

## **Dorothea versus John Locke's philosophy**

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*Abstract.* I interpret George Eliot as objecting to John Locke in *Middlemarch* – more specifically, his theory of ideas – by means of her account of Dorothea's experiences of Edward Casaubon at dinner.

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*It's dinner time and the clock goes tick tock*

*As the key to all mythologies meets a dream of John Locke*

In chapter two of the esteemed Victorian novel *Middlemarch*, there is a reference to the foundational English philosopher John Locke. Some characters are having dinner. Young Dorothea desires to marry the ageing scholar Edward Casaubon. She fears the conversation is too shallow for him:

She wondered how a man like Mr Casaubon would support such triviality. His manners, she thought, were very dignified; the set of his iron-gray hair and his deep eye-sockets made him resemble the portrait of Locke. He had the spare form and the pale complexion which became a student; as different as possible from the blooming Englishman of the red-whiskered type represented by Sir James Chettam. (1871-2: chapter 2)

A reference to Locke, but is there any philosophical significance in these sentences?

This may be reading too much into her words, but perhaps what Eliot is trying to say is this: “Locke held the theory that concepts are images. If we take a sentence, it is composed of words and those words usually refer but how do they refer? For example, how does the

word 'triangle' in the sentence 'Every triangle has three sides' refer to triangles? Locke's answer is that when a speaker utters this sentence, an image of a triangle is in the speaker's mind and that image resembles triangles more than it does other stuff and because of that resemblance, the word 'triangle' refers to triangles. That image is the speaker's concept of a triangle. When they have a thought such as 'Every triangle has three sides' that thought is composed of concepts and concepts are images. Words enable them to communicate the thought to others. But when Dorothea thinks, 'I wish to marry Edward Casaubon,' the image that occurs in her mind is actually an image of John Locke. Nevertheless, her sentence which expresses that thought surely refers to Edward Casaubon. So there must be a problem with Locke's theory of how words refer."

## Reference

Eliot, G. 1871-72. *Middlemarch*. Accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2020 from:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/145/145-h/145-h.htm>