essay*

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This is a review of Michael Ayers, *Locke* (Routledge, 1991); from the *Times Literary Supplement* 4642 (March 20, 1992).

This is the most considerable book yet written on Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; it reflects scholarship, intelligence, and a good nose for a philosophical problem; the writing is mostly clean and hard; the book's design is elegantly simple and satisfying; and the type-setting is almost flawless.

For more than two decades Michael Ayers has spoken eloquently for a certain view about the study of past philosophers, his focus being on Locke. To grasp Locke's thought, Ayers maintains, we must understand it historically: to know what Locke meant by the words on the page we must go to unpublished drafts, works of contemporaries and forebears, and other clues. For Ayers this is not a mere desideratum; he has often contemned what he here calls the 'intellectually disreputable' approach of Locke commentators (including, it is fair to warn the reader, myself) who have given much less weight to historical context than he does.

The discipline that Ayers practises aims to burrow into a philosopher's thought to discover how it works, to test the arguments and evaluate the conclusions; unlike the history of ideas, which has none of those aims. His thesis concerns the need for historical knowledge in the philosophical understanding of past texts, grasping them so that that they can help us in our philosophical thinking.

Nobody would deny that it helps to know something about the historical setting of a major text, or that its words must be taken in the meanings they had when they were written. Nor, I hope, would anyone claim to know everything about a work's historical context that could help him to understand it. As Ayers writes: 'The task of uncovering the network of influences is no doubt potentially endless in theory, but in practice an end will be reached as a result of some sense of diminishing returns.' The difference that divides recent work in early modern philosophy has to do with how fast and how early the returns are thought to diminish. Ayers evidently holds that without a lot of historical knowledge one can learn almost nothing from the great philosophers of the past; some of us have thought that without bringing in much historical knowledge one can understand a great deal well enough to learn from it.

Ayers has here his best chance to support his answer to this empirical question—setting the rest of us to rights about what happens in the *Essay* and showing that it was attention to the historical background that enabled him to do this. He announces this aim at the outset, and periodically reminds us of it. His knowledge of the historical background of the

Essay certainly helps us to understand how Locke saw his project, what debate he meant to be joining, and so on. This reader has gained from Ayers' book an enriched appreciation of the *Essay*'s purposes and thus of its achievements; but how much this contributes to the core philosophical and exegetical project is another question.

Ayers thinks that it is essential to the project, for a two-step reason. The work's historical context must be grasped if we are to understand its 'unity of purpose', which in turn affects how individual arguments are interpreted; so we need to understand the context if we are to engage with what is really there as against what might seem to be there if passages are 'chopped out of context'.

There must be something in this, but I am not sure how much. (It is because there is something in it that my own work over the years has brought history in more than does the early work on Locke which Ayers deplores.) This book has cured me of some errors about the meanings of some Lockean doctrines, but those achievements have owed more to Ayers' intelligent reading of the text than to his greater knowledge of its historical context and its purpose. Indeed, such knowledge is a double-edged sword. Someone whose thought is continuously informed by a clear, strong view about the *Essay*'s over-all purposes is in danger of overlooking isolated textual episodes that don't fit the pattern. When that happens, something is lost. Such a misfit passage can be the philosopher's fragmentary response to a half-recognised difficulty in his position, or his expression of a half-conscious insight that he hasn't turned into doctrine. One can learn as much from exploring a great philosopher's subliminal sensitivities as from studying his official doctrinal program. (I have defended this view through a case study, in 'Kant's Theory of Freedom', in A. W. Wood (ed), *Self and Nature in Kant's Philosophy* (Cornell University Press, 1984).

That may account for a fact of my experience and, I am told, of others'. When we read a treatment of any early modern work by a commentator whose mind is saturated by his knowledge of the work's unity of purpose, we find ourselves in an intellectual environment which, though it is nourishing, good for us, full of interest, and so on, is also rather sedate, with much of the excitement drained off. Here is why, I think. To the extent that someone is 'knowing' about a text, he can be comfortable with it, steadily seeing it as running true to form, given its purpose. Valuable as this is, it loses something: the stimulation, the challenges, and the philosophical insights that can come from approaching a masterpiece more openly and innocently, more ready to be surprised by it, always uncomfortable with it.

Two other aspects of Ayers' thought—more personal ones, this time—are also dangerous to his work. **(i)** He holds that some of Locke's currently least popular views are right, and he defends them (and other things) in purely philosophical chapters that occupy over a quarter of the work. In siding with Locke he defies the present age, 'a time of systematic denigration of previous philosophical achievements', which he sees as driven by unthinking fidelity to inherited patterns of thought: 'an assortment of revered twentieth century philosophers', 'the currently more fashionable pessimist', 'tired old criticisms', 'pragmatist patter', 'an insouciance worthy of our own ontologically insensitive times', and so on. This antipathy generates an intense desire to interpret Locke so that he comes out right, or nearer to right than he is usually thought to be; and this sometimes leads Ayers astray. **(ii)** The forcefulness, the spirit of absolute conviction in which the book is written, goes with a kind of self-indulgence. This shows in Ayers' tendency to textual favouritism—his willingness to rely on an isolated passage, without warning the reader of ones that point the other way. It shows too

in over-statement. In volume 2, p. 52, he says of a certain interpretation that it credits Locke with accepting something which he 'explicitly rejected'. His only evidence for this is a passage which he interprets as rejecting the thesis in question. I think the interpretation is quite wrong, but even if it were right that would not justify 'explicitly'. And sometimes Ayers allows himself to slacken, gesturing broadly towards lines of argument that need vast amounts of work if they are to be worth considering at all.

I shall briefly discuss six episodes in Ayers' book, concerning abstract ideas, sensitive knowledge, modal knowledge, dualism, real essences, and identity. The discussions will illustrate faults that I have mentioned, but should also display some of the book's virtues. It is an absorbingly interesting book. I have had a good time wrestling with it.

(1) Ayers is right to say, against some commentators, that Locke thought of 'ideas' as mental images. (He even agrees with Locke about the busy, central role of images in the life of the mind. Ayers must be better at imaging than many people are, and apparently doesn't realise how greatly people vary in this respect.) That seems to imply that an abstract idea is an abstract image—a conclusion that was famously mocked by Berkeley. Like everyone who has read Locke with care, Ayers defends his doctrine of abstract ideas against Berkeley's charges, but his way of doing so is unusual. For Ayers' Locke, an abstract idea is not an idea that is somehow incomplete or unsaturated; rather, it is an ordinary perception or image 'partially considered' and given a certain function in thought.

That would give Locke a difficulty which Ayers does not mention. Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas was supposed to help greatly in describing and explaining human thought. On Ayers' account of it, the doctrine's whole weight rests on a notion of 'partial consideration', about which Locke tells us nothing. This diminishes the achievement, to put it mildly. The actual Locke, I suspect, would say that partially considering something involves having an abstract idea of it, reversing Ayers' order of explanation.

Anyway, Ayers' only textual support for his account of 'abstract ideas' is II.xiii.13, which speaks of 'partial consideration'. Ayers does not say why he thinks that Locke is here explaining what 'abstract ideas' are; the passage is part of a fourteen-page stretch in which 'abstract' does not occur once. In contrast, when Locke does explicitly mention abstract ideas he strongly suggests—and sometimes says outright—that they are partial ideas, not partial considerations of complete ones.

Locke seems to me to have intended his theory of abstract ideas to be an all-purpose technique for classification: We recognize a thing as an F by conjuring up an abstract idea of F and checking the thing off against it. Ayers agrees with Wittgenstein that no such theory can be right, because the ideas themselves must also be recognized or classified; and he asserts roundly that Locke was offering a technique only for classifying sensible things, not for classifying anything. He does not ask why, if Locke knew we don't need a technique for classifying ideas, he should think that we need one for classifying sensible things.

(2) According to Ayers, Locke holds that in 'sensitive knowledge' we are immediately aware both of our own sensory state and of its being caused by something outside us. He has convinced me of this interpretation, which has some salutary effects. Here are two. **(i)** Locke's account of how we get 'the idea of power' is meant to explain the origins only of our more theoretical causal thinking, not of causal thinking as such, as this is already omnipresent in sense perception. **(ii)** Locke's famous arguments against scepticism were not intended 'to supply a rational foundation for belief, which he

took to be already securely founded on. . . the senses', but were addressed to 'the sceptic who. . . goes to the extreme of pretending to doubt whether his natural faculties really are cognitive faculties'.

While accepting these interpretations, I am not convinced that all this is philosophically all right. **(i)** Ayers' extended defence still leaves me uneasy about the idea that the senses, though 'not theory-laden', present causal information. **(ii)** Locke's account of the 'idea of power', even on Ayers' limiting account of its aims, also needs more work. **(iii)** So does the argument against scepticism. Ayers approves of the part of it which he says contends 'that metaphysical mistrust of the senses is mistrust of a basic cognitive faculty,. . . which makes the whole concept of knowledge meaningless'. I cannot understand his willingness to assert this without argument.

(3) As Ayers makes clear, Locke opposed innate general principles, handed to us on a plate, because he held that our knowledge of necessary truths comes from the proper working of a cognitive faculty. This invites a comparison with the other cognitive faculties, and Ayers searchingly explores 'the analogy of "seeing" necessary connections'. One good question he asks is whether there is a modal-knowledge analogue of visual illusions. He concludes that there is a cognitive faculty that might be called 'intuition', but that Locke did not adequately describe it. According to Locke, I learn that necessarily triangles are F by inspecting an idea I have of a triangle and discerning that it is F. But, as Ayers says, for modal knowledge I need to learn that the idea is F *because* it is of a triangle; and Locke doesn't provide for this.

Ayers undertakes to explain 'what a priori intuition is', using 'an account of the interpenetration of. . . intelligence and linguistic competence'. He assigns the intuition of necessity to 'intelligence', and recounts how this faculty is at work in our understanding of language, for example in substantively judging what 'makes sense' as distinct from merely recognizing what is grammatical. According to Ayers, our linguistic lives are permeated with exercises of the cognitive faculty through which we learn necessary truths; and he conjectures that false theories of modal knowledge are caused by 'the failure to appreciate the implications' of this fact. In my long-held opinion, the language/intelligence mix has the best chance of yielding a credible modal epistemology, and Ayers' good handling of it is encouraging. But even with careful re-reading I have not been able to get from these chapters a forthright positive account of how modal knowledge is gained.

(4) Ayers reports Locke as agnostic about 'dualism', without explaining the word. A property dualist holds that properties fall into two classes—pertaining to materiality and to mentality respectively—with no overlap and no way of reducing either to the other. Locke's property dualism can be felt all through the *Essay*, though he does not announce it as a thesis. Substance dualism says that no one substance has properties of both kinds, and about this Locke was indeed carefully agnostic.

Now, Ayers defends Lockean views about perception, understanding, meaning and knowledge, including his emphasis on conscious mental states as essential to all of these: 'Locke's epistemology contains truth and can be of value to us, not despite being a theory about consciousness, but because it is a theory about consciousness.' This stress on consciousness need not express property dualism: there are theories purporting to explain consciousness as a material phenomenon. Ayers, however, assumes that consciousness is not possible for robots, and denies that it can be reduced to behavioural 'inclinations or their physical bases or antecedents'. One naturally sees him as a property dualist.

When late in the work he explains why dualism 'does not in the end make sense', he means substance dualism, but one of his reasons goes further. If there are immaterial 'spirits', he says, there are problems about supposing that they are not in space, and if they are in space there are problems about how a spirit affects bodies in its vicinity, and about 'how such relations, together with purely psychological. . . processes, might. . . fit into a general physics'. This, however, is equally a problem for property dualism. I am sorry that Ayers does not confront this question. Locke does not invite us to do so, but only because for him property dualism was too deeply axiomatic to be seen as doctrine.

Probably Ayers wouldn't agree that Locke is a convinced property dualist. He writes that 'Locke was officially agnostic' about how ideas relate to events in the brain, adding: 'He did not rule out the possibility that they are identical.' He was indeed agnostic about causal relations between the two: he gingerly ventures that 'it may seem probable that the constitution of the body does sometimes influence the memory'. These are hardly the words of someone who thinks that mental items may be events in the brain. He doesn't deny that they are identical, but that, I submit, is because it never occurred to him that they might be.

(5) Ayers properly highlights Locke's thoughts about the 'real essences' or explanatory inner natures of kinds of substance, and provides a rich historical setting for them. Locke belonged to the movement that rejected Aristotelian essences, and said that any essences that things have probably consist in facts about their fine-grained 'textures'. They were looking towards chemistry, before any of it had been discovered.

Locke stressed that no real essences were known, and was pessimistic about their ever being discovered. This nourished a mistake in his theory of meaning: if the real essence of gold is unkown to me, he said, then it can't come into what I mean by 'gold'; from which he inferred that by 'gold' we mean 'stuff that is heavy, yellow,. . . ' etc., through the facts about gold that were superficially available. Unlike his commentator Leibniz, he did not see that a meaning might have a quantifier in it, so that by 'gold' one could mean 'stuff that has a real essence that is shared by. . . ' followed by a pointer to uncontroversial samples of gold. Ayers acknowledges this defect in Locke's semantics, though not with ideal sharpness.

In the four chapters on classification in Locke—by far the best discussion of this topic that I have seen—the highlights include a probing discussion of the roles in biological taxonomy of historical and non-historical properties, and an unusually thorough scrutiny of Locke's view that while substances have unknown real essences 'modes' have only the 'nominal essences' that we confer on them by defining their names. As Leibniz pointed out, a natural mode such as a disease can have a deep explanatory nature—a real essence—which has to be laboriously discovered, just as gold does; and Locke seems to have overlooked this, perhaps focussing on artificial modes at the expense of natural ones. According to Ayers, however, substances differ from modes (even natural ones) in a way that helps to excuse Locke's error. Here is a pointer to it: We might after close study know only that if she is ill she has chicken pox; but we couldn't, after close study, know only that if it's an animal it's a primate. This is offered as evidence that although chicken-pox has a real essence there is also something conceptual—something chosen by us—in the boundary around chicken-pox.

Ayers connects real essences with what Locke calls 'the idea of substance in general', in a manner that puts him at odds with most commentators on Locke, including some who agree with him about method. The majority view is that by 'the idea of substance in general' Locke means the idea

or pseudo-idea corresponding to the empty word 'thing', the idea of an item of which nothing can be said except that it has properties. This debate has been going on for years. Ayers used to attribute the majority interpretation to historical ignorance, but that was implausible—the interpretation was accepted by Leibniz and Berkeley—and Ayers has dropped it, debating issue now in less esoteric terms. Furthermore, he comes up with a genuinely new line of argument on the topic, which I shall discuss in a more suitable place.

(6) Ayers' treatment of identity includes some good handling of Locke and also some of the best philosophical discussions in the book. It centres on the concept of substance, and the view—which Ayers presents as a foundational in Locke's thought—that the world is given to us already broken up into substantial things that we can identify by pointing, their boundaries in space and time being provided for us. In contrast, 'conceptualism' holds that we can by our choice of concepts break up the shapeless dough of the given world into substances in any way we please.

This is used in absorbing discussions of the identity of organisms and of persons, which I cannot discuss here, and in exploring how artefacts relate to the stuff of which they are made. The portion of silver is old, but the ring is new, so the ring is distinct from the silver although they now coincide in space. So some philosophers say, but not Ayers, because for him spatial boundaries lie at the heart of identity. In the deepest sense, he holds, there is no such thing as the ring; there is only a quantity of silver which is annular for a while. When the silver loses that shape, 'the ring ceases to exist' only in the sense in which, when Joe takes a job in the city, 'the farm-hand ceases to exist'. 'Farm-hand' does not mark out a kind of substance, nor does 'ring'. This line of thought, though it has precedents, has never been rooted in considerations about substance as deeply as it is here.

[From here to the end is material that was written for this review but not submitted for publication for length reasons]

Applying it to organisms, one might expect this: There is basically no such thing as a horse; there are only. . . that are temporarily equine. But what fills the gap? It cannot be 'quantities of matter' in Ayers' sense of that phrase, according to which the same quantity of matter must always contain exactly the same atoms. Since organisms gain and lose atoms continually, no quantity of matter remains equine for more than a fraction of a second.

Locke's concept of 'mass of matter' won't serve either, for the same reason: Locke stipulates that the same 'mass' always contains the same atoms. Unlike quantities, which can be scattered, Lockean 'masses' are somehow physically united; and Ayers says that so long as we have this unity we don't also need sameness of atoms; the unity lets us make sense of the idea of a single thing that stays in existence through gradual turnover of its constitutent atoms. In the case of an organism, Ayers says, the unity is provided by precisely the relationships that makes the thing an organism.

This, though sound and helpful, leaves unanswered the question: What is an organism? One can describe organisms in terms of functional unity and ongoing life, as Locke beautifully did; but when he tried to sum it all up by saying what a single organism is, he came up with: An organism is 'the same successive body not shifted all at once'! The spectacular evidence of strain in this phrase indicates how hard the question is to answer. Ayers does not answer it, but then nor has anybody else—except Richard Grandy, who holds that an organism is a function from times to quantities of matter.

Ayers has an illuminating critique of Locke's treatment of personal identity, in which he says that, although Locke wanted the concept of 'person' to be like that of 'man' or 'horse', his analysis implies it to be more like that of 'ring' or 'farm-hand'. He was drawn to the analysis by his desire for a theory of final reward and punishment that would be acceptable to orthodox Christians, his chapter on identity being part of a rich ongoing debate which Ayers describes in lively detail. This contextual information does not significantly affect one's reading of the 'Identity' chapter itself. It isn't even needed to motivate the chapter, because, as Ayers remarks, twentieth century philosophers have not needed theological motivations to be drawn to Lockean conclusions about what a person is. Ayers does not agree with Locke and his followers, but I have not clearly grasped what he would put in place of the Lockean account of personal identity.