Review of "Locke's Moral Man"

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Locke’s Moral Man

Antonia LoLordo.


Locke tells us that the project of his Essay arose out of discussions on a topic that was very remote from the main topic of the Essay, and later historiography tells us that remote topic was moral philosophy. Supposedly, then, the Essay seeks to clear away the underbrush that prevents us from having a clear understanding of moral philosophy. The Essay, however, as Antonia LoLordo teaches us in her new book, Locke’s Moral Man, throws up a very formidable difficulty for that discussion of moral philosophy that had not really been faced before: the Essay breaks down the natural kinds distinction by which humans as moral creatures had been traditionally differentiated from other members of the animal kingdom which are not moral creatures. In spite of this breakdown, however, Locke insists on a clean line dividing moral agents from other types of being. His trifecta of features for the moral agent, liberty, personhood, and rationality, becomes the topical focus for the central chapters of LoLordo’s book.

This slender little book is an outstanding scholarly foray into the Lockean prerequisites of moral agency. LoLordo describes her book as “an account of the Lockean metaphysics of moral agency” (134). She later softens this description into a Lockean critique of metaphysics, but the first description is more apt. Each movement takes the reader into the thickets of scholarly debate about the metaphysical issues surrounding the three central Lockean features of moral agency.
Before advancing to the main concerns, LoLordo gives introductory consideration to a pair of preliminary matters: corporeality and natural law. Corporeality is actually identified by Locke as a fourth feature of moral personality, but since it is mentioned only once by Locke while the other three are referred to again and again, LoLordo assigns it a lower order of importance in the *Essay* and feels comfortable in giving corporeality only brief consideration.

More has to be said, though, about Locke’s understanding of natural law. Locke is thought by Schneewind to be the last important voice of the natural law tradition in modernity, and in the *Second Treatise*, Locke clearly invokes the natural law framework for his political philosophy. LoLordo systematically treats of the central issues: the relation of natural law to divine will, natural law and innate ideas, motivation to abide natural law, and the nature of obligation under natural law. She treats these issues fairly, but in the end dismisses further investigation in favor of the question of what kind of being is obligated under natural law. This question, of course, leads her back to the investigation into the identified features of Locke’s moral man.

LoLordo’s concentration on the metaphysics of Locke’s moral man leaves undeveloped an important consideration. The natural law tradition to which Locke belongs takes very seriously the topic of moral persons in association. This is a preeminent concern for the main voices of the tradition from Suarez through Pufendorf. It would seem, then, that Locke’s affiliation with the tradition would mandate that his moral man not be considered in metaphysical isolation, but rather that consideration must be given to the capacities that suit a moral man for the association that provides the necessity of morality in the first place. We need to know, for instance, if the association of moral persons is different in kind from the association of gregarious animals, or if it is a function of reason, and if so, how this is possible. LoLordo leaves all of these issues unaddressed before turning to her focus features of liberty, personality, and rationality.

The discussion of liberty begins with LoLordo formalizing Locke’s conception of Liberty as: “S acts freely in performing action a iff (i) S does a because S wills to do a, and (ii) if S had not willed to do a, S would not have done a.” I don’t think that this formalization manages to cover all and only cases of the relation between S’s willing to do a and S’s doing a. While it covers the cases as free in which S either wills to do a and does a, or does not will to do a and does not do a, and it covers as unfree the case in which S does not will to do a and does a, it fails to cover the case in which S wills to do a, and does not do a. This is a relatively minor point, but it may have relevance to her later claim that genuine freedom involves suspension.

After considering active powers and arriving at the conclusion that all and only spirits have them, she resumes her treatment of liberty. She informs us that the idea of freedom defined in terms of active powers cannot be the criterion of moral agency because while animals have active powers, they are not moral
agents. The real idea buried deep in the chapter is that the form of freedom that makes up a constituent part of moral agency is the capacity to suspend and deliberate. Animals do not have this capacity, but having it allows us to be responsive to natural law, understood as right reason. LoLordo, then, has connected freedom properly understood to rationality, but before she can address the second half of this relation, she must first attend to the idea of personality.

LoLordo opens her discussion of personhood with an appropriation interpretation of Locke on consciousness, but I am not sure that she manages to evade the Reid objection to Locke on this point. While the appropriation interpretation is not particularly novel, the most poignantly interesting claim of LoLordo’s whole book is that the Lockean idea of personality is not a complex idea of a substance, but rather a complex mixed mode idea. I am nearly persuaded that her position carries, but her demonstration is slightly but importantly incomplete. There is a noticeable gap in her argument that she needs to rectify. Her basic argumentative strategy is eliminative, but she has failed to give sufficient attention to one of the disjuncts of the Lockean premise. That premise is that “anything that is not a substance, relation, or quality is a mode,” (75) and she wants to conclude by elimination from this premise that persons are modes. This conclusion, however, requires a little more work than she gives it.

She deals very handily with qualities. While simple ideas represent qualities, the idea of a person is complex idea. This is decisive. That leaves a troika of possibilities for the complex idea of a person: it is either a relation, or a mode, or a substance. LoLordo fairly annihilates the possibility that the idea of a person represents a substance. This is the thrust of her main energy, and she has a barrage of arguments to support her position. It must be said that she is following the Locke literature here, and the substance interpretation of persons is seen as her main rival to the mixed modes interpretation of persons, but she treats the substance interpretation as the only real contender to mixed modes interpretation. This concentration on substance, however, leaves uneliminated the possibility that a complex idea of a person might be a relation. All that I can find her saying about relations in the body of the argument is “Persons, organisms, and souls cannot be qualities or relations, so they must be either substances or modes” (92).

For some reason she has coupled relations together with qualities. To be sure, she has won the day with respect to qualities, but she did so by arguing singularly for that elimination. There is no separate argument for eliminating relations; this is a bare assertion, perhaps founded on an intuition. She does consider relations in her next chapter on rationality, but it is not clear if and how this treatment hearkens back to the eliminative argument for persons as modes.

This defect in the argument is not merely a matter of logical tidiness, although it is at least that. There are reasons that we should give consideration to this possibility of the idea of persons as relations, including the possibility that a relational interpretation of persons might include many of the same advantages that
LoLordo accredits to the modal interpretation such as being consistent with anti-essentialism, and that there are living philosophical interpretations of persons as relations, for example in Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont.

There are two promising approaches to evading this difficulty. First, Locke insists that relations are always comparative, but it might be shown that the idea of a person does not itself bring to mind the idea of comparison. As it sits, this is not a knockout argument. Someone who thought that the idea of a person as a relation might object that there is no necessity that a relational idea plainly contains a readily visible comparative idea. This, however, is an objection to Locke rather than to LoLordo, and if we do dismiss the comparative element of relational ideas, it very well could follow that the concept of relations collapses into the concept of mixed modes. If that were the case then LoLordo’s argument goes through in spite of the objection.

Second, mixed modes combine simple and complex ideas into a unified idea. The idea of a person, we might think, is just such an ideal unity. Relations, on the other hand, and this may be an aspect of the comparative feature, always keep distinct the ideas that are related. Thus, the idea of a person is not a relation. This argument, too, would need further specification and support. It might be argued that Locke’s own idea of personal identity maintains a relation between distinct ideas of a person at different times but that the idea of a person now contains the idea of a person at some previous time. In fact it might seem that in order for Locke’s notion of a person to overcome the Reid objection that relations must be left evident on the surface. In any case, it would appear that there is still some additional work to be accomplished before LoLordo’s eliminative argument is complete.

LoLordo’s last full chapter deals with rationality. In Essay 4.17.2, Locke asks the very pertinent question, “What need is there for reason?” LoLordo has an answer to this question that is intended to tie her whole project together. Indeed, the concepts she has worked so hard to distinguish bleed into each other when placed alongside rationality. Moral agency requires rationality, according to LoLordo, for a number of reasons. First, rationality involves a capacity for abstraction. While animals are capable on Locke’s account of some level of reasoning, they are wholly incapable of abstraction. LoLordo argues that Locke includes in animal reasoning the capacity for making inferences, and, again, since animals are not moral agents, inferential capacity cannot then be an essential characteristic of moral personhood and agency. Abstraction, on the other hand, is an aspect of reason that according to Locke, “is that which puts a perfect distinction betwixt Man and Brutes” (Essay 2.11.10), and LoLordo explains why it is necessary for moral agency. The agent must be able to know and abide natural law, but knowledge of the principles of natural law itself requires the capacity for general ideas. Moreover, in order to know the natural law as law, one must know that it promulgates from a legitimate authority. In the case of natural law, that authority is God. God’s existence can be demonstrated to all and only thinking beings that
have a capacity for abstraction. Thus, rationality as abstraction makes it possible
to know the natural law.

Second, rationality also includes the capacity through reflection of forming a
lasting conception of self. This means, according to LoLordo, that the person mo-
tivated by ideas of pleasures and pains, understands that future pleasures and pains
as consequences of abiding or violating the natural law will adhere to the very same
person experiencing present pleasures and pains. Thus, rationality satisfies the re-
quirement for moral agents to be able to supply a reason for their actions.

Third, rationality gives agents a capacity for first suspending action motivated
by present desire, and second for deliberating on the outcomes of that action.
Thus, rationality provides the groundwork of freedom, defined in terms of sus-
pension and deliberation, and freedom is a necessary constituent of Lockean
personhood and agency.

While I find myself in general agreement with this interesting interpretation
of Locke on the role of rationality for moral agency, I think that LoLordo perhaps
wrongly, and certainly too quickly, dismisses the inferential role of reason in
Locke’s moral project. One thing that she does not mention in the chapter on ra-
tionality that she has brought up several times in earlier sections is that Locke
holds morality to be a demonstrative science. Locke illustrates this with a demon-
stration that where there is no property there is no injustice, a proposition of
which, Locke assures us, we can be just as certain as we can that a triangle
has three angles equal to two right ones (Essay 4.3.18). Yet in a footnote (110),
LoLordo indicates that while animals may not be capable of probable reason-
ing, they are capable of demonstrative reasoning, but, of course, this is just what
is required for a demonstrative science. LoLordo defends Locke against Leib-
niz’s objection that animals cannot reason because all reasoning relies on general
principles. In response to Leibniz, she brings forward Locke saying that, “the im-
mediate Object of all our Reasoning and Knowledge, is nothing but Particulars,”
(110). This allows animals inferential capacity without attributing to them gen-
eral concepts or ideas. The passage here, however, is not about animal reasoning,
but about human reasoning, and the claim is that all reasoning is particular. One
page later, LoLordo again brings us Locke saying that animals have reason, “but
it is only in particular Ideas,” (111). Yet, if we are to believe the passage that she
has presented one page earlier, humans suffer from exactly this same weakness.
This needs to be cleared up, and one natural possibility is that humans have an
inferential capacity involving general ideas, and animals lack this capacity.

The objections I have presented here aside, Antonia LoLordo’s book is excel-
ient, and is worthy of careful consideration. It should be hoped that LoLordo will
return often to us with insightful interpretations of Locke and perhaps other fig-
ures of early modernity. Her scholarship is exemplary, but figures like Locke are
only kept alive by turning to them our imaginations as well as our intellects. It is
clear that LoLordo is apt at opening interesting new avenues of interpretation.