

Carlo Augusto Viano on John Locke's Idea of Experience*

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Abstract: Carlo Augusto Viano devoted assiduous attention to Locke's work. This paper aims at exploring his interpretation of Locke's concept of experience, identifying two important stages. In the first one, represented by his book *John Locke. Dal razionalismo all'illuminismo* (1960), Viano mainly focused on the various meanings Locke attributed to experience, in particular his idea of a method for verifying our beliefs. In the second stage, including Viano's later contributions on Locke, he favoured an interpretation of Locke's empiricism as being deeply rooted in Aristotelianism, Scholasticism and Cartesianism. He especially insisted on Locke's ability to create an "empiricist version of Cartesianism", grounded in Scholasticism. The paper intends to highlight Viano's ability to thoroughly investigate Locke's philosophy.

Keywords: experience, method of verification, reason, procedure, Aristotelianism, Cartesianism

Introduction

Carlo Augusto Viano carried out extensive research into seventeenth-century British philosophy¹, especially on John Locke. In 1955, he authored the introduction to a new Italian edition of Locke's *Some Thoughts concerning*

* Carlo Augusto Viano died on 20 July 2019. This note aims to highlight the originality of his views on John Locke and their relevance.

¹ See for inst. C.A. Viano, "Esperienza e natura nella filosofia di Francesco Bacone [Experience and Nature in Francis Bacon's Philosophy]", in *Rivista di filosofia* 45 (1954), 3, pp. 291-313; Id., "Socinianesimo e cultura filosofica nell'Inghilterra del Seicento [Socinianism and Philosophical Culture in Seventeenth-Century England]", in *Rivista di filosofia* 46 (1955), 4, pp. 460-69; Id., "Analisi della vita emotiva e tecnica politica nella filosofia di Hobbes [An Analysis of Emotional life and Political Technique in Hobbes' Philosophy]", in *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia* 17 (1962), 4, pp. 355-92. Viano's complete bibliography has recently been published by B. Miglio in *Accademia delle Scienze di Torino, Quaderni* 34 (2020), pp. 41-65.

*Education*², and in 1958 he explored the crucial role played by Ashley Cooper, the first Earl of Shaftesbury and a prominent member of the English investing class, in stimulating Locke's interest in economics³. In 1961, six years before Philip Abrams, Viano published the first English transcription of Locke's *Two Tracts on Government*, which were written in 1660-62⁴. The book included the original English text and the Italian translation of *An Essay concerning Toleration*, which Locke had begun to write in 1667⁵.

In 1968, Viano edited a new Italian edition of *Draft B* of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*⁶, following the one published by Armando Carlini in 1948⁷. In the introduction to his edition, Viano kept his distance not only from Carlini but also from Vittorio Sainati, who had published the first Italian translation of *Draft A* in 1951⁸. Viano criticized both for considering the drafts as merely preparatory writings, rather than as autonomous works⁹. To support this view, he undertook a detailed historical reconstruction of Locke's experiences during the composition of the drafts (1671-72).

² J. Locke, *Pensieri sulla educazione*, It. trans. by F. Pivano, Paravia, Turin 1955. Beside the introduction, Viano wrote the bibliography and a comment. Viano's interest in Locke seems to date back to the early fifties, when he wrote a review of D.J. O'Connor, *John Locke*, in *Rivista di filosofia* 45 (1954), 3, p. 213, and another review of A. Klemmt, *John Locke. Theoretische Philosophie*, in *Rivista di filosofia* 45 (1954), 3, pp. 336-39.

³ C.A. Viano, "I rapporti tra Locke e Shaftesbury e le teorie economiche di Locke [Locke's relationship with Shaftesbury and his economical theories]", in *Rivista di filosofia* 49 (1958), 1, pp. 69-84.

⁴ J. Locke, *Scritti editi e inediti sulla tolleranza* [Published and Unpublished Writings on Toleration], ed. by C.A. Viano, Taylor, Turin 1961, pp. 20-61; Id., *Two Tracts on Government*, ed. by P. Abrams, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1967. Viano's book included the first Italian translation of the *Two Tracts*. It was reprinted by Laterza in 1989, with a new introduction but without the original text.

⁵ Locke, *Scritti editi e inediti sulla tolleranza*, cit., pp. 81-107 and 158-98. The following year Viano published "L'abbozzo originario e gli stadi di composizione di *An Essay concerning Toleration* e la nascita delle teorie politico-religiose di John Locke [The Original Draft and the Stages of Composition of *An Essay concerning Toleration* and the Birth of Locke's Political-Religious Doctrines]", in *Rivista di filosofia* 52 (1961), 3, 1961, pp. 285-311. Repr. in J. Dunn and I. Harris, *Locke*, E. Elger, Cheltenham, UK-Lyme, USA 1997, vol. 1, pp. 181-207.

⁶ J. Locke, *Saggio sull'intelligenza: secondo abbozzo* [Essay on the Understanding: Second Draft], ed. by C.A. Viano, Laterza, Bari 1968.

⁷ J. Locke, *La conoscenza umana* [Human Knowledge], ed. by A. Carlini, Laterza, Bari 1948.

⁸ J. Locke, *Saggio sulla intelligenza umana: primo abbozzo* [Essay on Human Understanding: First Draft], ed. by V. Sainati, Laterza, Bari 1951.

⁹ Viano attributed this reading to Richard Aaron e Jocelyn Gibb's edition of *Draft A*, the one used by Sainati. See J. Locke, *An Early Draft of Locke's Essay together with Excerpts from his Journals*, ed. by R.I. Aaron and J. Gibb, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1936; Viano, *Saggio sull'intelligenza umana*, cit., pp. 12-13, n. 9.

A few years before, in 1960 Viano had published *John Locke. Dal razionalismo all'illuminismo*, his major contribution to the understanding of the English philosopher¹⁰. The book proved to be a milestone for twentieth-century Italian historiography, and was much appreciated abroad by Peter Nidditch. In the introduction to the first critical edition of the *Essay*, which appeared in 1975, Nidditch defined Viano's book as "the most broadly erudite and instructive account, and [...] the most balanced and best organized in its coverage, among existing books on Locke's thought as a whole"¹¹. Nidditch particularly praised Viano's analysis of Locke's treatment of reason, a key aspect within his theory of understanding. This analysis was carried out paying attention to the numerous Locke manuscripts collected in the Lovelace Collection, which had become accessible to the public a few decades earlier. At that time, several scholars were working steadily to advance the knowledge of this material. In 1931, long before the Lovelace Collection was purchased by the Bodleian Library, Benjamin Rand published the transcription of the manuscript containing *Draft B*, and a few years later, in 1936, *Draft A* along with some notes from Locke's journals appeared, edited by Richard Aaron and Jocelyn Gibb. In 1953, John Lough published a large portion of the journals dating back to Locke's stay in France (1675-79), and in 1954 the eight *quaestiones* on the law of nature written by Locke in 1664 were printed, edited by Wolfgang von Leyden. Viano's *Scritti editi e inediti sulla tolleranza* were published a few years later. In the meantime, other scholars had undertaken a careful examination of several central aspects of Locke's thought, in the light of the new evidence emerging from the Lovelace Collection. This was the case of William Yolton, whose analysis of Locke's anti-nativist arguments was praised by Viano¹², and Peter Laslett, who was repeatedly mentioned by Viano for his studies on the *Two Treatises*

¹⁰ C.A. Viano, *John Locke. Dal razionalismo all'illuminismo* [John Locke. From Rationalism to the Enlightenment], Einaudi, Turin 1960.

¹¹ P.H. Nidditch (ed.), *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, Introduction, p. lix, n. 1. Regarding the scant attention paid to Viano's book abroad, due to his use of Italian, see C. Borghero, "Testi e leggende: il Locke di Viano", in *Rivista di filosofia* 3 (2019), p. 402.

¹² J.W. Yolton, *Locke and the Way of Ideas*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1956; Viano, *John Locke. Dal razionalismo all'illuminismo*, cit., p. 128, n.1. A review of Yolton's book written by Viano appeared in *Rivista di filosofia* 48 (1957), 3, pp. 308-15, together with a review of M. Cranston, *John Locke. A Biography*, in *Rivista di filosofia* 48 (1957), 4, pp. 457-58. The year before, Viano had written a review of G. Bonno, *Les relations intellectuelles de Locke avec la France*, in *Rivista di filosofia* 47 (1956), 3, pp. 358-59.

of *Government*¹³. This pioneering research was a novelty in Italy, as Carlo Borghero has recently affirmed: “among us there was nothing which might be compared with the renewal of studies abroad, where the familiarity with Locke’s unpublished works served to put into question old historiographical mirages and to open up new interpretative paths”¹⁴. This was the situation in Italy when, in 1960, Viano’s book was published. Its considerable length manifested his desire to undertake a large-scale reconstruction of Locke’s thought: Viano examined the entire corpus of his works, from his juvenile *Two Tracts on Government* to *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, which was published posthumously. He returned to Locke’s idea of tolerance, which he had already examined in previous years, but he also contemplated Locke the promoter of a reasonable Christianity, the educator and the philosopher of nature. A thread runs through this vast agenda of themes, Locke’s idea of experience. In the introduction, Viano declared that his basic aim was “to examine what Locke had meant by experience, and what its internal structures and function were”¹⁵. This aim was clarified by Viano’s objections to nineteenth-century philosophical historiography, swinging between conflicting but equally critical interpretations of Locke’s thought. On the one hand, the French historian Victor Cousin had hailed Locke as a sensist and labelled his theory of the intellect as inadequate – an assessment in keeping with the opinion of Hegelian historiography –, on the other hand, Alois Riehl and other German scholars had described the content of the *Essay* as an immature forerunner of Kantian criticism¹⁶. Even the comparison with Hume’s empiricism was unfavourable; the net result was a general loss of interest in Locke’s approach. Focusing on the meaning attributed to experience by Locke was the best way of avoiding misunderstandings, in Viano’s opinion. In his words, it was necessary to “put aside assessments centred on sensism or intellectualism” in order to understand why Locke’s idea of experience had “marked such an important moment in the history of philosophy”¹⁷.

¹³ Viano frequently referred to P. Laslett, “The English Revolution and Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*”, in *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 12 (1956), 1, pp. 40-55. Viano also mentioned Laslett, *Patriarcha and Other Political Works of Sir Robert Filmer*, Blackwell, Oxford 1949. See Viano, *John Locke*, cit., p. 209, n.3. Laslett’s edition of the *Two Treatises* appeared in 1960.

¹⁴ Borghero, “Testi e leggende”, cit., p. 396.

¹⁵ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., p. 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Viano's remarks reflected his conception of the work of historians, who should be able to reject authoritative historical narratives perceived as inadequate and to clarify how questions which are relevant today may be efficaciously dealt with through an enquiry into the history of the concepts underlying them. This conception also inspired Viano's later writings on Locke. In a 1990 article, he examined the crisis of the liberal interpretation of Locke's politics given by Whig historiography¹⁸, and in a 2005 essay he questioned the historical reliability of individualistic and utilitarian readings¹⁹, a controversial theme in the panorama of Locke studies²⁰. In the meantime, Viano had returned to Locke's notion of experience, which was the thread running through his 1960 book. His views indicated a significant development in his thought, which is the topic of this paper. This development, attesting to Viano's ability to thoroughly investigate Locke's philosophy, favoured an interpretation of Locke's empiricism as being deeply rooted in Aristotelianism, Scholasticism and Cartesianism. In the first paragraph, I shall focus on Viano's treatment of Locke's concept of experience in 1960, in the second, I shall consider his later contributions.

1. *Experience as a method of verification*

John Locke. Dal razionalismo all'illuminismo begins with a detailed reconstruction of the historical, political and religious context in which Locke was educated and wrote his earlier works. His idea of experience comes to the fore when Viano considers the *Essays on the law of nature*, which contain the text of the eight lectures delivered by Locke as censor of moral philosophy at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1664. The main topic of this work is the law of nature, or moral law, which is that part of divine law that has not been revealed. Locke claimed that humans can discover the content of the precepts of natural law through reason, since reason, as Viano wrote, equates to the "set of practical

¹⁸ C.A. Viano, "Chi ha paura di John Locke? [Who's afraid of John Locke?]", in *Materiali per una storia della cultura giuridica* 20 (1990), 1, pp. 3-33.

¹⁹ C.A. Viano, "L'individualismo introvabile e la teoria lockiana della tolleranza [The Hard-to-find Individualism and Locke's Theory of Toleration]", in G.M. Chioldi e R. Gatti (eds.), *La filosofia politica di Locke*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2005, pp. 11-31.

²⁰ A reconstruction of this debate may be found in A.J. Simmons, *The Lockean Theory of Rights*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992.

principles which conform to divine natural law”²¹. These principles are not to be intended as innate, but rather as accessible by rational research.

Given the lack of innate sources, reason can only begin with experience. Through experience, namely through the perception of the regularity and perfection of nature, reason can acknowledge that God exists and is the creator and legislator of the universe, the author of the law of nature. The senses and reason together are able to persuade humans that they exist as rational beings created by God: this is the ground of their obligation to conform to divine will²².

After having highlighted Locke’s rejection of innatism in the *Essays*, Viano moved on to analyse the conception of experience which first appeared in the drafts of the *Essay*. In *Draft A*, the ultimate origin, as well as the absolute limit of knowledge was said to lie in sensory experience, which represented “a set of conditions which are in part not modifiable”²³. Experience and the reflection on the operations of the mind provided understanding with simple ideas, which were the bases of knowledge. The intellect worked on simple ideas, combining them and making comparisons which produced complex ideas. Without experience, this activity was entirely without foundation: there was no other source of knowledge beyond the senses²⁴. Viano underlined the important consequences that ensued from this position, especially those concerning the relationship between facts and norms: by tracing the origins of all our ideas, including moral ideas, in sensory experience, Locke had intended to highlight the comprehensibility of moral norms, which was also the reason for his emphasizing the demonstrability of morality in the *Essay*²⁵.

Experience returned to the fore when Viano considered Locke’s views about the relationship between faith and reason in *Draft A* and in a journal note he wrote in 1676²⁶. Experience is the basis of all our beliefs, Locke claimed, including those beliefs which cannot be ascertained by ocular testimony. The content of a religious belief can be considered as part of divine revelation only if it does not contradict our knowledge, or, as Viano put it, “if it

²¹ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., p. 91.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1. See Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature and Associated Writings*, ed. by W. von Leyden, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1954, pp. 153-57.

²³ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., p. 113.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15. See Locke, “Draft A”, §§ 1-2; “Draft B”, § 94, in *Id.*, *Drafts for the Essay Concerning Human Understanding and Other Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1: *Drafts A and B*, ed. by P. Nidditch and G.A.J. Rogers, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1990, pp.1-7 and p. 211.

²⁵ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., pp. 153-57.

²⁶ See J. Locke, “Faith and Reason”, 25 August 1676, in *Id.*, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, cit., pp. 275-77.

can be interpreted through those same fundamental categories which regulate available experience²⁷. The basic assumption underlying Locke's position, Viano affirmed, was the theory of probability formulated in *Draft A*: since the bases of our knowledge are in sensory experience, which is always singular, we cannot have certain knowledge of any universal proposition concerning things existing independently from us. These propositions are not self-evident but only probable²⁸. Knowledge in this case "requires us to detect lines of uniformity through direct ascertainment, in order to create contexts of comparison which may help us to determine the index of probability and reliability"²⁹.

The analysis of Locke's theory of probability led Viano to emphasize a first important aspect of his conception of experience. Locke would call experience, he says, the uniformities provided by the contexts of comparison, which are the work of reason. The latter operates as a kind of procedure, arranging the evidence coming from the senses in "a complex of recurring uniformities"³⁰ that help direct our choices. Rational procedures "may be accepted by anyone – Viano wrote –, whatever their judgment of these uniformities"³¹, since they do not depend upon our beliefs but upon experience, which provides reason with unbiased evidence. The indifference of simple ideas to their manners of composition ensures the independence of the basic ingredients of our reasoning from its outcome. Experience may therefore be described as the condition for the independence of knowledge, since it provides "a complex of requirements that need to be satisfied by a procedure which is to be considered as independent of its results"³². This would be the first meaning of experience in Locke's empiricism, for Viano.

A second meaning could be found, Viano continued, in Locke's conception of experience as the best instrument for freeing knowledge from Descartes' idea of a unique metaphysical order. Locke aimed at disentangling the sources of ideas from Cartesian assumptions. Descartes had traced the origin of ideas back to the relationship of a finite thinking substance with itself, with the infinite thinking substance and with the extended substance³³; Locke removed the reference to substance from this picture, showing its irrelevance

²⁷ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., p. 348. Locke, "Faith and Reason", cit., p. 276.

²⁸ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., pp. 347-48; Locke, "Draft A", § 33, in Id., *Drafts for the Essay*, cit., p. 62.

²⁹ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., p. 348.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 350.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., pp. 555-56.

in forming simple ideas. In the *Essay*, the enquiry into the causes of simple ideas was said not to pertain “to the *Idea*, as it is in the Understanding”, and the two actions, perceiving and searching for the causes of ideas, were carefully distinguished³⁴. Since only the second action introduced the idea of substance, Viano concluded that Locke had radically changed the Cartesian conception of ideas. At the basis of Locke’s empiricism there was the conviction that “an idea is such on the basis of what it testifies by itself, independently of our making it part of a certain view of substances”³⁵. Thanks to their independence from beliefs about substances, simple ideas in Locke “are able to secure freedom to knowledge and neutralize any attempt to make a particular view the unique and necessary order of the human intellectual world”³⁶.

Finally, Viano highlighted a third meaning of experience in Locke, which, although it was more limited than the previous ones, was the most fundamental in his view, being their source. This meaning only concerned existential propositions. Experience in Locke depended on reason as far as its being organized into contexts of comparison was concerned, yet it was able to operate autonomously when intended as “a method of verification” distinct from rational procedures³⁷. This was the method to be employed in our enquiries into substances: in this case, Locke affirmed, “the bare Contemplation of their abstract *Ideas*, will carry us but a very little way in the search of Truth and Certainty”. Here we have

to take a quite contrary Course, the want of *Ideas* of their real *Essences* sends us from our own Thoughts, to the Things themselves, as they exist. *Experience here must teach me*, what Reason cannot: and ‘tis by trying alone, that I can certainly know, what other Qualities co-exist with those of my complex *Idea*³⁸.

Here experience is described, Viano continued, as “a method for verifying the coexistence of qualities”, and therefore “as an element of proof in validating a general proposition concerning a certain substance”³⁹. The existence of things may only be ascertained by experience, which begins when sensory knowledge is used in this way. This meaning of experience would be therefore the most important one, and the true essence of Locke’s empiricism.

³⁴ See Locke, *Essay*, cit., II.ii.8, pp. 132-33.

³⁵ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., p. 555.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 562.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 582.

³⁸ Locke, *Essay*, cit., IV.xii.9, p. 644.

³⁹ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., p. 583.

Viano's reading of Locke in 1960 recalled what Nicola Abbagnano was writing about empiricism in those very same years, when he described the common trait shared by modern varieties of empiricism as a conception of experience based on "an appeal to the repeatability of certain situations intended as a means for verifying possible solutions"⁴⁰. Keeping this meaning in mind, experience could be intended as objective and impersonal owing to its being independent of beliefs, which were placed under its control. Abbagnano attributed this notion of experience to Locke, highlighting its foundational nature and its significance as the absolute limit imposed upon human knowledge; Viano shared this interpretation. His adhesion to the "new Enlightenment", which linked him to Abbagnano, Bobbio and other Italian philosophers in the fifties, was the background to his reading of experience in Locke as a method of verification, an echo of the teaching of the Circle of Vienna clearly perceptible in the programme of that group⁴¹. Experience was to be intended as the origin of all human knowledge, but also as the best instrument for verifying rational procedures.

This background was also noticeable in the last chapters of Viano's book, where he insisted on the anti-metaphysical leanings implicit in Locke's empiricism: the critique of metaphysics intended as a dogmatic approach typical of omni-comprehensive systems, irreconcilable with the full awareness of the limits of human understanding and with a conception of reason as a concrete, pragmatic faculty, was another distinguishing mark of the programme of the "new Enlightenment". Viano attributed this critique to Locke, as a prominent opponent of Descartes' rationalism: Locke's concept of experience bolstered a critical and anti-metaphysical view of reason, claimed Viano, stripped of those truth claims which characterized Cartesian reason and extraneous to dogmatism. The idea of reason emerging from the *Essay* was "enlightened", in the sense given to this term by the "new Enlightenment".

⁴⁰ See the voice "Esperienza" in N. Abbagnano, *Dizionario di filosofia* [Dictionary of Philosophy], UTET, Turin 1971, pp. 323-30.

⁴¹ Regarding the contents of the "new Enlightenment", see Viano, *La filosofia italiana del Novecento* [Twentieth-century Italian Philosophy], Il Mulino, Bologna 2006, pp. 65-70; Borghero, "Testi e leggende", cit., pp. 403-7. Pietro Rossi briefly described this experience in these terms: "The intellectual education of Viano was strongly marked by the 'new Enlightenment' of Nicola Abbagnano, Norberto Bobbio and other younger scholars who were engaged, after the decline of Croce's and Gentile's idealism, in the search for new relationships with the most important philosophical orientations both in Europe and North America: from the philosophy of existence to Dewey's pragmatism, logical positivism and philosophy of science". P. Rossi, "Un lungo cammino", in *Rivista di filosofia* 3 (2019), p. 341.

This reading of Locke is attenuated in Viano's further writings. Arguably, his interest in the recent historiographical debate over the interpretation of Locke's political thought led him to reconsider some aspects of his approach. This would have important consequences on the way Viano viewed Locke's empiricism, as I shall argue in the following paragraph.

2. *Locke's "empiricist version of Cartesianism"*

In a 1990 contribution entitled "Chi ha paura di John Locke?", Viano wrote, "Perhaps we should get used to thinking that Locke might have been a relatively marginal author and that his theories were taken into consideration less often than a heroic historiographical tradition has led us to suppose"⁴². This assertion appeared almost at the end of his contribution, which focused on the decline of Whig historiography and its myth of Locke the father of liberalism and the theorist of the Glorious Revolution. Viano began by considering the origins of this myth in Locke's nineteenth-century biographers Lord King and Fox Bourne, and in historians such as Lord Macaulay and George Trevelyan. He went on to examine Leo Strauss' radical critique of this tradition⁴³, and his agreement with Macpherson on Locke's "possessive individualism"⁴⁴. Then Viano focused on John Dunn's criticism not only of the liberal interpretation but also of the Marxist interpretation, which made the *Two Treatises of Government* an apology for capitalism legitimizing the unlimited accumulation of capital. Dunn hailed Locke's social and political doctrine as an elaboration of Calvinist social values deeply rooted in the culture of his time⁴⁵; Viano agreed with him. He emphasized that Locke belonged to the seventeenth century, a "culture permeated by religiosity"⁴⁶ extraneous to the kind of secularism which Strauss had imputed to it. Commenting on Dunn's work, Viano wrote,

⁴² Viano, "Chi ha paura di John Locke?", cit., p. 32. A similar opinion had been expressed by Viano in "Locke", in V. Mathieu (ed.), *Questioni di storiografia filosofica*. I. *Dalle origini all'Ottocento* [Issues in Philosophical Historiography. From the Origins to the Eighteenth Century], vol. 2: *Dall'Umanesimo a Rousseau*, Editrice La Scuola, Brescia 1974, p. 442.

⁴³ L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1953.

⁴⁴ C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford University Press, New York 1962.

⁴⁵ J. Dunn, *The political Thought of John Locke*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1969.

⁴⁶ Viano, "Chi ha paura di John Locke?", cit., p. 30.

The more Locke was seen as belonging to seventeenth-century culture, the more the interpretation itself of the seventeenth-century changed, being freed from the schemes of Whig historiography [...]. At the same time, eighteenth-century English society began to be viewed less as a liberal, bourgeois society transformed by the industrial revolution, and more as an aristocratic society based on an oligarchic political regime and a commercial economy, but far from the religious and ethical indifferentism which had been attributed to it⁴⁷.

Locke's "marginality" in the narrative construed by Whig historiography highlighted, in Viano's view, the irrelevance of secular readings of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English culture. The secular philosophical themes which Strauss and other scholars had found in Locke's thought were typical of that culture, insisted Viano, and had not contributed to the birth of a secularized society because "the existence of such a society in eighteenth-century England was another historiographical legend"⁴⁸. Faced with the problem of finding an appropriate location for Locke, which did not penalize him for his ambiguous liberalism, Viano remarked how important it was to avoid "common historiographical habits" and accept Locke's "marginality" in the history of pre-capitalist and pre-bourgeois society⁴⁹. If we want to introduce Locke into some "intellectual chain" linking him to the eighteenth century, Viano maintained, we can do so, but we should avoid giving too much credit to these chains, because they are "generally the result of a more or less deformed reading of texts, instrumental in detecting and deforming traits of societies different from those in which these texts were written"⁵⁰.

Deformed readings of Locke were those that neglected his cultural background. As Viano wrote,

These views, as any view, were born from a selective reading of Locke's works: they tended to grasp what was *modern* in them. Therefore they neglected both the scholastic doctrine of the law of nature, which could already be found in the *Two Tracts on Government*, and the Aristotelian schemes in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, focusing instead on the theories of political liberty or on empiricist doctrines⁵¹.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.32.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.27.

The Aristotelian roots of Locke's empiricism and his debt to Scholasticism were one of the main themes of a later contribution by Viano, "La ragione e l'esperienza". In 1960, he had emphasized the novel aspect of Locke's theory of the intellect and his anti-dogmatic leanings; Locke's disagreement with the Aristotelian-scholastic model of science and knowledge had been brought into focus, although Viano also remarked that Locke's conception of the law of nature had its basis in Anglican Scholasticism. In "La ragione e l'esperienza", Aristotelianism came to the fore. Carlo Borghero has noticed this: several remarks in this later contribution by Viano concerned Aristotle's influence on Locke. The conception of sensory experience as the basis of knowledge, the metaphor of the *tabula rasa*, and even the view of things as separate substances rather than as the manifestation of a unique substance, were shared by Aristotle and Locke⁵². No doubt, Viano could clearly discern these resemblances, given his great familiarity with Aristotle⁵³.

In "La ragione e l'esperienza", Viano asserted that the Aristotelian-scholastic vocabulary was Locke's vocabulary from his early *Essays on the law of nature* onwards. The Anglican Scholasticism of Richard Hooker and Robert Sanderson provided Locke with the basic concepts of his theory of understanding, including his notion of opinion as assent given to the content of a probable proposition⁵⁴. Scholasticism was also the source of Locke's idea of God as an infinite spiritual substance, and of his views about language⁵⁵; this legacy took on a complex form in his doctrine, given the number of influences at work. Bacon, Boyle and Gassendi were no doubt in this number, yet the frame was Cartesianism. In 1960, Viano had mainly focused on the distance which separated Locke from Descartes: he had insisted that Locke had begun to reform Cartesianism in *Draft A* when he had introduced the theory of probability, and had continued on this path in his subsequent writings criticizing the Cartesian notions of substance and infinity⁵⁶. Also Descartes had taken probable knowledge into consideration:

⁵² C.A. Viano, "La ragione e l'esperienza [Reason and Experience]", in P. Rossi, C.A. Viano (eds.), *Storia della filosofia*, vol. 4: *Il Settecento*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1996, pp. 37 and 45.

⁵³ C. Borghero, "Viano narratore di storie", in Accademia delle Scienze di Torino (ed.), *Quaderni*, cit., pp. 11-12; Id., "Testi e leggende", cit., p. 411. Aristotle and Locke were Viano's favourite authors. Viano published a book on Aristotle's logic (1955) and a complete translation both of the *Politics* and the *Constitution of Athens* (1955), as well as of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (1974).

⁵⁴ Viano, "La ragione e l'esperienza", cit., p. 36. Locke found this notion in Sanderson's *Logicae Artis Compendium* (1615).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁶ Viano, *John Locke*, cit., p. 345.

he had affirmed that those propositions which are neither self-evidently true nor false may be determined by the judgment of the will, which is different from knowledge. However, Descartes maintained that the essence of reality could be known without resorting to probable propositions, since human reason has access to universal propositions concerning things existing independently from us⁵⁷. This, however, was not Locke's idea of reason, given his rejection of innatism. Reason in Locke was "neither a system of truths nor a collection of principles", but rather "a kind of procedure"⁵⁸ which might be used to determine both the necessary connections between ideas, which are the basis of certain knowledge, and their probable connections. The reform of Cartesianism Locke had undertaken in *Draft A* was aimed at introducing this idea of reason, which could afford "an orientation in those areas not determinable through a straight comparison between ideas or through direct ascertainment"⁵⁹.

In "La ragione e l'esperienza", Viano seemed to be more interested in the many points of agreement between Locke and Descartes, for instance the distinction between intuitive and demonstrative knowledge⁶⁰, the adhesion to mechanism⁶¹ and metaphysical dualism⁶², the scholastic arguments used to prove the existence of God⁶³ and, chiefly, the theory of ideas intended as "whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks"⁶⁴. Viano pointed out that Locke's main purpose had been to expand Descartes' representational theory: while the latter had denied that the content of sensory ideas comes from the senses, Locke attributed a sensory origin to all ideas. In doing so, he had "extended the interpretation which Cartesianism had given of several human notions [...] introducing the traditional theory of sensation in Cartesianism and reinterpreting some typically Cartesian concepts on this basis"⁶⁵.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 349.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 366.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 344, 348.

⁶⁰ Viano, "La ragione e l'esperienza", cit., p. 43.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

⁶² Ibid., p. 41.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 37. See Locke, *Essay*, cit., I.i.8, p. 47. In the introduction to J. Locke, *Saggio sull'intelligenza umana*, ed. by C.A. Viano, Laterza, Bari 1988², vol.1, p. xxi, Viano noticed that Locke's notion of mode, which indicated one of the varieties of complex ideas, could be traced back to Scholasticism and had also been employed by Descartes, who had referred to the modal distinction (an ingredient in the scholastic theory of substance).

⁶⁵ Viano, "La ragione e l'esperienza", cit., p. 44.

In 1960, Viano had affirmed that the originality of Locke's empiricism was to be found in its freeing the sources of knowledge from certain metaphysical assumptions, whereas in "La ragione e l'esperienza" he insisted more on Locke's ability to embody and develop those assumptions within his theory. Viano maintained that Locke had been able to create a synthesis of the notion of experience typical of Aristotle, late Scholasticism, Bacon, Gassendi and Boyle with that "rewording of Cartesian philosophy in Scholastic terms which Descartes himself had begun, and that would become the main task of Cartesian *philosophers*"⁶⁶. This is where the originality of Locke's empiricism was to be found: he had "crushed the scholastic-Cartesian synthesis", and replaced it with a new one. Locke's "empiricist version of Cartesianism"⁶⁷ was based on the separation between geometry and nature, and consequently destroyed the Cartesian project of geometrizing the extended substance, nevertheless, the common scholastic background guaranteed the possibility of a synthesis. In addition, Locke's theory was more akin to Cartesianism than to Spinozism, given Spinoza's rejection of dualism⁶⁸.

The kind of empiricism which Viano attributed to Locke in "La ragione e l'esperienza" was not "modern", in the sense he had highlighted in his 1990 article, but rather deeply rooted in the culture of his time. The same may be said of his view of Locke's treatment of reason. Viano remarked that, in Locke's opinion, the majority of people did not use reason as they should, a claim quite common in the seventeenth century. As a remedy against this, he had intended to provide a system of demonstrative morality – the equivalent of Spinoza's *Ethics* – yet he abandoned this project in his later years⁶⁹, when he

seemed more and more to conceive of reason as a natural faculty, which does not produce systematic knowledge but is able to organize what can be known when mistakes and prejudices are put aside. Intended in this sense, reason can agree with traditional beliefs, rather than pretend to build alternative systems of beliefs⁷⁰.

Viano's interpretation of Locke in 1997 seems to be more attentive to the contradictions and ambiguities hidden in his thought than the one he had given

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 59.

in his 1960 book. Once having considered the misunderstandings stemming from Locke's historiography, and highlighted the risk of the "modern" readings of his theory, Viano moves on to reconsider the sources of Locke's approach in depth, firmly anchoring it to the seventeenth century. The net result is a clarification of Locke's position in the history of philosophy, which is no doubt still very relevant today⁷¹.

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⁷¹ Locke's debt to Scholasticism and Aristotle has been the object of extensive research in the last years. Even his relationship with Descartes has been carefully analysed, as shown by a recent publication by P. Hamou and M. Pécharman (eds.), *Locke and Cartesian Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

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Reviews

