

John Locke in the Twenty-First Century

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Etienne Balibar, *Identity and Difference: John Locke and the Invention of Consciousness*, translated by Warren Montag and Introduced by Stella Sandford (London/Brooklyn: Verso, 2013)

Poor Descartes. The seventeenth-century French rationalist tried to naturalize the mind by doubting everything and restarting from what he thought was unarguable: I think, therefore I am. The mind was a *thinking* substance with innate *a priori* ideas, while the body was a separate *extended* substance whose senses supplied us with less reliable *a posteriori* ideas. Since the Cartesian *cogito* began in an individual mind, the problem immediately arose as to how to connect that interiority to an exteriority: its own body and a world of other minds and bodies. So, while Descartes is credited for starting a modern psychology incorporating a conscious self, he is blamed for generating modern dualism and a corresponding state of alienation between mind and body, subject and object—a breach every subsequent philosophical innovation has addressed one way or another. An early effort was that of British empiricist John Locke, who declared the mind a *tabula rasa*; our ideas were *all* acquired *a posteriori* through lived “impressions.”

Locke is also known as the architect of the liberal revolution that substituted an atomistic individualism and bourgeois property rights for divinely ordained land-based feudal aristocracy. Nonetheless, in *Identity and Difference: John Locke and the Invention of Consciousness*, Marxist Etienne Balibar has now withdrawn credit from Descartes for conceiving our modern notion of consciousness and a “rationalist psychology,” to instead bestow it on Locke! Balibar justifies his ironic choice in an intriguing analysis of Locke’s discussion of personal identity in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (“Of Identity and Diversity,” Book II, xxvii, 1694 edition). Balibar’s essay is sixteen years old, but has now been trans-

lated into English by theorist Warren Montag and ably introduced by British philosopher Stella Sandford. The book contains a new preface and significant appendices, including a detailed "Philosophical and Philological Glossary" and a second essay on Spinoza and Locke.

We attend particularly closely not only since Balibar is Professor Emeritus of moral and political philosophy at Université de Paris X and Distinguished Professor of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine, but because he is embedded in the critical post-structuralist pantheon as co-author with Louis Althusser of *Reading Capital* (1965) and, like Althusser and Montag, a distinguished Spinoza scholar. The other rationalist, Spinoza, born in 1632, the same year as Locke, had argued in the opposite direction when answering Cartesian dualism: the universe was one Substance Absolutely Infinite conceived as either mental or material and incorporating everything. He called it "God" or "Nature" and defined our chaotic emotions as bodily affects resulting from our situations within this larger matrix. In the essay on Spinoza and Locke, Balibar suggests that after Descartes, psychology had two radical naturalistic possibilities: Spinoza's rationalistic materialism or Locke's rationalistic empiricism.

Balibar's further purpose is to find points of contact between the Anglophone and Continental philosophic traditions in response to the rift that developed after the Second World War between European critical philosophy (phenomenological, existentialist, and Marxist), which allows for theoretical questions of Being, desire, and political engagement, and the "analytic" school (positivist, empirical, emphasizing the use of symbolic logic). Despite the latter's important sources in 1920s Middle Europe, the two strands developed independently with little crossover and much alienation. Analytics dominated in Britain and America during the Cold War, but the critical theorists ascended in Europe after 1968. Though both schools were part of a "linguistic turn," they formulated distinct modes of approach: the Anglophone examined semantics and technical issues of language use, while critical theorists used Foucault and others to transform Marxian analysis by investigating linguistically embedded power.

Framed thus, Balibar's 1998 essay is more than a simple call for reconsideration of a thinker, but reaches across a deep division. In the central essay he limns the philological history of the freighted term "consciousness" in Locke and his contemporaries such as Malebranche, Condillac, Arnauld, and Pierre Coste, Locke's conscientious French translator. Balibar focuses on Locke's use and Coste's translation of "consciousness" as the neologism "*con-science*." The term rarely appears in other portions of Locke's text and thus the chapter's discussion of identity is believed to be a much-revised section not fully consistent with the rest of the *Essay*. Locke also distinguishes between substance, soul, man, self, and person to reconceive identity in active consciousness, described primarily as our awareness while awake. As unexceptional as this appears today, Locke was then

positioned firmly against scholastics, Christian theories of inborn "sin" and free will, and against Descartes, who still rested identity in the soul.

The "problem" of identity only appears after the Cartesian *cogito*. If my existence can be found to follow from my thinking, it matters much what is meant by "I" and "think." Cartesians had defined mind as a thinking substance whether discursively aware of its thoughts or not. Locke found this definition unintelligible since it was the intimate state of awareness of one's own thoughts, of oneself as perceiving, thinking, and feeling, that *was* consciousness. Furthermore, the Cartesian view relied on abstract supposition. Though systematic experimentation was then a new epistemology, Locke now challenged anything that could not be empirically verified:

If they say, That a Man is always conscious to himself of thinking; I ask, How do they know it? Consciousness is the perception of what passes in a Man's own mind. Can another Man perceive, that I am conscious of any thing, when I perceive it not myself? No Man's Knowledge here, can go beyond his Experience. (quoted in Balibar, 49)

Identity and Difference brilliantly illuminates Locke's originality and naturalism in rejecting or drastically recasting the inert terminology of the scholastics, particularly that of "substance." That is, Locke rejects a scholastic notion of innate ideas disconnected from a temporal experience that is recognized by a combination of sensation, memory, introspection and logic he suggests is natural to the mind. Balibar finds a "theoretical inversion" in Locke's argument:

The principle of identity and the principle of contradiction are relativized as acquired beliefs or knowledge, that is, he has posited their *de facto* non-universality. . . . But this is to discover them as inscribed in the very structure of the mind in the form of the thesis: *it is impossible that man does not think that he thinks* or that *he thinks without thinking*. . . . It is not the statements or even the corresponding 'mental propositions' which are universal but the *non-contradiction of the mind*, and in consequence, the mind's *identity to itself* as an activity or operation of thought. Finally, Locke refers this affirmation to the *experience of each person*, which does not mean that it is relativized, but on the contrary, that at the heart of every experience we feel the same collision with the impossible and in consequence the same point of universal certitude. The name of this necessity with which thought finds itself not thinking without thinking is precisely *consciousness*. (50, Balibar's emphases)

Though perhaps not the simplest way to describe Locke's identification of consciousness with waking life, we may see Locke naturalizing the human mind as he had the social contract. Just as it makes no sense to speak of a remote divine right, we cannot discuss inaccessible ideas. The principles of contradiction and

that of identity are recognized by the mind not as pre-existing *a priori* but, and as universally natural to human thought *a posteriori*, when fully capable of reasoning.

Balibar's elliptical descriptions of our modern notion of consciousness can occasionally make it difficult to grasp Locke's innovations. Perhaps consciousness remains too contested a complex of definitions and intuitions for precision to be feasible, but absent a clear description of the conceptual progeny, how do we judge the alleged paternity? Another oddity of Balibar's treatment is that he doesn't use certain terms we would expect to find in a contemporary discussion of an empirical theory of mind. He never explicitly describes perception as physiological, i.e., as a bodily event. Locke, who trained as a physician, lived during an explosion of science. Seventeenth-century medicine was becoming modern. Descartes had written his own book on physiology, famously locating the soul in the pineal gland. More reliably, Harvey had discovered the circulation of the blood in the 1620s, and Borelli had also discovered muscular mechanics.

How did these discoveries intersect with Locke's modern conception of consciousness and identity? For Locke, men were natural beings—living things with complex organizational structures that might be preserved even when atoms or parts of the body were removed or altered. Locke argued here that identity was something maintained through growth, change, and corpuscular damage as long as consciousness, as a particular function of that organization, remained and was able to identify itself as same. Thus something as vague as “substance,” spiritual or mental, could not be the source of identity. Nor could “soul” as defined by Descartes. It was not the eternal soul that was conscious but the particular historical self. But what happened to identity in those perceptual lapses during sleep, after illness, inebriation or in faulty memory? Since this consciousness was fractured, Locke and others saw difficulties with identity as continuity of consciousness, and the *Essay* does not rest finally on a single definition of identity.

Any project to further dismantle the unproductive architecture that sustains the separation between Continental “theory” and Anglophone “empiricism” is welcome. One therefore accepts the lingering stylistic obscurities on both sides. It is a perversity of our linguistic human nature, if we can speak of such a thing after discussing Locke, that when twentieth-century logical empiricists who, after filling their own writings with pointless formulae, charged their opponents with philosophical unintelligibility, Continental theorists obliged by developing their own insider rhetoric. In this, we all might have done better to remain literary children of Descartes who, if nothing else, was pithy and clear.

Identity and Difference offers many insights to the reader willing to make some effort. The second essay on Spinoza alone is worth the price of admission. Balibar's attempt to untangle the threads of Locke's cryptic discussion and articulate the debt that the European phenomenological tradition owes him is fascinating, brave, and necessary. This translation provides Anglophone readers

with an astute reading of Locke, incorporating an ontological angle too easily neglected. In focusing on issues of identity and difference, Balibar explicitly returns to the fundamentals of the European philosophic tradition beginning with the pre-Socratics and Plato (74). As he speaks in the terms of his own critical tradition, some Anglophone readers intrigued by his thesis may still crave more definitive premises. Fortunately, much is developed and clarified in the material that follows the central essay.

In the philosophical and philological glossary of Lockean concepts, Balibar engages interpretations by Michael Ayers and Paul Ricoeur on the matter of Locke's consistency and suggests we approach Locke's usage “functionally.” Whether resulting from this pragmatist method, or due to Balibar's immersion in Spinoza, he offers some valuable reassessments. For example, he finds a greater intentionality in Locke's distinctions between material life, organic life and “consciousness,” which separate materiality (the substance) from both the stable continuity of structural organization (the species individual), and the continuity of internal perceptual moments (the person). Identity is different in each case (81). Thus Balibar looks less to discover where Locke might be inconsistent than to discover Locke's own perspective on the meaning of his terms. His Locke is highly tolerant of disunity in his own concept of consciousness and while never fully resolving the relationship of consciousness to identity, moves it toward a version of self-perception that anticipates not only Hume's “sense impressions,” but the phenomenologists' and pragmatists' “experience.” As Balibar observes,

there can be no single univocal concept of 'internal difference' but there are at least three, just as there are three meanings of 'self identity.' . . . The fact that one of them—namely, that which attaches the identity of consciousness to the internal perception of the difference between ideas in the train of thought and therefore to their numerical multiplicity for the subject . . . —is privileged . . . can never abolish this difference of difference. It is this fact that prevents any consideration of Locke's subjectivist system as an absolute idealism [such as Berkeley's]. . . . The esse and the percipi never meet. (77)

In discussing “sameness” as a relation in his glossary, Balibar admits that Locke's and our choice is either to accept a type of subjectivism or psychologism, or generate an axiomatic definition or “pure undefinable” (115). No doubt Locke became embroiled in classic dilemmas. Against scholastics he critically pointed out the natural fluidity and change of ideas and the impossibility for us to “have one self-same single Idea a long time alone in his mind without any variation at all,” yet never addressed the endless fragmentation it logically implies. If consciousness is the name for the waking mind, that is, the mind with particular impressions and ideas, this ties the “idea” and its consciousness to an infinitely divisible “moment.” Besides the problem of solipsism, any “idea” so time-dependent as Locke's could hardly be located. It merges with our sense of time and embeds mind in an

experiential reality yoked to a regressive dissolution. But this is phenomenological in that the historical experience, the fleeting indefinable phenomena of an “I,” becomes the more reliable actuality.

We can never be certain whether Locke made consciousness the sole criterion of identity or vice versa. While he accepted entirely different activities as part of the human business, and located consciousness in the time-space continuum, separating out memory, he clearly wished to understand identity as continuity of consciousness, though he thoroughly problematized it. And Ricouer and Balibar admit that while less ready to tie it all together under a single psychological or religious title, Locke was quite willing to identify individuals with their labor and an inalienable “property in themselves” (80). Balibar only suggests the political implications of Locke’s epistemology, he does not discuss them in this short essay; there is much left for others to explore in these simultaneous attacks on divine right and innate ideas.

So what is the aspect of the concept of modern consciousness Continentals should credit to Locke? Balibar suggests ambiguity, tension and “uneasiness” in the location, organization and power of “the self that recognizes itself” as continuous. Today’s neo-pragmatists who look to Nietzsche might welcome Locke’s distinctions between man, self, soul, consciousness and person, and especially his definition of desire as “unease” (colorfully illustrated with thought experiments involving princes, cobblers, and a loquacious parrot), as revealing his acceptance of a profoundly unstable identity grounded neither in a soul nor in any underlying “substance.” This identity was somehow expressed by the body—its physical powers and limits of perception and its origination and position in time and space. While Locke’s receiver of impressions was somewhat passive, Locke’s continuous “self” was a “person” and active. Furthermore, in generating events s/he trailed a forensic dust of legal responsibility for any “conscious” acts and would answer first to man and later to God on Judgment Day. And there, Locke tells us, it will be the eternal soul that is judged by God’s eternal standard. Consistent in his inconsistency, Locke was no atheist.

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Surpassing Philosophical Antagonism? A Critique of Tom Eyers’s *Post-Rationalism*

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Tom Eyers, *Post-Rationalism: Psychoanalysis, Epistemology, and Marxism in Post-War France* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 217pp.

Beginning to delve into a philosophical area with which one is not acquainted can often seem like stumbling upon familiar ideas: for instance, upon crossing the continental-analytic divide, one might, at first, notice similarities between Donald Davidson and Jacques Derrida. Of course there are some similarities, and some of the same issues are addressed by each thinker; however, upon initiating oneself into the orthodox philosophical discourse, fissures become apparent and before long it appears difficult to assert any similarity whatsoever. It would be easy, for example, to assert that existentialism is *prima facie* a twentieth-century rearticulation of Stoic truths. Indeed, it would not be too convoluted to mount a fairly sophisticated argument in support of this. That is until one becomes familiar enough with the context in which existentialism arose: phenomenology. It would subsequently become clear that existentialism and Stoicism arose out of such different *Weltanschauungen* that it requires a certain amount of philosophical acrobatics to even begin to speak of them in terms of common themes. It is under these very conditions that we are all initiated into the disjointed philosophical discourse we all rely on. To understand collective philosophical discourses as a patchwork of partisan factions—such as structuralism and poststructuralism, or realist and anti-realist—is so fundamental to the perpetuation and development of philosophy that the implicit core lesson of philosophical training is often merely to conceive of all philosophical thought in the most disparate and antagonistic form possible. The pertinent question in acknowledging this situation is: does philosophy gain something by speaking about its collective ideas in such absolute terms? Or rather, does