Editorial

War with Scotland?
An attentive reader has pointed out that I called John Locke a Scottish philosopher, though he was born in England, on the 29th August 1632, in a cottage in the village of Wrington, just outside the City of Bristol. This is little more than ten miles from the Editor’s Bristol home, and from the Editorial office. The cottage was in the grounds of a large house which still stands. As some years ago it was on the market, I toyed with the idea of buying it for a Locke study centre.

A tablet was placed on the cottage in 1810 to commemorate it as Locke’s birthplace. But the cottage was demolished by its then owner, who took offence when a Bristol newspaper commented on its dilapidation and urged that it should be restored. So it is no more, though there is a bust of Locke in the porch of the particularly fine church. The cottage was for some time part of a school for small children, when this verse was penned:

“Perhaps some village Locke is here,
And o’er his horn-book drops a tear
And may fair learnings path persue
And Wrington’s classic fame renew.”

When a boy, Locke was interested in science, influenced especially by the great Irish scientist Robert Boyle (1627–1691), who, it seems, asked the young Locke to find out about minerals in the local mines. Later, he became a friend of Newton (1642–1727). With his knowledge of their discoveries and ideas, Locke introduced science to philosophy. So he continued the work of Francis Bacon (1561–1626), to challenge classical logic chopping and semantic inertia with enquiry directly from nature, as his Novum Organum (1620) recommended with cogent arguments and working examples. Locke wrote in his small book, The Conduct of the Understanding:

“We should not judge of things by men’s opinions, but of opinions by things”. He frequently said we should look “to things themselves”. But, for this, it is necessary to “examine our own abilities”. Hence the writing of his main work, the Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690). Locke attributed the origin of the Essay (in the Epistle to the Reader at the beginning of the Essay), to a philosophical discussion held
in Lord Shaftesbury’s house (when he was in Shaftesbury’s employment as secretary and doctor), but the discussants

“found themselves quickly at a stand by the difficulties that arose on every side. After we had awhile puzzled ourselves, without coming any nearer a resolution of those doubts which perplexed us, it came into my thoughts that we took a wrong course, and that before we set ourselves upon enquiries of that nature it was necessary to examine our own abilities, and see what objects our understandings were or were not fitted to deal with.”

This harks back to Francis Bacon’s concern that ideas are corrupted by knowledge based on authority, and by mental tendencies such as reading our own desires and needs into nature, which he called Idols of the tribe (idola tribus). Even more pernicious in Bacon’s view, were Idols of the cave (idola specus) meaning individual predispositions based on personal education and acceptance of authorities. The conclusion was that, when the Idols are rejected, the mind is left free to seek knowledge of natural laws based on experiments. This was the basis of Bacon’s and Locke’s philosophy of empiricism, and was essentially different from classical philosophy, apart from Aristotle. It also differed from the literary basis of arts, as expressing individual and shared beliefs running free from evidence. Bacon’s emphasis on inductive methods was, surely, key to liberating ideas from personal experience, and so was and is very different from the aims and practices of the arts.

As Locke was born some seventy years after Boyle, he had the advantage of seeing the fruits of the young science, which was little more than a promise for Bacon in his earlier generation. Locke espoused Common Sense—which became the basic tenet of the ‘Scottish School’. But isn’t there a paradox here? For science has the unique power to discover and conceive counter-intuitive principles, and convince across almost all nations and creeds counter-intuitive ideas which flout common sense. It was not common sense that the Earth is spherical and moves round the Sun. More recently space-time of relativity, and the quirky behaviour of the very small in quantum mechanics, are very far from common sense. Yet the common-sense ‘Scottish School’ rose from the influence of science—with its power of discovering surprising facts and conceiving challenging new principles of nature and mind. Locke was inspired by the physical sciences to investigate the fallacies of common sense, as common-sense mind is the weakest link between reality and understanding. Yet common sense was adopted by the ‘Scottish School’ as the principal criterion for truth.
Now I am in danger of starting a war with Scotland. For it is easy to point out that the celebrated proponents of Scottish common-sense empiricism, came on the scene considerably later than John Locke, born in 1632.

Thus David Hume lived from 1711 to 1776, the *Treatise on Human Nature* appearing in 1739. Thomas Reid was born the year before (1710 – 1796), the *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* appearing in 1764. Sir William Hamilton (1788 – 1856) defended Reid’s common-sense philosophy, in *Reid* (1846). Dugald Stewart (1753 – 1828) took up themes of Locke’s, in *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (volume 1, 1792).

Thomas Reid was the acknowledged leader of the Scottish School. He is surely the most interesting, at least to us, as he wrote at length on vision and other senses, including smell and touch. For him vision is non-Euclidian, being projected as great circles from the eye, though touch is Euclidian. He also considers the second eye and much else of interest to us. This was while Kant accepted Euclidian axioms as a priori necessarily true, so apparently justifying metaphysics—a major mistake that Reid avoided.

Reid accepted George Berkeley’s view that mind is immediately aware of ideas, though this is incompatible with the common sense of Locke and later Hume. He abandoned the theory of ideas, as ideas (sensations) are not like things—or, as he says, movement—for ideas do not have to move for us to see motion. Reid developed a nativist theory of conception of ideas as originating from innate faculties of mind (related to phrenology) though the ideas themselves are not innate. He saw perception of objects as empirical hypotheses. For him sensations are very different from object perceptions, as sensations are undeniable but object perceptions are hypotheses projected on the world with help from God. Modern theorists of object perception may sympathise. Reid accepts Locke’s distinction of primary and secondary qualities, and accepts Locke’s argument that sensations (qualia) may, and often must be, very different physical reality—yet stand for reality, much as words stand for things very different from their physical forms. There seems to be an almost seamless development from Locke to Reid.

Here lies the danger of war with Scotland. If Locke is seen as English, the Scots might see Scottish Philosophy as English-inspired. If Locke is quietly accepted as in the Scottish School, the danger passes. So, in the previous Editorial, I saved the world.
from yet another conflict. But now the cover is blown, by the attentive reader, so the danger returns.

Who is this unwitting threat to the United Kingdom? She is a distinguished and totally admirable lady, living in Aberdeen, in Scotland. She is an expert on Scottish music, and Scottish mountains having climbed them all, as well as on perception. She is Helen Ross. Helen did a truly excellent PhD in England, at Cambridge, making a discovery so far from common sense it has not yet been accepted by the community of visual scientists. Who was her supervisor? Yours truly

Acknowledgment. Many thanks to Nick Wade for the prints of John Locke and Thomas Reid. They come from *Psychologists in Word and Image* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1995).

Richard Gregory
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