

Interpretation

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John Locke and Cultural Relativism

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1. LOCKE AND MODERNITY

In our still proliferating, bewildering debates about the nature of 'modernity' and about what, if anything, comes (came) after it or supersedes (-ed) it, one might still venture to suggest that there remain one or two old-fashioned, fixed points of reference. Whether we think of modernity as a "category of historical periodization," a "quality of social experience," or "an (incomplete) project," all roads lead back to—or through—something traditionally called 'the Enlightenment,' located temporally (in the first instance) in the eighteenth century and spatially in Europe. Entangled in the "thicket" of arguments about "the character and status of the concept of modernity itself" (Osborne 1992, p. 65) is also "the fate of the concept of Enlightenment, or more specifically, the Enlightenment concept of an autonomous reason" (Osborne 1992, p. 78). Indeed, one might even argue that at times our everyday working notions about modernity blur into and become indistinguishable from our popular, received notions about the Enlightenment. Whether we approach the issues from a 'postmodernist' position relying on poststructuralist analyses which claim to disclose the discursive constructedness of all rationalities, or whether we take up a 'postcolonial' perspective from which the re-empowered voices of the hitherto silenced 'Others' of Europe are purportedly seen to expose the 'universal' rationality of Europe in all of its parochial cultural specificity, we always seem obliged to return to a critique of eighteenth-century European notions about the autonomy and universality of human reason. In our contemporary parlance, this frequently entails a critique of the notion that a human being is (or can become) a coherent, unitary, autonomous, self-fashioning human 'subject' endowed with powers of reason which can attain to universally valid truths about the world.

Of course nobody maintains that Enlightenment notions about human reason sprang full-blown from the minds of a handful of eighteenth-century French *philosophes*. Any discussions of the secularization of European thought systems and the epistemological revolution leading to the scientific rationality of the modern "Enlightenment project," with its goal of harnessing nature and reliev-

ing “man’s estate,”² lead us back to another of our old-fashioned points of reference, in this case to John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which served as the starting point for countless Continental discussions of language and reason. And Locke would appear at first glance to be a fitting embodiment of that notion of a human subject who is able, almost magically it seems, to observe, analyze, and act upon the world without himself being acted upon. In our own skeptical times, one can only watch with envy as Locke audaciously takes possession of an epistemological position (where?) of ‘objectivity’ from which ‘he’ (what part of him?) engages in an astonishing act of introspection and observes the workings of his own mental mechanisms, his processes for acquiring knowledge of the world, and the internal functioning of his powers of reason. What’s more, once he believes he has removed some of the traditional scholastic and ecclesiastical “rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge,” he seems confident that his own personal, parochial acts of introspection have yielded results that are applicable to all of humankind. If we latter-day readers are not alert to the contradictions and fissures in his arguments, we can come away with the heady impression that it is somehow possible to think objectively about the involvement of language in the processes of acquiring knowledge without considering that language must also be involved in the very processes of introspection, thought, and reason themselves.³ Locke is not one to invite his readers to stare into the abyss of infinite regress.

This is no place to go into biographical details, but even if we take but a brief, superficial look at Locke the person (1632–1704) in the social, political, and religious context of his times, all factors seem to conspire conveniently to produce the apparently emancipated persona who speaks to us from the pages of the *Essay*. His origins were appropriately humble (relatively speaking), Puritan, and Roundhead, and he happened to be attending Westminster School in London in January 1649, when the world was given ample empirical evidence of the creaturely vulnerability of Charles I’s neck-joint, thereby confirming growing doubts about the divinity of monarchs. Whether, much later, Locke was actually in the penumbra of conspirators allegedly involved in the so-called Rye House Plot against Charles II in 1683 probably matters little here. The facts of his exile in Holland and his triumphant return to England in 1689 with the Princess of Orange bear ample witness to his estrangement from an epistemological posture of “romance idealism” upon which had been based the notion that the political authority of monarchs was legitimated by an inborn, inherited “virtue” (McKeon) guaranteed by ancient lineage. It is clear that Locke was not taken in by the “aristocratic ideology” (McKeon) that continued to insist on the divine rights of the Stuarts to the throne of England and Scotland.⁴

It is equally clear, from the *Essay*, that Locke would also have no truck with the notion that the ancient lineage of an idea or proposition (analogous to the inherited “virtue” of noble families) is the guarantee of its truth. In McKeon’s terms, Locke’s “naive empiricism,” the belief that all valid knowledge is de-

rived from experience, underpins his “progressive ideology,” which judges the merits of rulers on the basis of their observable abilities, not on their family pedigrees, and dispenses with the outmoded romance nonsense about inherited inner nobility. In his own life and works, then, Locke would seem to vindicate convincingly McKeon’s central thesis of the inseparability of a reigning epistemology and the social order it sustains and is sustained by. Locke, whose rhetoric in the *Essay* often suggests that he had no pretensions to being a professional philosopher, becomes, arguably, the most important founding theorist of the epistemological revolution “which would liberate us from the shackles of religious . . . superstition and produce a rational moral and political order—which would remove injustice and oppression and achieve universal freedom” (O’Shea, p. 9). By draining the natural world and the world of human relations of all spiritual meaning and divine significance, and by reducing the truths of divine revelation more or less completely to the truths of human sense experience and reason, Locke becomes the quintessential thinker of early modernity.⁵

As we know with hindsight, the early modern period in much of Europe witnessed not only an epistemological revolution, but a revolution in property relations as well. Most of our notions about the nature of modernity rest on the at least tacit assumption that it is a *capitalist* modernity. There is clearly nothing fortuitous about the fact that Locke is both a founding theorist of empiricism and a political thinker devoted to the rational defense of individual property rights. This is not the place to rehearse his well-known arguments in the *Second Treatise* (see chap. 5, “Of Property”). Suffice it to say that, starting with the notion that all human beings ‘own’ their own persons and their own labor power (a notion perfectly consistent with his “progressive ideology”), Locke proceeds to justify the individual appropriation of the fruits of the earth and any land with which one has mixed one’s labor. In an additional audacious argument, he then asserts that the tacit agreement of human beings to assign value (otherwise generated only by labor power) to gold and silver (money) justifies the institution of wage labor and the private possession of unlimited amounts of land. Needless to say, the assumption that productive labor gives a right to the possession of land has been used to justify colonialisms of various kinds and at various times. The notion of a general, undisputed social consent to the assignment of value to money becomes a necessary fiction underlying the generation of capital. To rework an old cliché: if Locke had not existed, Whig landowners, agrarian capitalists, colonialists, and Americans would have had to invent him (as, in a sense, they did).⁶

2. ENLIGHTENMENT REASON AND THEORIES OF LANGUAGE

As I reiterated above, our debates about the nature of modernity must necessarily address the fate of the Enlightenment concept of an autonomous reason. If, as has become common intellectual currency in our own time, we assume

that human reason operates within the constraints of culture-specific linguistic structures and language-specific conceptual configurations, the notion of reason's 'autonomy' must give way to our acceptance of reason's cultural contingency. The proudly autonomous human 'subject of modernity' turns out to be a cognitive illusion, the effects of a culture-specific play of intersecting discourses. The subject does not observe the world from some supposed epistemological vantage point of objectivity; it is the subject's activity of mind that constitutes the reality that is the object of cognition.⁷ If we accept this line of thinking, the supposed universality of Enlightenment claims to truth about the world dissolves and is replaced by some sort of cultural relativism. It can then be argued that, once this 'linguistic turn' in philosophy has accomplished a thoroughgoing epistemological paradigm shift, we have left the mental world of 'modernity' and have entered our 'postmodern' epoch. An analogous 'post-colonial' narrative of that same shift, as already mentioned, would stress that Europe's loss of its epistemological moorings is inseparable from Europe's postimperial awareness "that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world."⁸ To put matters crudely and succinctly: the collapse of empires results in the repudiation of Locke.

As usual, alas, these attempts to write intellectual history represent crass oversimplifications and are probably fatally flawed. To speak of "the concept of the Enlightenment," for instance, would seem to imply (whether we mean to or not) that there was a more or less homogeneous European mind-set in the eighteenth century, whereas common sense and numerous writers tell us that such an assumption must be very suspect indeed. But in order to keep 'the Enlightenment' in our minds as a fixed point of reference, as a "category of historical periodization," so that we can keep our popular notions of 'modernity' afloat and simultaneously theorize a putative paradigm shift in thought which ushers in our postmodern epoch, we still persist in hypostatizing a narrow notion of the Enlightenment which is centered on alleged beliefs in a universal, autonomous human reason. It may well be that 'the Enlightenment,' as a heuristic construct, was at one time a necessary and useful conceptual tool, but it seems to have taken on a life of its own, as heuristic constructs are liable to do, and to have become a sort of reified label. I suspect that our continuing reluctance to think of eighteenth-century European thought systems as riven by conflicts and fissured by contradictory discourses has a lot to do with the powerful theorization of the emergence of modernity by Michel Foucault, who posits a succession of all-pervasive, period-specific, self-contained, epistemological fields (epistemes) and can lead us to believe that the so-called Classical age was characterized by a more or less unified epistemological space which was abruptly superseded at the beginning of the nineteenth century. If we simply believe that Foucault means to delineate a series of empirically verifiable historical epochs in European thought, we can easily fall into the habit of spotting neat epistemic discontinuities and epistemological ruptures. And if we

take as read Foucault's assertion that "analysis has been able to show the coherence that existed, throughout the Classical age, between the theory of representation and the theories of language, of the natural orders, and of wealth and value," then we presumably end up believing that eighteenth-century Europe was suffused by, among other things, empiricist, more or less Lockean, theories of language which viewed language simply as a signifying tool *used* by the sovereign human subject of the Enlightenment.⁹

Perhaps it is the rhetorical power of Foucault's arguments that leads, say, Hayden White to assert that "language [was not] a problem for [the Enlighteners]" and makes it possible for David Harvey to produce the easily refutable statement that "Enlightenment thinkers believed that translation from one language to another was always possible without destroying the integrity of either language." It is clear that our insistence on the prevalence of an "Enlightenment concept of an autonomous reason" makes us reluctant to entertain the thought that not only did prominent eighteenth-century thinkers theorize the immanence of language in every act of reasoning, but also insisted on the cultural specificity of linguistic structures and, consequently, of cognitive development. Contemplating these heresies would disturb too violently our narratives of epistemological paradigm shifts and our sense of epochal changes—our sense of what is 'postmodern' in postmodernity. If one may be allowed to indulge in a generalization worthy of Lady Bracknell: Ours is not an age in which it is easy to think in terms of multiple, even contradictory, discourses, coexisting in fluid suspension, which, if disturbed by real material, economic, and social changes, then crystallize out into fully conscious positions which engage with each other in a continuing series of discursive reversals and counter reversals.¹⁰ Our current debates about the nature of modernity tend to obscure whole swathes of thinking in eighteenth-century Europe.

3. JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER

It will come as no surprise that I agree with Hans Aarsleff when he asserts that "linguistic relativity" was a "commonplace eighteenth-century doctrine" (Aarsleff 1982, p. 345). We need look no further than to the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) to find a central, symptomatic Enlightenment thinker who "had already accomplished in his own thinking the essence of the 'epistemological turn,' that is, the interpretation of the subject's activity of mind as itself constitutive of the reality that is the object of cognition . . . [and who had done so] . . . in the form of the 'linguistic turn,' ordinarily located by historians more than a century later" (see note 7). Given his skeptical epistemological stance, Herder was obviously a powerful opponent of any eighteenth-century universalist claims for the workings of European reason.¹¹ For him, human beings are born with no more than a dormant capacity for reason

which is awakened and given force only by language (p. 138). It is language that organizes sensory experiences into thought. Reason itself is not innate; it is not an autonomous mechanical activity set inexorably into motion by the fact of one's being human; it must be learned, and a human being can learn only from other human beings, through language (pp. 141–44). Language acquisition, however, and consequently the development of thought, are dependent on the language community, on the language of the ethnic group (pp. 336–37). Every language bears the stamp of an ethnically specific understanding and general folk character (p. 353). Every nation has its own sounds, and systems of naming are different in every language. Each culture impresses upon its collective understanding “aspects” of the perceived world that are appropriate to its strategies for survival and its productive activities. Some languages stress names (of things); others stress action. Different languages have different ways of using person and tense and different ways of configuring concepts. All of these differences are embedded in the specific cultural arrangements and activities of particular language communities. Out of the chaos of sense impressions generated by the world, each culture delimits and articulates its own concepts and weaves its own conceptual configurations, thereby constructing its own particular landscape of thought which it then perceives as real. There is no such thing as pure reason without language. Language is the “character” (p. 343) of our reason, the sole means by which reason takes on form and reproduces itself.

Herder is, of course, no longer a stranger in our postmodernist debates about the nature of reason. There is an impressive range of specialist writings on Herder's theory of language and signification, the implications of which are becoming clearer for current debates in cultural theory and for discussions within postcolonial historiography about purported relations between European Enlightenment thought systems and the colonial enterprise. Jacques Derrida, for example, signals in a footnote to his *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry* that he is aware of the epistemological and historical significance of Herder's prolonged and public philosophical quarrel with Kant. In his *Metacritique* (1799) of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Herder—in Derrida's words—“reproach[es] Kant for not taking into consideration the intrinsic necessity of language and its immanence in the most apriori act of thought.” In an important article in *History and Theory*, Brian J. Whitton traces parallels between Herder's thought and Jean-François Lyotard's arguments in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*: “Proceeding from a view of the inherently relative, pluralistic nature of human cultural knowledge as an arbitrary linguistic construct, both Herder and Lyotard reject . . . claims to objectivity . . . based upon an artificial reification of a particular, limited cultural form to the status of universality.” Whitton places Herder firmly (too firmly, in my view) within the ambit of postmodernist thinking.¹²

It will doubtless be objected in some quarters that my invoking of Herder represents an illegitimate polemical exploitation of a maverick *German* eight-

eenth-century thinker, the exception that proves the rule, as it were. Many English-speaking interpreters of Herder seem simply to have taken as read the long German tradition of nationalistic reception of Herder since the end of the nineteenth century—a time of German nation-building, when scholarly success was often heavily dependent on demonstrating that Herder had (allegedly) managed to ‘overcome’ the overweening hegemony of the rationalist French *lumières* by teutonifying the hated Romance-language discourses of ‘the Enlightenment’ and by constructing alternative discourses of human nature, the nation, ethnic particularity, and the primacy of language in human rationality, which supposedly constituted a sort of *Gegen-Aufklärung* (Counter-Enlightenment) more accommodating to the aspirations of German *Kultur* construction. This construction of Herder as an ‘irrationalist,’ ‘anti-Enlightenment’ thinker has persisted, aided powerfully, I think, by Sir Isaiah Berlin’s celebrations of Herder (and Vico and Hamann) in a series of wonderfully readable, influential publications. At any rate, our old popular notion—or heuristic construct—of ‘the Enlightenment’ gets rescued repeatedly by consigning uncomfortable, contrary thinkers to some ‘anti-Enlightenment camp.’ We are then left with an intellectually debilitating heuristic dichotomy of opposed ‘camps.’ Herder specialists, on the other hand, would remind us wearily that Herder’s thinking has long since come to be viewed as an integral part of the Enlightenment. The English-speaking world should by now be aware that Herder represented a focal point in a complex network of eighteenth-century debates spanning a wide range of disciplines. As Robert E. Norton put it fairly recently, Herder was “participating in a constant, constructive dialogue with the Enlightenment [he] was long thought to repudiate.”¹³ “The traditional view of Herder as an irrational iconoclast, as the irresistible opponent of a moribund Enlightenment, has now lost much of its argumentative force and integrity” (Norton, 1991, p. 1).

But why, in a paper ostensibly devoted to John Locke, have I made such a lengthy digression through Herder? The short answer is that I am convinced that, in our debates about the nature of modernity and postmodernity, we are so determined to cling to a narrow concept of the Enlightenment and an Enlightenment concept of an autonomous reason that we extend our limiting preconceptions even to Locke, that “quintessential early thinker of modernity.” If a revaluation of Herder disturbs comfortable assumptions about the Enlightenment, the popular image of Locke is put in jeopardy as well. It would be foolhardy to make an attempt to transmogrify Locke into a prophet of epistemological skepticism and cultural relativism—yet another postmodernist *avant la lettre*, as it were—but it may well be worth while to look again at those multiple, contradictory notions coexisting in fluid suspension in Locke’s thinking which have the potential to crystallize into conscious, conflicting, even ‘anti-Enlightenment’ positions. I have already quoted Aarsleff to the effect that “linguistic relativity” was a commonplace doctrine in the eighteenth century. Herder alone would seem to vindicate that view. But Herder’s views on lan-

guage emerge from a complex of theoretical debates largely initiated by Locke and inflected in various ways by (especially) Leibniz and Condillac, and Herder's first full-length treatise on language was but one contribution to an extensive, prolonged debate in the Berlin Academy about the nature and origins of language. One in no way wishes to detract from the originality of Herder's thinking by stating the obvious fact that his theory of signification was not produced *ex nihilo*; his indebtedness to Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), however, is obvious and well known (see Aarsleff 1982, pp. 23, 30–31, 195, 219–21), even if Herder's own theorization of the cultural specificity of linguistic and cognitive structures goes far beyond Condillac's insistence that each language expresses the specific character of the ethnic group that speaks it. And one hardly needs to repeat the fact that Condillac himself saw his *Essai*, to a great extent, as a sort of restatement of Locke's basic position, embellished and improved by necessary corrections and supplements. Aarsleff states bluntly (and probably too simplistically) that "the relativity principle and its subjective basis are a consequence of the epistemology that Condillac took over from Locke" (Aarsleff 1982, p. 346). So what, in Locke's thinking, could give rise to what would seem to be an 'anti-Enlightenment' assault on the notion of an autonomous Enlightenment reason? Was Locke a cultural relativist after all? As the late Paul de Man wrote, nearly twenty years ago: "[O]ne especially has to disregard the commonplaces about [Locke's] philosophy that circulate as reliable currency in the intellectual histories of the Enlightenment."¹⁴

4. SENSE EXPERIENCE

In my own recent rereadings of Locke, Condillac, and Herder, I have been struck first of all by the shared emphasis on the sheer physiological contingency of all human sense experience. Now, these meditations on the imperfections of mere fleshly perception are of course not innovations peculiar to the early modern period; traditional Christian doctrine had always warned human beings that their own earthly, temporal experience, if unaided by the eternal truths of divine revelation (mediated, of course, by the Church), was tainted by their fallen state and liable to be a snare set by the forces of evil. Once Locke, however, has spurned traditional ecclesiastical principles as guidance for the assessment of human understanding and asserts that all valid knowledge has its original sources in ideas imprinted upon the mind by sense experience and by the mind's own introspective reflections on its operations, his harping on the creaturely limitations of sense experience takes on a rather different significance. "Had we senses acute enough to discern the minute particles of bodies and the real constitution on which their sensible qualities depend," he writes in a *locus classicus* in book II, chapter xxiii, paragraph 11, of the *Essay*, "I doubt not but

they would produce quite different ideas in us” (my emphasis).¹⁵ He then goes on to speculate about the color of gold and the radically different appearances of pounded glass, hairs, and blood under a microscope. It is immediately and obviously clear that truths about the world acquired through sense experience are truths specific to the severe physiological limitations of the fleshly organs of sense. In the next paragraph of the same chapter of the *Essay* there follow familiar meditations on the providentially organized balance of the human machine and its organs of sense, a balance which enables us, on the one hand, to function in the material world and, on the other, prevents us from being overwhelmed by conceivable extremes of sensory acuteness. If we had “microscopical eyes,” for instance, we would find ourselves living “in a quite different world.” However conventional these ruminations may be, though, it remains interesting that Locke repeatedly stresses the fittingness of our empirical knowledge to “the business we have to do here.” “We are able, by our senses, to know and distinguish things, and to examine them so far as to *apply them to our uses*, and several ways to *accommodate the exigencies of this life*” (my emphasis). The knowledge we acquire is hence “suited to our present condition” and enables us to “provide for the conveniences of living.”

If we never doubted that Locke unswervingly presupposes (as he repeatedly states) that immediate sensory perception of the world is a thoroughly mechanical, more or less passive affair, it would not be difficult to arrive at conclusions similar to those espoused by numerous eighteenth-century French *philosophes*. If all knowledge comes through the senses, then what a person knows depends completely on their experiences, and differences between people in later life are the differences created by different experiences.¹⁶ Clearly, if we change the environment of human beings and change their social and economic arrangements in such a way that “the business we have to do here” and “the exigencies of this life” assume significantly different structures and exert different pressures, we will produce humans with radically different ‘ideas’ and hence radically different ‘understandings.’ The ‘engineering of human souls’ would in that case be a pretty straightforward matter. Needless to say, mechanistic models of this sort underlie the thinking of, *inter alia*, Helvétius and Jeremy Bentham and even Robert Owen (and Stalin?). (For comments on Locke and Bentham, see Ayers II 1991, p. 198.) So far, however, this line of thinking says nothing about the conceivable cultural contingency of the modes of sense perception themselves or about the conceivable ways in which linguistic structures and conceptual configurations might, concomitantly, be culturally specific as well.

Locke, however, does *not* consistently presuppose simply that the processes of sense perception and the subsequent mental linkage of articulated sounds (signs) to the ideas imprinted upon the mind take place in a space free of human pressures.¹⁷ In his early arguments against the existence of “innate practical principles” (or any innate principles whatsoever) in the mind, he concedes the following:

Nature, I confess, has put into man a desire of happiness and an aversion to misery: these indeed are innate practical principles which (as practical principles ought) do continue constantly to operate and influence all our actions without ceasing. . . . I deny not that there are natural tendencies imprinted on the minds of men, and that from the very first instances of sense and perception, there are some things that are grateful and others unwelcome to them, some things that they incline to, and others that they fly. (I, iii, 3)

Hence we can already surmise that this inborn Hobbesian calculus of attraction and aversion is going to exert pressures on the powers of mental attention and on the selection of aspects of the world for contemplation or oblivion. But Locke does not by any means assume that our desires and aversions are all inborn: there are of course “natural wants” (which express themselves in hunger, thirst, heat, cold, weariness, sleepiness, etc.), but we are also urged onward by “fantastical uneasiness (as itch after honour, power, or riches etc.) which acquired habits, by fashion, example, and education, have settled in us, and a thousand other irregular desires which custom has made natural to us” (II, xxi, 45). Apart from anything else here, it is interesting that Locke, the theorizer of “possessive individualism” (see C. B. Macpherson, pp. 194–262, and Ayers II 1991, pp. 267–68) and the philosopher who allegedly set out to prove that *bourgeois* understanding was the *natural* way of understanding the world, does not assume that competitiveness and greed are part of human nature (see note 6 below). Here Locke seems to be much closer to a traditional Christian understanding of these urges as unfortunate, ‘unnatural’ byproducts of the Fall from Grace; which, as we know, come to be ‘naturalized’ (that is, made to *seem* natural) only when capitalist economic and social arrangements come to be seen as defining the natural human state.¹⁸ Translated into politics, Locke’s denial of the naturalness of knowledges of course buttresses his concomitant assault against political principles which have only their ancient lineages to recommend them. For my purposes here, it is useful to suggest (if not prove) that Locke is aware that specific economic and social arrangements are going to inflect the processes of perception and language formation. His repeated insistence on the force of custom and habit in establishing rigid connections between ideas (more on that below) then provides us with the leverage to theorize the cultural specificity of perception and discursive constructions.

My point here, of course, is not to assert that Locke sets out primarily to theorize the cultural contingency of human reason. I want only to reiterate that what is often seen as his “naive empiricist” theorization of human understanding coexists uneasily with contradictory notions which can easily be mobilized in various theoretical directions. It is probably Condillac who first takes up and expands the notion that it is the impulses and pressures of pleasure and pain that first inflect and shape the processes of perception and language formation. To him it is clear “that to occasion ideas, desires, habitudes, and talents of every

kind, nothing more should be wanting than to render us sensible to pleasure and pain” (Condillac, Translator’s Preface, p. xvii). When we perceive the world, we notice objects which are apt to produce sensations of fear and pain (Condillac, p. 237). “Our attention is drawn by external objects, in proportion as they are more relative to our constitution, passions, and state of life” (Condillac, p. 35). “When objects attract our attention, the perceptions they produce within us are connected with the consideration of ourselves, and of everything relative to us” (Condillac, p. 36). All ideas are hence bound up with our experience of “wants” and are connected together in chains which reflect the configuration of those wants:

Hence as things attract our attention only by the relation they bear to our constitution, to our passions, to our state, or, to sum up all in one word, to our wants; it follows that the same attention embraces at once the ideas of wants, and of such things as are relative to these wants, and connects them together. (Condillac, p. 46)

Those Lockean “natural tendencies imprinted on the minds of men” hence become, in Condillac’s thinking, a sort of configuring substratum or template for all knowledge *tout court*:

Our wants are all dependent upon one another, and the perceptions of them might be considered as a series of fundamental ideas, to which we might reduce all those which make part of our knowledge. Over each of these series, other series of ideas might be raised, which should form a kind of chains, whose strength would intirely [*sic*] consist in the analogy of the signs, in order of perceptions, and in the connection that should be formed by the circumstances which sometimes reunite the most dissimilar ideas. Want is connected with the idea of the thing proper for relieving it; this is connected with the idea of the place where it is to be had; this, with the idea of the persons we have seen there; this in fine, with the ideas of such pleasures or pains as we have felt there, and with many others. (Condillac, p. 46)

These chains of ideas, held in the memory by virtue of the signs (words) attached to them, can be recalled when the relevant wants recur (Condillac, p. 53). The signs themselves had to be agreed upon originally in some experiential primal scene:

In order to comprehend in what manner mankind agreed among themselves, about the first signification of words, it is sufficient to observe, that they pronounced them under such particular circumstances, that every one was obliged to refer them to the same perceptions. (Condillac, p. 237)

Words and their signifieds then gradually gain precision and get imprinted more permanently on the individual mind with more frequent repetition of circumstances, as the mind grows more accustomed to connect the same ideas with the

same signs (Condillac, p. 237). We are right, I think, to see Condillac as a genuine precursor of, among other things, a behaviorist, Skinnerian theory of language acquisition via conditioned responses. More recently, we have become familiar with Chomsky's rebuttals of Skinner and also with Chomsky's own speculations to the effect that children are actually born with an innate "blueprint" in their heads which is genetically designed to process linguistic data.¹⁹

More important than Condillac's putative proto-behaviorism are, for my purposes here, the conclusions he draws from his insight that signs and chains of signs reflect a people's particular life circumstances, including their climate, their government, and their economic and social circumstances (Condillac, pp. 283–84). All of these interconnected factors conspire to form particular national characters or "geniuses," and "every language expresses the character of the people who speak it" (Condillac, p. 285). The differences prevailing among national characters render precise translations impossible.²⁰ As adumbrated above, it is Herder, in particular, who builds upon the thinking of Locke and Condillac and arrives at his thoroughgoing theory of the cultural specificity of language structures, conceptual configurations, and, consequently, of human cognitive development. The processes of human reasoning are shaped differently by different cultures, so it is not far fetched to look for the epistemological seeds of "linguistic relativity" in Locke's *Essay*.

5. THE ARBITRARINESS OF THE SIGN

Aarsleff, however, is more interested in seeking the seeds of linguistic relativity in Locke's insistence on the arbitrariness of the sign. To approach this issue, I think it best first to return to Locke's notions about the initial physical events of perception and the use of articulate sounds as signs. His mock-modest view of his task as an "under-labourer," "clearing ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge," would seem to imply that the human mind can be restored to some pristine state as a registering apparatus free from the distorting influences of received principles and imprecise linguistic usages. By presupposing, apparently, that all humans are born with the same passive perceptual equipment, he is positing a timeless physical basis for the human mind, even though he eschews speculation about the physiology of the brain. The underlying assumption is that the acquisition of knowledge and the processes of thought can be explained ultimately as a vastly complex system of causes and effects. We are led to conceive of a sort of mechanical model of the mind—a "materialist psychology," as Christopher Hill put it long ago.²¹ In any case, we are presented with the notion that the mind starts out as a blank registering apparatus (the notorious *tabula rasa*, the "white paper void of all characters" [II, i, 2]) which passively receives sense impressions from the outside world:

First, our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them. And thus we come by those ideas we have of yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet, and all those which we call sensible qualities; which when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean, they from external objects convey into the mind what produces there those perceptions. This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call SENSATION. (II, i, 3)

Before proceeding further with Locke's sketch of the basic mental operations, I think it is useful to make a couple of familiar preliminary observations: First, given the ostensibly mechanical nature of the processes described in the passage quoted, we must recall that Locke also assumes that human desires and aversions, which include "acquired habits" specific to particular cultural arrangements, are constantly active in acts of perception and exert pressures on the powers of human attentiveness. The registering of "sensible qualities" is not as automatic and neutral as it may sometimes seem. (See, on the other hand, II, i, 25 and II, xii, 1. In the former passage Locke compares the mind with a mirror.) Secondly, it is worth stressing (in the face of persistent popular notions that Locke believes the mind perceives the world 'as it really is') that he is fully aware that these "sensible qualities" do not exist in the objects themselves. As he puts it here, the senses convey into the mind only "*what produces* there those perceptions." "Yellow," it follows, does not exist in nature, but gold has the "power" to produce the "idea" of that quality in our minds. So our senses do not perceive 'the real,' since they do not have access to the "real essences" of the things of this world. The various "secondary qualities" (yellow, white, soft, hard, etc.) of objects, which exist only as events in the brain, remain "nominal essences" only. Given the inaccessibility of "real essences," and given the fleshly and human contingencies of perception as well, Locke's conclusion (and ours) must be that correspondences between sense experiences and 'the real' must be very tenuous indeed. We can be reasonably confident only of our apprehension of "primary qualities." Our sense impressions can never be replicas, simulacra, 'pictures of reality,' of the world outside.²² But before I pursue the issue of physical perception further, it will be useful to introduce Locke's familiar notions about the role of language in all of this:

Thus we may conceive how words . . . came to be made use of by men as the signs of their ideas: not by any natural connexion that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea. The use, then, of words is to be sensible marks of ideas, and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification. (III, ii, 1)

Locke, as we know, is not particularly curious about the ultimate origins of language, a question which was to exercise philosophers and linguists throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and, since Chomsky, shows signs of a considerable revival). He is content to assume that “common use, by a tacit consent, appropriates certain sounds to certain ideas in all languages, which so far limits the signification of that sound that, unless a man applies it to the same idea, he does not speak properly” (III, ii, 8). So Locke is convinced that language is a human (as opposed to divine) contrivance and that the link between signifier and signified is culturally contingent and hence not “natural” (or ‘motivated’); otherwise, given uniform brain structures across cultures and historical epochs, there would be only one language.²³

In order to pin down “linguistic relativism” in the *Essay*, Aarsleff makes much (perhaps too much) of Locke’s argument that language is not divine and natural but, rather, made by humans, and that it consists of *conventional* signs. Since an “idea” of a “sensible quality,” imprinted on the mind by sense experience, does not correspond to anything ‘real’ in the world, and since the “articulate sound” is only an *arbitrary* sign for the idea, given meaning by “voluntary imposition,” and made conventional by social agreement (“tacit consent”), Aarsleff, reading backwards through Humboldt, Herder, and Condillac, immediately wants to insist that Locke’s language is a social institution that reflects the world of its speakers (Aarsleff 1982, p. 27). This would mean, of course, that Locke is insisting on linguistic relativism. However true this may be for Locke’s “complex ideas” or his notorious “bundles” of ideas (more on that below), a belief in the conventionality of linguistic signs obviously does not lead ineluctably to a belief in “linguistic relativity.” If all human beings have more or less identical physical apparatuses of perception (barring physiological defects), one might argue that they all perceive the same “sensible qualities” in the world and hence have more or less the same “simple ideas” knocking about in their heads (plus or minus the odd ideas peculiar to local environments). The fact that each language community has its own arbitrary, conventional (as opposed to natural or motivated) signs for these ideas would not (in Lockean terms) hinder translatability (see Harvey 1989, p. 250, and note 20 below) and would not imply the cultural specificity of the ideas and of the particular stores of vocabulary in various languages (just as the Morse Code does not suggest a code-specific culture). On the basis of the relevant (and frequently quoted) classic passages in the *Essay* dealing with perception and the voluntary imposition of signs, we are not going to arrive at notions of linguistic relativity. It would seem, on the contrary, that the world consistently causes the same sense impressions which result in the reception by the human mind of eternally uniform simple ideas. In all of these passages it is clear that Locke believes that these ideas then exist (how? where?) in the mind *prior to* the voluntary use of language. (See, among many others, Yolton 1970, p. 197; Ayers I 1991, p. 62.) Language is reduced to a mere instrument of communication, a tool *used by*

human reason to convey ideas to other human beings. If this is so, notions about the sovereign human subject and the autonomy of reason are preserved intact for the subsequent 'Enlightenment.' There seems, so far, little indication that language itself might be seen as *constituting* the world of ideas which it is ostensibly designed merely to communicate. Language does not seem to be a constitutive factor in the process of knowledge acquisition, and there is no suggestion that languages themselves might be systems structured in culturally specific ways which might shape the processes of sense experience and generate their own 'realities' in human minds.²⁴

Within the basic Lockean arguments we must go beyond the simple notions regarding the arbitrariness and conventionality of language and look, as I have above, at those passages which stress the shaping pressures of human desires and aversions, including *acquired* cultural habits, on the processes of perception themselves. In those Lockean shaping pressures we can perhaps see the early germ of a Herderian theory which will later stress that particular material environments and culturally specific strategies of survival, that is, the culturally specific "exigencies of this life" (to use Locke's own phrase), will result in different language communities in which the speakers fix upon *different* specific *Merkmale* ("sensible qualities") of reality, to which words are affixed, these words then becoming the sole means by which human reason can construct its knowledges (see note 11 below). For Herder, who arguably anticipates Saussure and post-Saussurean theories of language, each particular language delimits and articulates its own culture-specific concepts out of the chaos of sense impressions generated by the world and weaves its own conceptual configurations. Each different language takes on a specific "character" or "spirit" (*Geist*) appropriate to the life-conditions of the speakers and actually constitutes a culture-specific conceptual landscape which can never be fully translated into another. But Locke has not yet brought us that far. The "simple ideas" in the minds of his humans remain stubbornly uniform, translatable, and firmly in place *before* the use of language.

6. COMPLEX IDEAS

Aarsleff is of course correct to stress that it is Locke's notion of culturally specific "bundles" of ideas that brings us closer to linguistic relativity. In the course of the *Essay*, Locke repeatedly stresses the relations of interdependence obtaining between, on the one hand, combinations of ideas and the linguistic signs for these combinations and, on the other, the fashions, customs, manners, and opinions of a culture. His several references to the untranslatability of one language into another suggest that his own logic is pushing him towards the (probably unacceptable) conclusion that each language constitutes the mode of life and reasoning of the people who speak it. But to what extent does Locke's

acknowledgement of the cultural contingency of idea formation actually lay the groundwork for an epistemology of skepticism, of cultural relativism? We need to look at some of the relevant passages carefully:

As any reader of Locke will know, in various paragraphs scattered throughout the *Essay* he makes the (for us) fairly obvious point that a person's stock of ideas is going to depend largely on the stock of ideas in circulation within a particular language community. In book I, he is concerned in particular to ascertain whether the "notion of God" (I, iv, 8 ff.) is universal (he concludes it is not), but his knowledge of early 'travelers' tales,' that is, of European descriptions of travels to various parts of the earth (the Americas, southern Africa, Asia, the East Indies), has clearly led him to think more generally about the sources of any knowledge whatsoever:

For, men being furnished with words by the common language of their own countries, can scarce avoid having some kind of ideas of those things whose names those they converse with have occasion frequently to mention to them. (I, iv, 9)

And in a similar vein:

Had you or I been born at the Bay of Saldanha, possibly our thoughts and notions had not exceeded those brutish ones of the Hottentots that inhabit there. And had the Virginia king Apochancana been educated in England, he had perhaps been as knowing a divine and as good a mathematician as any in it: the difference between him and a more improved Englishman lying barely in this, that exercise of his faculties was bounded within the ways, modes and notions of his own country and never directed to any other or further inquiries. (I, iv, 12)

In another instance (chosen here from many), Locke makes the interesting observation (interesting, that is, in the light of much later European anthropological investigations) that words denoting kinship relations are peculiar to the culturally specific networks of kinship in different nations:²⁵

Mankind have fitted their notions and words to the use of common life and not to the truth and extent of things. . . . It is very convenient that by distinct names these [kinship] relations should be observed and marked out in mankind, there being occasion, both in laws and other communications one with another, to mention and take notice of men under these relations; from whence also arise the obligations of several duties amongst men; . . . This, by the way, may give us some light into the different state and growth of languages; which, being suited only to the convenience of communication, are proportioned to the notions men have, and the commerce of thoughts familiar amongst them, and not to the reality or extent of things, nor to the various respects might be found among them, nor the different abstract considerations might be framed about them. (II, xxviii, 2)

Perhaps it is *too* easy for us, three hundred years later, to understand—even take for granted—these familiar cultural differences. One wonders, however,

just how startling these passages still might have been around 1700. To what extent had European travelers' tales of 'the exotic' percolated down from the circles of learned societies, travelers, and natural historians? Whatever his notions about language and epistemology, Locke clearly has sophisticated notions about the existence of different mental universes, each corresponding to particular cultural arrangements and social structures. This does not mean, of course, that he has become a *linguistic* relativist: he is still talking about the presence or absence of ideas which might well be reproduced by means of circumlocutions or new coinages in any language. There seems to be hardly a hint that ideas themselves might have different semantic shapes; that semantic fields might be configured in ways that would render translation (or circumlocution) impossible. He does not appear to be suggesting, as do Condillac and Herder, that one language might structure a mental universe of discourse in a manner incommensurable with the discursive world generated by another language. He is talking about linguistic 'building blocks,' not about structured systems of signification. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to speculate that Locke's incipient cultural relativism served as a basis, an intellectual spur, as it were, for subsequent theories of "linguistic relativity."

We must go far beyond Locke's apparently indestructible "simple ideas" of "sensible qualities," those basic building blocks of most knowledge, if we are to grasp fully his theorization of different mental universes. It is well known that Locke's model of the mind includes an *active* power which applies itself to the raw materials of sense impressions and constructs its own "complex ideas":

The mind often exercises an active power in making these several combinations; for, it being once furnished with simple ideas, it can put them together in several compositions, and so make variety of complex ideas, without examining whether they exist so together in nature. (II, xxii, 2)

Now, multitudes of these "complex ideas," those of "substances," for instance, present few problems (for Locke, that is). The complex idea of "gold," for example, is going to be a more or less universal idea consisting of a fairly circumscribed combination of simple ideas of sensible qualities: its color ("yellow"), its malleability, its weight, etc. It is when we enter the realm of the so-called mixed modes that we encounter uncertainty and radical cultural variation.²⁶

These mixed modes, being also such combinations of simple ideas as are not looked upon to be the characteristic marks of any real beings that have a steady existence, but scattered and independent ideas put together by the mind, are thereby distinguished from the complex ideas of substances. (II, xxii, 1)

As we can readily conclude from the examples he adduces (obligation, lie, hypocrisy, sacrilege, parricide, etc.), Locke, in the first instance, clearly has

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concepts in mind which are taken from the sphere of moral and social values that are generated by particular social and cultural arrangements which in turn have to do with social cohesion and strategies of survival:

For it is evident that, in the beginning of languages and societies of men, several of those complex ideas, which were consequent to the constitutions established amongst them, must needs have been in the minds of men before they existed anywhere else . . . (II, xxii, 2)

It is these culture-specific ideas that are not readily translatable, even though it must be noted that Locke continues to insist that long circumlocutions (“long periphrases”) and “long descriptions” ultimately render different languages mutually intelligible.²⁷

Equally culture-specific are the general categories we use to classify the things of the world:

The first thing [the mind] does as the foundation of the easier enlarging its knowledge, either by contemplation of the things themselves that it would know or conference with others about them, is to bind them into bundles and rank them so into sorts, that what knowledge it gets of any of them it may thereby with assurance extend to all of that sort, and so advance by larger steps in that which is its great business, knowledge. This . . . is the reason why we collect things under comprehensive ideas, with names annexed to them into *genera* and *species*, i.e. into kinds and sorts. (II, xxxii, 6)

Locke never allows us to forget that these *genera* and *species* do not exist in nature;²⁸ they are purely mental constructs, “an artifice of the understanding” (III, v, 9), and—needless to say—the systems of classification are going to be related to culture-specific needs, the “exigencies of this life,” that are generated and structured by particular environmental, economic, and social arrangements.

So Locke knows full well that, in nature, the world is not already divided into categories; it is human beings who construct the general, the complex ideas. There is a

great store of words in one language which have not any that answer them in another. Which plainly shows that those of one country, by their customs and manner of life, have found occasion to make several complex ideas and give names to them, which others never collected into specific ideas. This could not have happened if these species were the steady workmanship of nature, and not collections made and abstracted by the mind, in order to naming, and for the convenience of communication. [There follow some remarks about the inexactness of translations and the lack of equivalence between ideas in different languages.] . . . And we shall find this much more so in the names of more abstract and compounded ideas, such as are the greatest part of those which make up moral discourses, whose names, when men come curiously to compare with those they are

translated into in other languages, they will find very few of them exactly to correspond in the whole extent of their significations. (III, v, 8)

Aarsleff is surely right to emphasize that Locke is not far from linguistic relativity with his notion that “words . . . are like knots that tie bundles of ideas together” (Aarsleff 1982, p. 346). But since, in my reading, Locke is still maintaining that these “bundles” represent combinations of more or less universal “simple ideas,” keeping open the possibility of full translation by means of “long periphrases” or “long descriptions,” I would suggest that Aarsleff was overstating his case a bit when he maintained that “Locke made it a principle that it is often impossible to do a faithful translation from one language into another” (Aarsleff 1982, p. 346. See also references to Aarsleff in notes 14 and 24 below.). Nevertheless it is clear that Locke accepts that different cultures have radically different conceptual universes. The same can be said of different epochs (“remote ages”) in the same language community (III, ix, 22).

To speak of the cultural specificity of ideas and bundles of ideas is of course still not tantamount to denying, in any ultimate sense, the autonomy of human reason and the universality of its protocols and processes. To be sure, if we choose to emphasize the rather commonplace insight that the *contents* of thought must necessarily evince culturally specific differences, we have already gone some way towards diminishing the monolithic sovereignty of the putatively self-fashioning human subject. But we have still not suggested how the structures of thinking itself, the very stuff of human consciousness, might be constituted by particular linguistic structures and configurations. As long as the reciprocal translatability of languages is seen ultimately to be possible, as long as linguistically constructed mental universes are seen, in the last instance, to be commensurable one with the other, it will still be possible (however difficult) for the human mind to negotiate the differences and to move closer to a *universal* truth. In my view this is, *pace* Aarsleff, precisely Locke’s position.²⁹ It remains interesting, however, to trace even further the lines of thought in which Locke worries away at the obvious facts of cultural differences and the various contingencies of human thought processes, thereby laying the groundwork for precisely those “extreme skeptical” (McKeon) epistemological positions which are usually seen to be reactions to his “naive empiricism.” Paul de Man goes so far as to assert that “it is possible to coordinate Locke and Nietzsche by claiming that their similarly ambivalent attitudes toward rhetoric have been systematically overlooked” (“The Epistemology of Metaphor,” pp. 29–30).

7. METAPHORS AND ASSOCIATION

It is also well known, for example, that Locke sees all higher thought processes as being ultimately metaphorical in nature:

It may also lead us a little towards the original of all our notions and knowledge, if we remark how great a dependence our words have on common sensible ideas, and how those which are made use of to stand for actions and notions quite removed from sense have their rise from thence, and from obvious sensible ideas are transferred to more abstruse significations, and made to stand for ideas that come not under the cognizance of our senses: v.g. to imagine, apprehend, comprehend, adhere, conceive, instil, disgust, disturbance, tranquillity, etc., are all words taken from the operations of sensible things, and applied to certain modes of thinking. . . . I doubt not but, if we could trace them to their sources, we should find in all languages the names, which stand for things that fall not under our senses, to have had their first rise from sensible ideas. By which we may give some kind of guess what kind of notions they were and whence derived, which filled their minds who were the first beginners of languages . . . (III, i, 5) (See also II, xii, 8)

Given what I have already said about the environmental, cultural, and social contingency of sense perception itself, the conclusions to be drawn from the above are probably obvious: If the store of simple ideas in the human mind is subject to the particular “exigencies of this life” generated by particular environments and social and economic arrangements, and if structures of thought are to any extent dependent on the “acquired habits” ingrained within humans as the result of social relations which, for example, may or may not ‘naturalize’ competitiveness and greed, then our “more abstruse significations,” being metaphors making use of ideas thus subject to cultural availability, are going to be shaped by our particular cultural conditions. Here I think we are getting close to Vichian notions that human beings themselves, in their higher thought processes, *create* the mental universes which they then perceive to be ‘true.’³⁰

In his chapter entitled “Of the Association of Ideas” (II, xxxii), Locke notoriously pursues his notion of “acquired habits” to considerable extremes:

There is another connexion of ideas wholly owing to chance or custom: ideas, that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some men’s minds that it is very hard to separate them, they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the understanding but its associate appears with it; and if they are more than two which are thus united, the whole gang, always inseparable, show themselves together (II, xxxiii, 5). . . . Custom settles habits of thinking in the understanding, as well as of determining in the will, and of motions in the body: all which seem to be but trains of motion in the animal spirits, which, once set a-going, continue in the same steps they have been used to; which, by often treading, are worn into a smooth path, and the motion in it becomes easy and, as it were, natural. As far as we can comprehend thinking, thus ideas seem to be produced in our minds; or, if they are not, this may serve to explain their following one another in an habitual train, when once they are put into that track, as well as it does to explain such motions of the body. (II, xxxiii, 6)

Locke then proceeds, in a manner worthy of B. F. Skinner, to give an account of the acquisition of conditioned responses, throwing in for good measure a lighthearted account of a young man who could dance well only in the presence of a trunk (II, xxxiii, 16). In Laurence Sterne's slapstick send-up of this same line of thinking, the poor mother of Tristram Shandy involuntarily and compulsively associates clock-winding with copulation and sets off the well-known chain of disasters. In our own times, we are inevitably reminded of the work of, say, Pavlov (and Skinner), and unavoidably begin to associate human beings with salivating dogs and rats pressing keys to obtain food. Noam Chomsky's send-up of Skinner's model of language acquisition via conditioned responses is perhaps our modern-day equivalent of *Tristram Shandy* (see Skinner, 1957 and Aitchison, 1976).

Jokes aside, though, it is clear that these notions about chains of associated ideas have serious implications for theorizations of culture-specific thought patterns. If it is "custom" and "habit" that forge the associative links, then the particular "exigencies of this life" generated by particular social structures are going to generate our common-sense habits of thinking about ourselves and the world. One might even venture to say that we are getting close to a theory about how language becomes a sort of everyday ideology. It will be remembered that it is Condillac who expands Locke's principle of association and theorizes that all our ideas are bound up with our experience of "wants" and are connected together in chains which reflect the configuration of those wants. Natural and culturally induced "wants" underlie and ultimately configure all knowledge *tout court*. For Condillac, as opposed to Locke, however, it is not ideas but *signs* (words) that are primary in the process of understanding: "The ideas are connected with the signs, and it is only by this means, as I shall prove, they are connected with each other" (Condillac, p. 7). "We evidently see in what manner good sense, wit, reason and their contraries equally result from the same principle, which is the connection of ideas one with the other; and that tracing things still higher, we see that this connexion is produced by the use of signs" (Condillac, p. 102).

8. SIGNS AND THOUGHT

Here we have the crux of the matter. As long as Locke clings to the notion that his "simple ideas" are stubbornly uniform and are somehow present in the mind prior to the use of language, and as long as he asserts that thought can consist solely in the mental manipulation of ideas (both simple and complex), those chimerical events in the brain, *without* the intervention of language, he blocks the way to a theory that would see language itself as the stuff of thought—or of any of the higher operations of human consciousness (see note 29 below). Using Locke's model of the mind, we can still conclude that the

sovereign human subject merely *uses* language as a tool for its autonomous reason and is not itself constituted by language. As Aarsleff puts it, “[Locke] had gone a long way toward saying that all knowledge is about signs, but he never took the final step of asserting the global role of language” (Aarsleff 1982, p. 28). In Locke’s theory, the user of language exists prior to language, so in principle language is dispensable in the processes of thinking (even though in practice that may never be the case) (Schmidt, *Sprache und Denken*, p. 32). In the *Essay*, Locke himself equivocates again and again: On the one hand he can state clearly that “every articulate word is a different modification of sound; by which we see that from the sense of hearing by such modifications the mind may be furnished with distinct ideas to almost an infinite number” (II, xviii, 3). (Here it seems clear that it is linguistic signs alone that are implanting ideas in the mind.) On another occasion he seems to be implying that it is the signs that actually delimit concepts: “We may observe how much names, as supposed steady signs of things, and by their difference to stand for and keep things distinct that in themselves are different, are the occasion of denominating ideas distinct or confused, by a secret and unobserved reference the mind makes of its ideas to such names” (II, xxix, 10). Nevertheless he still clings to the notion that we can think in “ideas,” without any intervention by language: “The signs we chiefly use are either ideas or words, wherewith we make *either mental or verbal* propositions” (II, xxxii, 19; my emphasis).³¹ But the distinction becomes well-nigh untenable:

To form a clear notion of truth, it is very necessary to consider truth of thought and truth of words, distinctly one from another; but yet it is very difficult to treat of them asunder. Because it is unavoidable, in treating of mental propositions, to make use of words, and then the instances given of mental propositions cease immediately to be barely mental and become verbal. For a mental proposition being nothing but a bare consideration of the ideas as they are in our minds stripped of names, they lose the nature of purely mental propositions as soon as they are put into words (IV, v, 3). . . . And what makes it yet harder to treat of mental and verbal propositions separately is that most men, if not all, in their thinking and reasonings within themselves, make use of words instead of ideas, at least when the subject of their meditation contains in it complex ideas. (IV, v, 4)

As Aarsleff suggests, it is Condillac who picks up Locke’s dilemma and ‘solves’ it to his own satisfaction by asserting the “global role” of language in thought and reason. Condillac rejects entirely Locke’s notion that “ideas” (as opposed to mere impressions or images) can exist in the mind before they have been lodged there in the form of signs (words):

In order to have ideas on which we may be capable of reflecting, we have need of imagining signs that may serve as chains to the different combinations of simple

ideas; and . . . our notions are exact, no farther than as we have invented signs to fix them. (Condillac, p. 20)

We recall that in Locke's model "reflection" is possible prior to the institution of signs. Locke's great error, in Condillac's view (indeed, it is this "error" which prompts Condillac to write his own *Essai*), is that he never discovered "the necessity of signs in acquiring a habit of the operations of the mind. He supposes that the mind makes mental propositions, in which it joins or separates ideas without the intervention of words" (Condillac, p. 136). And since signs can have meaning only in the context of social intercourse among human beings, "ideas" (in Condillac's sense of communicable mental events) can be acquired only in society, in acts of language:

Since men are incapable of making any signs, but by living in society, it follows of course, that the stock of their ideas, when their minds begin to be formed, intirely [*sic*] consists in their mutual communication. . . . Let no one object, that before this communication the mind has ideas already, because it has perceptions: for perceptions which never were the object of reflexion, are not properly ideas. They are only impressions made on the mind, which must be considered images before they can be ideas. (Condillac, p. 134)

Reason, then, consists in weighing, judging, and connecting ideas and placing them in various relations to one another, and this activity is made possible only through the use of "particles" (conjunctions, prepositions, etc.), the sense of which can only be acquired through the already-existing language community. Condillac uses the example of a young man in Chartres, deaf from birth, who suddenly begins to hear:

To reason is to frame judgments, and to connect them by observing their dependency on one another. Now this young man could do no such thing, so long as he had not the use of conjunctions, or of particles expressing the relations of the different parts of speech. (Condillac, p. 127)

Thought, for Condillac, is a thoroughly *social* activity, not the solitary act of a lonely human subject. And it is "natural for every nation to combine their ideas according to their own peculiar genius" (Condillac, p. 298). It is not difficult, then, to move from Condillac's model of language to Herder's more radical cultural and linguistic relativism.

9. CONCLUSION

My conclusion is hardly a startling one. Locke is, unsurprisingly, not a prophet of extreme epistemological skepticism and radical cultural relativism.

Locke would surely have no truck with, for example, the notion that the continuum of the color spectrum is articulated *culturally* by language-specific differential categories; that, for example, the concept 'red' is not imprinted upon the mind by the activity of particles in nature but, rather, comes into cultural existence only by virtue of the system of differences imposed by the English language upon our chaotic perceptions of the world. Neither, presumably, would he entertain the notion that, say, 'sheep' is only a culture-specific category. Locke is far from any latter-day "exorbitation of language"³² that would permit him to state that

. . . concepts are purely differential and . . . determined not by their positive content but by their relations with the other terms of the system. "Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position" (Saussure). . . . The world, which without signification would be experienced as a continuum, is divided up by language into entities which then readily come to be experienced as essentially distinct.³³

In defense of Locke (if defense is needed), and without necessarily tumbling into essentialist universalism, we might well ask ourselves to what extent our common humanity, including our species-specific bodily needs and faculties, pitted against the harshness of the natural world, may have resulted in cross-cultural conceptual landscapes and mental universes which are not, in the final instance, incommensurable one with another.³⁴ But that would be another paper. At any rate, it remains clear that Locke, the putatively "naive" empiricist and bulwark of a "bourgeois" model of human understanding, the embodiment of the heroically sovereign subject of early modernity, is much more critically aware of cultural differences than would seem to be the case in popular images of him. It is clear that, on the basis of his *Essay*, some subsequent Enlightenment thinkers moved much closer to radical versions of cultural relativism. The legacy of Locke was riven with contradictions, and it contributed to contradictory systems of thought in eighteenth-century Europe, which never unanimously upheld an "Enlightenment concept of an autonomous reason."

NOTES

1. Peter Osborne, "Modernity Is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category," *New Left Review* 192 (March/April 1992): 66. Subsequent references are indicated in the text as "Osborne 1992."

2. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. G.W. Kitchin, Everyman's University Library (London: Dent, 1973), p. 35. As my rhetoric suggests, we need to go back to Francis Bacon as well, but that would go beyond the scope of this paper.

3. For Hans Aarsleff, Locke is, simply, "the most influential philosopher of modern times." He is "the intellectual ruler of the eighteenth century." See Hans Aarsleff, "Locke's Influence," in Vere Chappell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 252 (hereafter "Aarsleff 1994"). As readers of Aarsleff will know, he has engaged exten-

sively with some of the issues I raise in this paper. I have found it necessary to mention Aarsleff's pathbreaking work repeatedly, even though I dissent from some of his conclusions and emphasize other aspects of Locke's thinking.

The familiar quotation, "rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge," is taken from Locke's "The Epistle to the Reader" in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. John W. Yolton, Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1961), vol. 1, p. xxxv. In my subsequent references to the text of Locke's *Essay*, I shall follow the conventions of this edition and shall indicate only book, chapter, and paragraph (e.g., I, i, 1).

I trust that Locke specialists will forgive me for this misleading caricature. Any careful reading of Locke's epistemological arguments reveals that he is extremely cautious in his attempts to set out the potential scope and *limitations* of human understanding. Despite many bold statements, he is also constantly aware of his own potential fallibility. (See, for example, IV, xxi, 4.) My caricature is an impressionistic attempt to represent what seems to be a widespread present-day image of Locke projected by much postmodernist and postcolonial writing.

Locke is, of course, aware that words constantly interpose themselves in our processes of thought. Indeed, the notion that language shapes thought can be traced back to the Ancients. Michael Ayers maintains, however, that "for all but a few, in Locke's time as before, the structure of thought is the source of the structure of language." See Michael Ayers, *Locke* (vol. I): *Epistemology* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 301 (hereafter "Ayers I 1991").

4. See especially Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957). This worthy old biography is in need of updating, but it is still probably the best place to start (hereafter "Cranston").

Locke's family were "very minor Somerset gentry" with puritan sympathies. See J. R. Milton, "Locke's Life and Times," in Chappell 1994, p. 5 (hereafter "Milton"). See also Cranston, pp. 1–17; and Peter Laslett's introduction to John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, Student Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 17–18 (hereafter "Laslett").

The schoolboy Locke did not witness what happened just up the road in Whitehall. The royalist headmaster kept the boys in school to pray for the king (Cranston, p. 20).

Locke's career, however, was not one of linear development toward revolutionary liberalism (if, indeed, one may use that label). Locke specialists seem to agree that he had become an authoritarian monarchist by the time of the Restoration in 1660. It was under the influence of Lord Ashley (later the first earl of Shaftesbury) that his more familiar political views took shape. See Cranston, pp. 57, 67; Laslett, pp. 19–20; Milton, p. 7.

On Locke's political connections, see Cranston, pp. 205–13, 227, 248–49; Laslett, p. 32; Milton, p. 14. See also various writings by Richard Ashcraft, especially his *Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). For Ashcraft's most recent contribution, see Richard Ashcraft, "Locke's Political Philosophy," in Chappell 1994, esp. pp. 234–35 and 250–51. I have borrowed the term "romance idealism" from Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600–1740* (London: Radius, 1988). For an initial brief summary of McKeon's story of epistemological and ideological conflict in the early modern period, see especially p. 21 (hereafter "McKeon").

On Locke's opposition to notions of divine right, see especially book 1 of the *Two Treatises of Government*, paragraphs 126–27. To be fair, of course, it should be mentioned that Stuart blood flowed in the veins of both William and Mary. The latter was, indeed, the daughter of James II.

5. I don't mean to imply that Locke's epistemology was itself "naive." The naivety is to be found in subsequent popular applications of Lockean empiricism.

As any reader of the *Essay* knows, his arguments are often chatty, meandering, and repetitious. Michael Ayers suggests that this "pose of the amateur, innocent of the sophisticated pedantry of academic philosophers, may well have been a conscious affectation that pervades Locke's manner of exposition." See M. R. Ayers, "The Ideas of Power and Substance in Locke's Philosophy," in I. C. Tipton, ed., *Locke on Human Understanding: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 85, note 13.

Alan O'Shea, "English Subjects of Modernity," in *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, ed. Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 9.

Locke himself surely didn't view his work as antireligious. There is little reason to doubt his intense Christian piety. I am talking about the longer-term effects of his epistemology.

"For whatsoever truth we come to the clear discovery of, from the knowledge and contemplation of our own ideas, will always be certainer to us than those which are conveyed to us by traditional revelation. For the knowledge we have that this revelation came at first from God can never be so sure as the knowledge we have from the clear and distinct perception of the agreement or disagreement of our own ideas" (*Essay*, IV, xviii, 4). As McKeon points out, Locke contrives to make the authority of divine revelation "both incontestable and negligible" (McKeon 1988, p. 80). See also Ayers I 1991, especially pp. 121 ff.

6. Karl Marx has been quoted as saying that Locke tried to demonstrate that *bourgeois* understanding was *normal* understanding. See K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz, 1986), p. 905. Laslett will have none of this: "It is gratuitous to turn Locke's doctrine of property into the classic doctrine of the 'spirit of capitalism,' whatever that may be" (Laslett, p. 106). John W. Yolton is also convinced that Locke is not primarily an apologist for capitalist property relations and modes of exchange; he is just attempting to clarify the processes which brought them about. See John W. Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding: A Selective Commentary on the "Essay"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), chap. 8, "Property: An Example of a Mixed-Mode Analysis," pp. 181–96 (hereafter "Yolton 1970").

For an extended, controversial commentary, see C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), especially chap. 8, "Locke: The Political Theory of Appropriation," pp. 194–262. See also Michael Ayers, *Locke* (vol. II): *Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 267–68 (hereafter "Ayers II 1991").

In the seventeenth century, according to Marx, the English word "worth" means something like "use value," whereas the word "value" means "exchange value." See *Das Kapital*, vol. 1, p. 50.

Yolton "cannot see that Locke is praising the invention of money. [Locke] is describing what happens when money comes into use" (Yolton 1970, p. 193).

As a civil servant, Locke was himself involved in the administration of the colonies of Carolina and Virginia. He also invested extensively in the slave trade. See Cranston, p. 115.

Against this view: "For all the intellectual and political influence which [Locke] wielded in the eighteenth century he was . . . a barren field for anyone who wished to justify what once was called the Whig oligarchy" (Laslett, pp. 106–7).

On the south wall of All Saints Church in High Laver, above the tomb where Locke lies buried, hangs a plaque "Erected by the American and British Commonwealth Association of the United States 1957." The inscription reads: "In Grateful Memory of John Locke 1632–1704 Who Lies Buried Here. His Philosophy Guided The Founders of The United States of America." This confident inscription would probably not have been possible in the 1960s, when—as Aarsleff points out—the thesis of Locke's guiding influence on the Founding Fathers "had lost its appeal" (Aarsleff 1994, p. 281). Laslett speaks of "the myth of Locke's commanding influence on the American revolution" (Laslett, p. 14 note). If I understand Aarsleff correctly, however, the old thesis is regaining its currency (Aarsleff 1994, pp. 281–82).

7. I owe this formulation in part to Michael Morton, "Changing the Subject: Herder and the Reorientation of Philosophy," in *Herder Today*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), p. 159.

8. Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990) p. 19.

9. Some recent examples: Robert E. Norton writes that "it is . . . perhaps inherently suspect, to speak of 'Enlightenment philosophy' as if it were a unified and self-contained entity" (R. E. Norton, *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991], p. 11). Robert J. C. Young states that "the differences between Diderot and Rousseau emphasize the fact that the Enlightenment itself was by no means a unitary phenomenon" (Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* [London: Routledge], 1995, p. 36). The wonder is that anyone ever felt it necessary to state anything so obvious.

"Historical periodization," in this case, is not the main problem; it is the "category" that presents difficulties (see Osborne 1992).

In another context, Hans Aarsleff has recently given vent to similar frustrations: "The anglophone world is wedded to the absurd *idée fixe* of 'the "hard" mechanistic and mathematical culture of the Enlightenment' as opposed to 'the "soft," fluid, speculative culture of the Romantic life sciences,' to quote a recent review in the *New York Review of Books* (June 27, 1991, p. 51). Since the very word 'Enlightenment' gets such reactions, I have entirely avoided it" (Aarsleff 1994, p. 283, note 4).

See Aarsleff's critique of Foucault's epistemes in Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (London: Athlone, 1982), pp. 22–23 (hereafter "Aarsleff 1982").

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), p. xxiii.

10. Hayden White, "The Irrational and Historical Knowledge," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 146.

David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 250:

The chemical metaphor is one of Michael McKeon's favorites in his *Origins of the English Novel*.

11. In what follows, all page numbers in parentheses, unless otherwise indicated, refer to Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, ed. Martin Bollacher (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989). All paraphrases and translations are my own.

"Aspects" is my own translation for *Merkmal(e)*. It has been variously translated as "feature," "characteristic trait," "character," or "mark." One is almost tempted to translate *Merkmal* as a "sensible quality"—which, in Locke's argument, is conveyed into the mind and becomes an "internal conception" or "idea." Locke uses a variety of terms which suggest Herder's *Merkmal*: "marks of distinction," "distinguishing mark," "characteristical mark," "distinguishing idea," "leading or characteristical ideas," and "leading sensible qualities."

12. For starters, see Brian J. Whitton's seminal article: "Herder's Critique of the Enlightenment: Cultural Community Versus Cosmopolitan Rationalism," *History and Theory* 27, no. 2 (1988): 146–68. There are a number of useful contributions in the collection of papers edited by Wulf Koepke, *Johann Gottfried Herder: Language, History, and the Enlightenment* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1990), especially Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, "From Sign to Signification: The Herder-Humboldt Controversy," pp. 9–24. See also several papers in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed., *Herder Today* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), and in Martin Bollacher, ed., *Johann Gottfried Herder: Geschichte und Kultur* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994). Single specialist works in German are too numerous to mention.

See especially Anthony Pagden, "The Effacement of Difference: Colonialism and the Origins of Nationalism in Diderot and Herder," in Gyan Prakash, ed., *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 129–52. Also see Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), especially pp. 36–43.

Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (Stony Brook, NY: Nicolas Hays, 1978), p. 70, note 66. My attention was directed to this reference by Karl Menges, "Erkenntnis und Sprache: Herder und die Krise der Philosophie im späten achtzehnten Jahrhundert," in Koepke, ed., *Johann Gottfried Herder: Language, History and Enlightenment*, p. 69, note 53.

The public quarrel begins with Kant's astringent reviews of the first parts of Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–91) and culminates (more or less) in Herder's *Metacritique* (1799) of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The literature on the Kant-Herder controversy is immense. For extensive treatments, see the article by Karl Menges mentioned above; also see Alfons Reckermann, *Sprache und Metaphysik: Zur Kritik der sprachlichen Vernunft bei Herder und Humboldt* (Munich: Fink 1979); Ulrich Gaier, *Herders Sprachphilosophie und Erkenntniskritik* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1988), especially pp. 172 ff. For a less demanding, English-language comparison of Herder and Kant, see Josef Simon, "Herder and the Problematicization of Metaphysics," in Mueller-Vollmer, *Herder Today*, pp. 108–25. See also the articles by H. D. Irmscher and Ulrich Gaier in Bollacher, *Johann Gottfried Herder: Geschichte und Kultur*.

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Whitton, "Herder's Critique of the Enlightenment," p. 157. I cite Whitton's excellent essay (despite his apparent lack of familiarity with the Herder oeuvre and with the Herder industry), since it is one of the few widely accessible, lucid, English-language expositions of some of Herder's central notions about language which also engages with our contemporary postmodernist thinking. As Whitton's title suggests, however, he is still trapped in the old mind-set that places Herder outside of and in opposition to something called 'the Enlightenment.'

Whitton gives the mistaken impression that Herder advocated only cultural particularism and had thought little about the positive effects of ethnic intermingling, leading to the development of an *Allgemeingeist*, a higher, more cosmopolitan form of culture. Whitton also seems to imply, mistakenly, that Herder's pluralism excludes any judgmental evaluations of various cultures.

13. Massive researches during the last two decades on the subject of Herder's reception over the last two centuries have traced, conclusively in my opinion, how the legend of an irrational, nationalist, racist Herder was constructed. See, for example, Wilhelm Raimund Beyer, "Die Herder-Verzerrung im Nationalsozialismus," in *Herder-Kolloquium 1978*, ed. Walter Dietze (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger, 1980), pp. 198–205; Bernhard Becker, *Herder-Rezeption in Deutschland. Eine ideologiekritische Untersuchung* (Sankt Ingbert: Röhrig, 1987); Bernhard Becker, "Phasen der Herder-Rezeption von 1871–1945," in *Johann Gottfried Herder 1744–1803*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987), pp. 423–36; Wulf Koepke, "Herders Idee der Geschichte in der Sicht des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts," in Bollacher, *Geschichte und Kultur*, pp. 375–92; Jost Schneider, "Herder im 'Dritten Reich,'" in Bollacher, pp. 393–401; *Herder im "Dritten Reich,"* ed. Jost Schneider (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 1994).

See, for example, Sir Isaiah Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," in *Aspects of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Earl R. Wasserman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976); *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990); *The Magus of the North: J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1993); "The Magus of the North," in *The New York Review of Books*, 60, no. 17 (October 21, 1993): pp. 64–71. On the distorting effects upon Herder studies of the notion of a 'Counter-Enlightenment,' see Wolfgang Pross, "Herder und Vico: Wissenssoziologische Voraussetzungen des historischen Denkens," in Sauder, *Johann Gottfried Herder 1744–1803*, pp. 88–113. Pross makes Isaiah Berlin largely responsible for the persistence of the notion of a *Gegen-Aufklärung*. According to Pross, Berlin's work is simply "out of date" (p. 90).

If we could but dispel the "anglophone *idée fixe*" (Aarsleff), perhaps we could eliminate the 'camps.'

For the best survey of Herder's thinking, see H. B. Nisbet, *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1970).

Robert E. Norton, *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. x.

14. Herder actually spent most of his adult life theorizing about language—in a variety of contexts. His massive *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (*Essay on the Origin of Language*), his "prize essay" submitted to a competition organized by the Berlin Academy, appeared in 1772. In the next decades, he continued to refine his theory and produced a more concise, arguably more coherent, version in the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–1791). I have based my remarks primarily on the *Ideen*.

The most useful English-language account of the debate is probably to be found in James H. Stam, *Inquiries into the Origin of Language: The Fate of a Question* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). See also Hans Aarsleff, "The Tradition of Condillac: The Problem of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy before Herder," in Aarsleff 1982, pp. 146–209; Hans Aarsleff, "An Outline of Language-Origins Theory since the Renaissance," in Aarsleff 1982, p. 278–92.

Aarsleff has evidently modified his views in recent years: "The work that initiated the new philosophy of language—and with it a new epistemology—by turning Locke's argument upside down was Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*" (Aarsleff 1994, p. 275).

Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): p. 16. My argument here intersects at several points with de Man's discussion of literary modernity.

15. Needless to say, this concern with the imperfections of the senses seems to have been shared by most philosophers at least since the ancient Greeks. Locke specialists will of course know that this passage is often cited as evidence for Locke's acceptance of Boyle's "corpuscularian hypothesis."

16. See p. xiii of Robert G. Weyant's Introduction to the Facsimile Reproduction of the Translation of Thomas Nugent of *An Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge (1756), Being a Supplement to Mr Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding*, by Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1971). In my discussion of Condillac, I shall be referring only to this edition.

17. This has also been noted by Mackie: "The empiricist may, and Locke does, recognize that even the reception of ideas in perception is not wholly passive, but includes a considerable element of (unconscious) interpretation." J. L. Mackie, *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), p. 210.

18. See Michael McKeon's chapter entitled "Parables of the Younger Son (I): Defoe and the Naturalization of Desire," in his *Origins of the English Novel*, pp. 315–37.

19. See B. F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957); Jean Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), especially pp. 18 ff.

Noam Chomsky, "Review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*," in *Language* 35 (1959): 26–58. On the Skinner-Chomsky controversy, see Aitchison, *Articulate Mammal*, pp. 18–32. On Chomsky's notions about an inborn-innate capacity for grammar, see also Mackie, pp. 222–23; Hans Aarsleff, "The History of Linguistics and Professor Chomsky," in Aarsleff 1982, pp. 101–19; Ayers I 1991, pp. 291 ff.

20. "Condillac provided the philosophical foundation of the concept of the *Volksgeist* with its emphasis on the culture-bound quality of national languages. It involves the principle of linguistic relativity . . ." (Aarsleff 1982, p. 31). Condillac's theory, alone, refutes David Harvey's sweeping comment about the eighteenth century (*The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 250).

21. I am assuming that the reader is broadly familiar with Locke's basic model of the mind, and I will try to avoid going over too much familiar ground. Nevertheless, I think it will be useful, particularly for relative newcomers to Locke, to reproduce some of the classic passages from the text of the *Essay*. I shall ride rough shod over the long tradition of arguments pertaining to Locke's notion of "ideas" and shall ignore the question of whether Locke believed that we perceive only ideas or that we can have knowledge of outward things. As Ayers points out, the term "idea" "has acquired a kind of mythic notoriety in philosophy" (Ayers I 1991, pp. 15 ff.). "A full account of Locke's notion of an idea would be, in effect, an account of most of his general philosophy" (Ayers I 1991, p. 67). For general orientation, I can only recommend that one read Ayers' work, one of the conclusions of which is that "Locke accepted that reality itself gives us the most fundamental objects of our thought" (Ayers II 1991, p. 11). On the processes of perception, see also Roland Hall, "Locke and Sensory Experience—Another Look at Simple Ideas of Sensation," *Locke Newsletter* 18 (1987): 11–31. Hall's article is brief, useful, knowledgeable, and readable, but he is not interested in the cultural contingency of perception.

"For, I think it will not be doubted that men always performed the actions of thinking, reasoning, believing and knowing, just after the same manner that they do now." (Quoted from one of Locke's letters to the Bishop of Worcester, cited by A.D. Woozley in the Introduction to the Collins Fount Paperbacks edition of the *Essay*, abridged and edited with an introduction by A.D. Woozley (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., 1964).

"I shall not at present meddle with the physical consideration of the mind; or trouble myself to examine wherein its essence consists" (I, i, 2).

Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603–1714* [1961] (London: ABACUS, 1978), p. 253.

22. On the power of objects in nature to produce perceptions: "by the operation of insensible particles on our senses" (II, viii, 13); "modifications of matter in the bodies that cause such perceptions in us" (II, viii, 7). See also IV, iii, 28. These passages are further evidence of Locke's use of

Boyle's corpuscularian hypothesis. The relation between qualities in objects and ideas in the mind is the subject of countless philosophical arguments regarding Locke. For sane general orientation, I recommend Ayers 1991. On "real essences" and "nominal essences," see especially III, vi, 6. Locke's inventory of primary qualities usually includes "solidity, extension, figure, number, and motion or rest" (II, viii, 22 ff.). Against the notion that perceptions might be "resemblances" or "likenesses": see especially II, viii, 7.

23. "Locke subscribed to the view that language arises by accident and the common use of people. . . . He did not have any clear or detailed theory about the origin of language . . ." (Yolton 1970, p. 219). See also note 14 above.

"Locke's theory of language is remarkably free of what is now referred to as 'cratyllic' delusions. The arbitrariness of the sign as signifier is clearly established by him . . ." (Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," p. 16).

24. See Aarsleff 1982, p. 27. Aarsleff tends to use "relativism" and "relativity" more or less interchangeably. Ian Hacking is of the opinion that Aarsleff uses "linguistic relativity" to mean something different from untranslatability between languages. Hacking takes Aarsleff to be referring only to the "impenetrable subjectivity of ideas" and to the fact that "each individual has a radically private language." Given Aarsleff's attempts to illustrate connections between Locke and Condillac, I am unable to agree with Hacking. See Ian Hacking, "Locke, Leibniz, Language and Hans Aarsleff," *Synthese* 75, no. 2 (1988): 135–53.

"The relativity principle and its subjective basis are a consequence of the epistemology that Condillac took over from Locke. This epistemology and its revolutionary linguistic effect were first developed in the seventeenth century when the new science rejected the Adamic language doctrine—the doctrine of the divine origin—with its postulate that words somehow refer directly to things, like a nomenclature that constitutes an inventory, in favor of the view that we can know only the external manifestations of phenomena. Thus, language being manmade, even words for physical objects are not certain. Words refer not to objects but to ideas we have in our minds. Here is the cause of linguistic subjectivity . . ." (Aarsleff 1982, p. 346). For Aarsleff's more recent formulations, see Aarsleff 1994, p. 275.

"On the level of simple ideas, there seem to be no semantic or epistemological problems . . ." (Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," pp. 16–17).

See Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Sprache und Denken als sprachphilosophisches Problem von Locke bis Wittgenstein* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1968), p. 31. See also Ayers I 1991, especially pp. 76–77 and 206; and Ayers II 1991, especially pp. 9, 164–65, 292.

25. The cultural specificity of our ideas and words is a familiar theme in the writing of many present-day Locke specialists. I have space for only a few representative samples: Yolton: "Neither idea-signs nor word-signs can escape the linguistic and conceptual structures of the social and cognitive world in which we are born and develop. . . . Locke did not detail or emphasise as he should the dependence each of us has upon our society for the action- and object-concepts which come to define and characterize our lived world. But I think it is clear that he was fully aware of this important fact" (Yolton 1970, pp. 220–22). Ashworth speaks of "the socially determined nature of ideas and hence of languages. . . . The differences in ideas relate directly to the differences in practices and interests" (E. J. Ashworth, "Locke on Language," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 [1984]: 51). Ayers (paraphrasing Hilary Putnam contra Locke): "The meaning of what we say is independent of our inner states to the extent that a language embodies the knowledge and life of the whole community which speaks it" (Ayers I 1991, p. 270); and in volume II: "The customs, conventions and purposes of a society, as Locke noted, determine how its language slices up the realm of human life and behaviour" (Ayers II 1991, p. 92); "People tend only to acquire ideas of mixed modes corresponding to words already existing in the language of their society, and seldom feel the need for more" (Ayers II 1991, p. 99). See also Paul Guyer, "Locke's Philosophy of Language," in Chappell 1994, pp. 115–45 (especially pp. 126–38) and Aarsleff 1994, p. 272.

Locke had an extensive collection of travel literature and evinced a lively "curiosity about cultural variety or what we today with a technical term would call comparative anthropology" (Aarsleff 1994, pp. 258–59).

It was widely assumed in the eighteenth century that what separated the cultivated European from Hottentots was a lack of education. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Critical Remarks," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 320.

For an additional commentary on kinship terms, see E. J. Ashworth, "Locke on Language," p. 51.

26. "[Mixed modes] can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways . . ." (Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," p. 21).

27. "There are in every language many particular words which cannot be rendered by any single word of another" (II, xxii, 6).

28. For a particularly lucid summary of this issue, see Ayers II 1991, especially pp. 81 ff. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., makes the crucial observation that "the achieved stature of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* itself contributed to the rejection of 'the whole business of *genus* and *species*' by some of the greatest naturalists in the latter third of the eighteenth century" (Gates, "Critical Remarks," p. 321). According to Gates, this Lockean "nominalism" becomes part of the heritage of the Enlightenment, which bequeathed to us our own "conceptual grammar of antiracism" (p. 323). For my purposes here, it is illuminating to point out that Herder appropriates Lockean language theory to buttress his own refusal to categorize human beings into *Rassen* (races).

29. Ayers produces some powerful, convincing arguments against the "currently popular [constructivist] view" and in defense of Locke: "Whatever the power of language to mould thought and experience, and however much the structure of discourse determines the ways in which we slice up the mind and its operations, there is something prior to language which makes language possible. Unless there were animal experience and intelligence and emotional life prior to language, there would be nothing to incorporate and comprehend language, or to be transformed by it" (Ayers I 1991, p. 206). Logic, reasoning, and language can't "simply be reduced one to the other" (Ayers I 1991, pp. 289 ff.). "For all but a few, in Locke's time as before, the structure of thought is the source of the structure of language" (Ayers I 1991, p. 301).

To be fair, it must be pointed out that Aarsleff draws back a bit when he writes that Locke "had gone a long way toward saying that all knowledge is about signs, but he never took the final step of asserting the global role of language" (Aarsleff 1982, p. 28). See also notes 14 and 24 above.

30. I am referring to Giambattista Vico's principle of *verum/factum*: human beings recognize as true that which they have made themselves; the "made" and the "true" are the same thing. See *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, revised translation of the third edition (1744) by T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).

31. See Jürgen Trabant, "Herder's Discovery of the Ear," in Mueller-Vollmer, *Herder Today*, pp. 345–65. According to Trabant, Herder was "the author who had introduced the ear [as opposed to visual experience] into eighteenth-century discussion concerning language philosophy . . ." (p. 355). Trabant should have gone back to Locke.

Locke specialists have made much of these "mental propositions." Most illuminating for me is E. J. Ashworth's careful exposition of the ways in which Locke's thinking here is embedded in a venerable scholastic tradition. See Ashworth, "Locke on Language," pp. 58 ff.

32. "But it is evident that that boundary [around the class of red things] is essentially conventional, set by the ordinary meaning of the word 'red'. The same nominalist argument can be extended to many other concepts, although not, as we shall see, to all" (Ayers I 1991, p. 207). Given the infinite quantity of similarities and regularities in nature, as Ashworth points out (p. 69), we can only pick out *some* of the regularities; definitions are apt to be variable.

"Exorbitation of language" is from Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975–1985* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 91.

33. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 40. Belsey is quoting from Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana, 1974), p. 118.

34. In volume II of his *Locke* (1991), Ayers directs a wonderfully rambunctious, exhilarating attack against fashionable latter-day versions of antirealism. In the opening parts, he uses Quine and

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Davidson to demolish notions of “outlandish” sets of objects of discourse and incommensurable conceptual schemes (see pp. 7 ff.). “The suggestion that a structured language is prerequisite to our individuating such [natural] objects is a paradox shaken (as Locke might have put it) by every infant with a rattle or dog with a rat” (Ayers II 1991, p. 9). Ayers’ conclusion might well serve as the motto for my own paper: “Modern conceptualism itself has some of its longest and strongest roots in Locke’s thought. . . . The *Essay* was perhaps the last great work of realism before the plunge into idealism. Yet it is a valuable object of study, not only as a source of alien and forgotten insights, but also for the light it casts on the origin of some of the pervasive dogmas of twentieth-century anti-realism” (Ayers II 1991, p. 292).