

The British Empiricists – Fall 2016

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Class time: Tue, 1:00 pm to 3:20 pm
Office Hours: Tue, 3:30 – 5:00
and by appointment

Our topic this semester is **Locke's metaphysics**. We will spend most of our time doing close reading of the text of *An Essay on Human Understanding*. Matthew Stuart's excellent book, *Locke's Metaphysics*, will serve as our main guide through the realm of the *Essay*. Many Locke scholars believe that there is no metaphysics to talk about, when it comes to Locke's main goals in the *Essay*. These scholars believe that Locke was mostly interested in finding out the limits of human knowledge: how certain it is and how certain it can become. I side with Stuart, however, in believing that even when Locke is bashing Aristotelian essentialism and the metaphysicians working in this tradition, he is actually doing metaphysics. It may be true that his metaphysical concerns are constrained by his epistemological ones, but that does not make him less of a metaphysician.

We will have two main goals: first, to get a clear-ish picture of the main elements of Locke's philosophy of nature (including substance, identity, primary and secondary qualities, real and nominal essences), and, second, to evaluate his anti-essentialist arguments.

Books

John Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford U. P.)

Matthew Sturat, *Locke's Metaphysics* (Oxford Clarendon), 2013.

Requirements

1. Regular attendance and participation in class sessions.
2. Written work: (a) a one-to-two page discussion note on the weekly reading assignments (due every week on Monday, 12 noon) and (b) a 12-18 page paper on a topic of your choice; outline and bibliography for paper must be approved by me no later than November 15.
3. Presentations: each student will make several presentations throughout the semester, usually based on their weekly responses. We will follow a workshop format for these presentations: the student may be interrupted by his/her classmates or myself along the way, to make sure that we are all on the same page regarding the statements made.
4. Auditing requirements: 6 weekly responses and 1 to 2 presentations.

Methodology

There are different ways to study the history of philosophy (just as there are for engaging with any kind of contemporary philosophical work). One can study the views espoused by a historical figure for their own sake: i.e. one can very carefully try to understand what the text says, given the context of the period the text belongs to, and given other texts written by that historical figure. In this tradition, one advances the debate, for instance, if one discovers a certain inconsistency that has gone unnoticed, or if one manages to craft a clever reply, on behalf of the author, to such an inconsistency.

Another way of doing history of philosophy is to become very familiar with the views of a historical figure, but treat them more liberally than before. Close reading of the text and charitable interpretation are still required – just as they are required when we study any philosophical text. However, one does not need to become super-cognizant of other texts by the same figure and of all the views put forward in unpublished manuscripts, the correspondence, etc. The way to advance the debate, here, is, for instance, by understanding that some views of the figure have certain consequences for their philosophical system as a whole. Moreover, such views can be fruitfully applied to contemporary philosophical debates. To give one example: given that X is an anti-skeptic, and that X's main aim is to prove skepticism wrong, X can help himself only to certain philosophical moves to advance his thesis. Another way to put this: if one is working in this tradition, discovering an inconsistency in the text would not be enough. One would want to explore what types of answers are available, given the constraints of the text, and, maybe even given more general constraints.

Each of these approaches has its merits; and both approaches have a lot in common. I tend to favor the latter approach, because it gives rise, in my opinion, to deeper discussions. But you are not required to subscribe to this philosophy, in order to do well in this seminar.

Topics and Readings

8/23 – Introduction and overview

8/30 – Locke's anti-innatism

Read: *Essay*, Book I.1–4

9/6 – Anti-individualism vs. Anti-innatism

Tyler Burge, "Individualism and the Mental" (I'll circulate copies)

Tyler Burge, "Post-script to 'Individualism and the Mental'" (I'll circulate copies)

9/13 – Categories

Simple Ideas. Read II.1–3; II.6–8

Complex ideas: modes, substances, relations. Read II.2–25

Stuart, 1-32

9/20 – Primary and Secondary Qualities

Read II.8; II.21.1-5, 73; I.4; II.23.7-10, 15-36

9/27 – Primary and Secondary Qualities, commentary

Ayers, M. “Primary and Secondary Qualities in Locke’s *Essay*” (I’ll circulate copies)

Curley, E. “Locke, Boyle, and The Distinction Between Primary and Secondary Qualities” (I’ll circulate copies)

McCann, E. “Locke’s Distinction between Primary Primary Qualities and Primary Secondary Qualities” (I’ll circulate copies)

Wilson, M. “History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today: The Case of the Sensible Qualities” (I’ll circulate copies)

Stuart, 33–136

10/4 – Primary and Secondary Qualities, commentary (ctd.)

10/11 – Primary and Secondary Qualities, commentary (ctd.)

10/18 – Real and Nominal Essences

Read II.30; II. 31; III.3, III.6; III.9; III.10; III.11

10/25 – Real and Nominal Essences, commentary

Stuart, 141–198

11/1 – Substance and Substratum

Read II.12–13; II.23

11/8 – Substance and Substratum, commentary

Bolton, M. B. “Substances, Substrata, and Names of Substances in Locke’s *Essay*” (I’ll circulate copies)

Stuart, 199–244

11/15 – Identity and personal identity

Read II.27

11/22 – No class: Thanksgiving Recess

11/29 – Identity and personal identity, commentary

Atherton, M. “Locke’s Theory of Personal Identity” (I’ll circulate copies)

Stuart, 297–338

12/6 – Wrap-up