

John Locke's Account of Madness: Its Skeptical Origins and Outcomes*

Kathryn Tabb

Abstract: John Locke offers an unusual account of madness which, unlike the dominant medical theories of his time, explains it as a pathology of ideas rather than of mental faculties or of physiology. In madness, according to Locke, ideas become associated through a variety of mechanisms that occur outside the ambit of the understanding. Locke contrasts associated ideas with healthy ones, which are connected through the activity of mental operations like discernment, composition, and abstraction. After presenting Locke's account of madness as the association of ideas, this paper shows how its justification drew on his commitments to the tenets of ancient medical skepticism, which discouraged speculation and theorization in favor of observation and experience. It then discusses how Locke mobilized this account to further his philosophical projects – namely his case against nativism – using traditional Pyrrhonian strategies. Locke argued that associated ideas, when used to construct maxims, can lead to false beliefs that seem to have all the certainty and indubitability of inspiration. He used madness to explain the irreconcilable religious and political rifts that engulfed him, and to argue that skepticism about our beliefs, and about the origins of our ideas, is the best prophylactic against dogmatism and zealotry.

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1. *A physician of the mind*

John Locke was interested in medicine from the time he was a young man studying at Christ Church, Oxford in the 1660s. Medicine was experiencing a sea change during this period, part of a broader mechanistic turn in natural

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philosophy. Out of dissatisfaction with Scholastic explanations came a desire to explain pathology in terms of underlying structures, rather than in formal terms, such as the *virtus dormitiva* Molière famously parodied in *Le Malade Imaginaire* in 1673. The rise of iatrochemical explanations – that is, those integrating chemical theories into medicine – challenged Galenist accounts of the humoral body that had been dominant for a millennium and a half. Disputes between the different camps were aggressive, public, and highly politicized.¹ The fundamental methods of chemistry such as distillation, fermentation, and fusion, as well as the quantitative methods developed by advocates of the new mechanism, also found their footholds in psychopathology, where they generated a complex array of novel approaches to mental illness. As a student Locke imbibed the theories of Thomas Willis, whose groundbreaking work of neuropathology, *Pathologia Cerebri*, was published in 1667. Willis described mental illness as a problem with the animal spirits, “Substances highly subtil, and Aetherial Particles of a more Divine Breathing, which our Parent Nature hath hid in this Sublunary World, as it were the Instruments of Life and Soul, of Motion and Sense, of every thing”.² Willis’s iatrochemical approach to psychopathology was at the cutting edge of the new science with which Locke was enamored.

It is surprising, then, that Locke developed an account of madness that did not rely on either chemical or mechanical accounts of the brain and nerves; an account not physiological, but intellectual. Theories like Willis’s turned on the indirect compromise of reason by damage to other mental faculties, typically the imagination. Those who believed in the rational soul, like Willis and, most famously, Descartes, argued that the soul itself remained untouched by madness, not diseased but merely disempowered. Suzuki quotes the late sixteenth-century physician André du Laurens’ arresting formulation that the soul cannot lose its power of reasoning just as “the sunne doth never feele any diminishment in brightness” during an eclipse. What eclipses reason are the lower faculties, which, unlike reason and judgment, are vulnerable to harm due to being embodied in the brain, the animal spirits, the nerves, or the humors, depending on the particular approach. The damage causes the “darkening” of mental content, leading to delusions and “melancholic and fixed ideas”.³

¹ Anstey, “John Locke and Helmontian Medicine”, p. 95.

² Willis, *A Medical-Philosophical Discourse of Fermentation*, p. 3.

³ Suzuki, “Dualism and the transformation of psychiatric language in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”, p. 420.

The account of madness that Locke ultimately developed does not turn on the disorder of the brain or body. It is ideational; Locke believes that the contents of thought, rather than the mental powers that produce them, become diseased. While in his early formulations Locke's discussions of madness reflect more of the dominant facultative view – such as in the first drafts of the *Essay*, when he attributes madmen's symptoms to the “violence of their imaginations” – he ultimately seems to lose faith in the explanatory power of the faculties when it comes to madness, though he applies it to other forms of mental disability.⁴ The result is a novel account of madness as the *association of ideas*, which, I will argue in what follows, both grew out of and contributed to skeptical projects: it draws justificatory strength from the philosophy of medicine developed by the ancient school of Sextus Empiricus (discussed in Sections 2-3), and ultimately works to bolster Locke's own skeptical epistemology (Section 4).

2. *Locke's account of madness*

Locke's first known speculations about madness are found in a series of notebook entries written during his travels in France in the mid 1670s. There, Locke interrogates the notion that “Madnesse seemes to be noething but a disorder in the imagination & not in the discursive faculty”, speculating about where exactly normal becomes pathological in our everyday mental processes.⁵ He concludes that madness sets in not at the level of the syllogism (that is, of reasoning) nor at the level of the simple idea (that is, during sensation or reflection), but rather at the level of the proposition.⁶ The trouble begins when pathological ideas are given existential import. Locke sometimes refers to these ideas as “mad”, sometimes as “wrong”: in the terms of his mature taxonomy of ideas in the *Essay*, he seems to consider them “false” insofar as they make “a tacit Supposition of their Conformity” to “any thing extraneous to them”.⁷ Locke contrasts madness with idiocy, a pathology of the faculty of reason itself, noting that while madmen put together “wrong” ideas, they can reason rightly using them. He includes an example he will return to later in the *Essay*, that of

⁴ Locke, *Essay*, II.xi.13, p. 161. By the later drafts of the *Essay*, Locke was using the word “imagination” almost exclusively to refer to the products of fancy, rather than a mental faculty.

⁵ Bodleian Library, MS. Locke f. 2, p. 317 (November 5, 1677), in Dewhurst, *John Locke (1632-1704), Physician and Philosopher*, p. 89.

⁶ Bodleian Library, MS. Locke f. 1, pp. 358-59 (July 22, 1676).

⁷ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxii.4, p. 385.

a madman who has the delusion that he is royalty, and reasons correctly on that basis about the obeisance owed to him.⁸

This account of madness is carried forward more or less consistently through the first three editions of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, where Locke writes, “In short, herein seems to lie the difference between Idiots and mad Men, That mad Men put wrong *Ideas* together, and so make wrong Propositions, but argue and reason right from them: But Idiots make very few or no Propositions, and reason scarce at all.”⁹ In the 1690s, however, Locke returned to the project of explaining the mechanism undergirding madness, which he first refers to as a pathology of the connection of ideas, but later coins a new term for: the *association* of ideas. He lays out the account in full in a chapter added to the fourth edition of the *Essay* (1700) entitled “Of the Association of Ideas”. There he begins his discussion of madness by writing, “There is scarce any one that does not observe something that seems odd to him, and is in it self really Extravagant in the Opinions, Reasonings, and Actions of other Men.”¹⁰ This unreasonableness is caused, Locke argues, by connections between ideas generated not by the active faculties of judgment but instead by chance, habit, or a strong passion.

Because they are not the product of the active powers of discerning, compounding, and judging, associated ideas are uniquely hard to rectify.¹¹ To reason with someone afflicted by a mad idea is as misguided as to “preach Ease to one on the Rack, and hope to allay, by rational Discourses, the Pain of his Joints tearing asunder” – a dig, perhaps, at the Stoic’s optimism about reason’s capacity to overcome all suffering. The only cure Locke mentions is time: “Time cures certain Affections, which Reason, though in the right, and allow’d to be so, has not power over, nor is able against them to prevail with those who are apt to harken to it in other cases.”¹² In *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, originally intended as an addition to the *Essay* but published posthumously in 1706, Locke expands on his discussion of association using material that was intended for Chapter 33. There he makes clear that the best remedy for mad ideas is prophylactics, such as the teaching of proper mental hygiene to children and the careful control of their environment to avoid things like untoward passions, unnecessary frights, and exposure to suggestive fairy stories.

⁸ Locke, *Essay*, II.xi.13, p. 161.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.1, p. 394.

¹¹ Tabb, “Locke on Enthusiasm and the Association of Ideas”.

¹² Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.13, p. 398.

While Locke holds that it may be helpful to imagine the animal spirits moving on set tracks in the brain in order to understand how ideas become associated, he emphasizes that such speculation fall short of explanation:

Whether the natural cause of these Ideas [...] be the Motion of [one's] Animal Spirits, I will not determine, how probable soever by this Instance it appears to be so: But this may help us a little to conceive of the Intellectual Habits, and the tying together of Ideas.¹³

This is typical of Locke's suspension of belief about the physical underpinnings of the mind, discussed in Section 3 below, in which he resists metaphysical assertions even while employing anatomical language to illustrate his points.

Locke instead defines associations as they seem from the inside. They appear to us conjoining ideas that "come to be so united in Mens Minds, that 'tis very hard to separate them"; associated ideas appear to the afflicted person "as if they were but one *Idea*".¹⁴ Locke uses the first-person plural to remind his readers that we can perform the "experiment" – in that early modern sense of "experiencing" – ourselves.¹⁵ Our shared experience is the foundation of his argument: "That there are such Associations made by Custom in the Minds of most Men, I think no Body will question who has well consider'd himself or others".¹⁶ And yet this phenomenological approach to mental illness also brings into view its profoundly personal nature, and Locke's causal claims about the case studies he considers are idiographic rather than nomological. A phobia, for example, may be due to a strong passion or to the accidental annexation of ideas – each case, when considered separately, will be found to result from a different experience in the life of the afflicted person, not coverable under a general law.¹⁷ What we find when we examine our mental life, instead of speculating about its underlying physical substrate, are contingent chains of ideas that together generate our beliefs, memories, and maxims. This aspect of Locke's account is highly original; while contemporaneous accounts allowed for idiographic causes of mental illness, the categories of disease themselves were typically viewed as being united by a shared symptomology and underly-

¹³ Ibid., II.xxxiii.6, p. 396.

¹⁴ Ibid., II.xxxiii.5, pp. 395-96.

¹⁵ Ibid., II.xxxiii.13, p. 398.

¹⁶ Ibid., II.xxxiii.7, p. 397.

¹⁷ Ibid., II.xxxiii.15, p. 399.

ing physiology. Locke, on the other hand, believed every madman to be mad in his own way, to be mad “about” his own ideas.

A lack of appreciation for the way in which ideas, when associated, can strike the understanding as not only natural but indubitable can allow mad ideas to unwittingly be adopted as truths. It is the association of ideas, Locke argues, to which “might justly be attributed most of the Sympathies and Antipathies observable in Men, which work as strongly, and produce as regular Effects as if they were Natural, and therefore called so, though they at first had no other Original but the accidental Connexion of two *Ideas*”.¹⁸ These pathological ideas can be taken for inborn, and may lead to the attribution of phenomena to human nature that are in fact the product of habit and custom. Locke gives the example of a man who eats too much honey, making himself sick. Afterwards he can trace his aversion to the substance to his gluttony, but “[h]ad this happ’d to him, by an over dose of Honey, when a Child, all the same Effects would have followed, but the Cause would have been mistaken, and the Antipathy counted Natural”.¹⁹

Not only phobias and philias but also beliefs can be generated by way of association, and then strike the understanding as inborn; and the repercussions are grave. The feeling of certainty that accompanies these ideas leads those afflicted with them to champion them, and “they applaud themselves as zealous Champions for Truth, when indeed they are contending for Error”.²⁰ For Locke, the infiltration of the intellectual life by mad ideas is a profound danger, not just for the individual, but for the commonwealth: “This gives Sence to *Jargon*, and Demonstration to Absurdities, and Consistency to Nonsense, and is the foundation of the greatest, I had almost said, all of the Errors in the World”, Locke writes; “or if it does not reach so far, it is at least the most dangerous one, since so far as it obtains, it hinders Men from seeing and examining”.²¹

Locke’s narrow definition of the phenomenon of association, even coupled with his deep concerns about its repercussions, suggests that historians of psychology who have read association as a widespread mechanism of cognition in Locke’s thought – similar to the role it plays for Hume – have gotten him wrong.²² Ultimately, Locke discusses the association of ideas only twice in his published works, in the fourth edition of the *Essay* and in the *Conduct*. In contrast, association is

¹⁸ Ibid., II.xxxiii.7, p. 396.

¹⁹ Ibid., II.xxxiii.7, p. 397.

²⁰ Ibid., II.xxxiii.18, p. 401.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See, for example, Warren, *A History of the Association Psychology*, Young, “Association of Ideas”, and Rapaport, *The History of the Concept of Association of Ideas*.

ubiquitous in Hume; its principles are invoked to explain such central functions of the understanding as belief, the indirect passions, and sympathy. Hume writes that if anything can entitle him to "so glorious a name as that of an *inventor*, 'tis the use he makes of the principle of association of ideas".²³ Despite Locke's coinage of the term, this assessment seems warranted. While Hume's theory of associated ideas is clearly drawn from Locke's, the "use he makes of" it is very different. The difference is due less to conflicting definitions of the term than to opposing views on the place that actively generated, law-governed connections between ideas should hold in a theory of human understanding.

Another common misreading has to do with the role of physiology in Locke's account of association. Wolfe has noted the frequent treatment of Locke as an empiricist set on re-founding the philosophy of mind on an anatomical basis – from Kant, who calls Locke's project a "physiology of the understanding", to contemporary scholars who see him as anticipating the mechanistic turn in neurology.²⁴ I agree with Wolfe that "such readings [...] are [...] *not a matter of interpretation* but are simply mistaken".²⁵ A comparison of Locke's *Essay* with the likes of Willis's *Pathologia Cerebri* shows that, for his time, Locke spared relatively little ink for pathological anatomy when discussing madness. This reflects a more general orientation in Locke's discussions of the mind. In line with Willis, Locke seems to concur that ideas are caused by "different degrees and modes of Motion in our animal Spirits, variously agitated by external Objects".²⁶ But where Willis devotes volumes to etiological accounts of cognition and psychopathology in these terms, Locke instead turns his gaze to "All those sublime Thoughts, which towre above the Clouds, and reach as high as Heaven it self".²⁷ In the opening paragraphs of the *Essay* he famously declines to "meddle with the Physical Consideration of the Mind", on the grounds that the "Motions of our Spirits, or Alterations of our Bodies" are "Speculations, which, however curious and entertaining, I shall decline, as lying out of my Way, in the Design I am now upon".²⁸ In the next section I argue that this is due to Locke's abiding loyalty to the position of medical skepticism.

²³ Hume, *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 32.

²⁴ Wolfe, "The 'Physiology of the Understanding' and the 'Mechanics of the Soul'".

²⁵ Wolfe, "From Locke to Materialism".

²⁶ Locke, *Essay*, II.viii.4, p. 133.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II.i.24, p. 118.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I.i.2, p. 43. Critics have noted the multiple places where Locke seems to violate his own precept (see, e.g., Sutton, "Carelessness and Inattention"). As I describe further in Section 3, my feeling is that Locke's irregular mentions of the animal spirits, humors, and other bits of anatomy are generally illustrative, rather than explanatory.

3. *Skeptical Origins*

Preoccupied as he was with the sectarian crises that were unfolding around him, Locke seems exemplary of what has been called “constructive” or “mitigated” skepticism, an early modern response to the widespread destabilization of traditional sources of authority in the 17th century.²⁹ Like the hallowed Francis Bacon, he insists on the importance of suspending assent before judgment, and he subscribes to the Royal Society’s methodology of observation over speculation and experience over theory. Like his contemporaries Robert Boyle and Joseph Glanvill, he champions probabilistic belief as the only appropriate goal for investigations of the natural world, in contrast with the higher degree of knowledge obtainable in the mathematical and moral sciences. The resonance of these commonplace early modern methodological commitments with those of ancient skepticism is frequently commented on in the literature.³⁰

In making such comparisons, historians are indulging an early modern penchant for self-styling in these terms, such as in Boyle’s *The Sceptical Chymist* (1661) or Glanvill’s *Scepsis Scientifica* (1665). Evocative language notwithstanding, there was not all that much deep scholarly engagement by members of the Royal Society with ancient skeptical sources, and their dedication to the pursuit of Christian projects assured that their epistemic practices were fundamentally different from classical ones. It seems all the more appropriate to proceed with caution here in light of Maclean’s dry observation that some of the most convincingly Pyrrhonian passages in Renaissance and early modern scholarship were written before recovery and translation would have made the relevant ancient sources available.³¹ In the case of Locke, scholars who locate

²⁹ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*; Lecuwen, *The Problem of Certainty*; Ferreira, “Locke’s ‘Constructive Skepticism’. A Reappraisal”; Gaukroger, “The Autonomy of Natural Philosophy”.

³⁰ See, for example, multiple contributions in Paganini, *The Return of Scepticism*.

³¹ Maclean, “The ‘Sceptical Crisis’ Reconsidered”, p. 248. Maclean has argued that critics generally move too hastily to conflate the anti-authoritarian anti-Scholasticism of the early modern period with ancient skepticism, ignoring more contemporaneous terms that might describe the stance such as “libertas philosophandi”, “libere philosophare”, and “philosophice loqui”. Similarly, Corneanu has adopted the actor’s category of “cultura animi” to describe the embrace of epistemic humility and temperance of judgment that, as she notes, bore a resemblance to ancient skepticism – but which Glanvill nonetheless bluntly contrasts with the “pretended Philosophy” of the Pyrrhonist (Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*, p. 103). Anstey (*John Locke and Natural Philosophy*) has invoked the Royal Society’s language of “experimental philosophy” and “speculative philosophy” to contrast the privileging of observation and experiment over speculation and hypothesis.

him in the tradition of mitigated skepticism have admitted that "there is little evidence that Locke saw himself as having a special relationship to skepticism as a philosophical position";³² and indeed his belief in a demonstrative science of morality has reasonably led a "committed *anti-skepticism*" to be attributed to him.³³

But there is a particular strand of Pyrrhonism to which Locke was more directly indebted: the ancient empiricist school of medicine.³⁴ Given the preponderance of influential Pyrrhonian physicians – besides Sextus himself, we know of Menodotus, Theodas, and Saturninus – ancient empiricist medicine should be seen less as a context in which Pyrrhonism was applied than as a central site for its development and propagation.³⁵ As Pomata has demonstrated, this close integration of empiricist medical methodology with skeptical epistemology saw a resurgence in the early modern period.³⁶ Early modern physicians situated themselves within the ancient divisions Galen treats in his *On the Medical Sects for Beginners*, and Locke can be read as allying himself with the empiricists against the rationalists.³⁷

Ancient medical empiricists defined themselves in opposition to the rationalist insistence on identifying the underlying causes of disease. This often manifested as a dismissal of anatomy as a worthwhile method.³⁸ Instead they championed the importance of experience, especially observation, in establishing rules according to which the likelihood of a given outcome could be

³² Rogers, "Locke Among the Skeptics", p. 38.

³³ Nidditch, Introduction to Locke, *Essay*, p. xxi (italics mine).

³⁴ Romanell also discusses this connection at some length in his *John Locke and Medicine*, writing that "medical empiricism at the end of the ancient world and British empiricism at the beginning of the modern meet eventually in the intellectual career of John Locke" (Romanell, *John Locke and Medicine*, p. 16). Other claims have been convincingly defended regarding more circumscribed relationships between Locke and ancient skeptical methods. For example, scholars have demonstrated that Locke adopts classical modes of argument in order to defend his view of qualities (Bolton, "Locke and Pyrrhonism"); to argue for toleration (Black, "Locke and the Skeptical Argument for Toleration"); to explore the limits of reason in the political setting (Wootton, Introduction to Locke, *Political Writings*) and to critique innatism (Carey, "Locke as Moral Sceptic"; Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson*). I engage with this last argument below in Section IV. These critics have noted that Locke tended to get his knowledge of skepticism from scholars influenced more immediately by Sextus Empiricus and other ancient writers, such as Pierre Gassendi, Pierre Charron, and Michel de Montaigne. Galen and other natural-philosophical sources likely play an analogous bridging role in Locke's exposure to medical skepticism.

³⁵ Allen, "Pyrrhonism and Medicine".

³⁶ Pomata, "A Word of the Empirics".

³⁷ Romanell, *John Locke and Medicine*; Walmsley, "John Locke's Natural Philosophy (1632-1671)".

³⁸ Hankinson, "Causes and Empiricism", p. 336.

predicted. This experience could either be the physician's own (*autopsia*) or that of other, respected physicians (*historia*). As opposed to rationalists, who speculated about underlying mechanisms to discover the best treatments, and methodists, who treated patients on the basis of a simple system of taxonomy, empiricists relied only on observed correlations between symptoms and interventions. These observed correlations were not experimental because, as Galen put it, "one happens upon these things not on purpose". Nonetheless, useful observations were committed to memory and repeated observations were taken more seriously, resulting in the slow assemblage of a set of "theorems", or best practices. "[W]hen many such theorems had been accumulated by them", Galen writes of the empiricist physicians, "the whole accumulation amounted to the art of medicine, and the person who had accumulated the theorems, a doctor".³⁹ As Pomata has emphasized, empiricists heightened the concept of *tērēsis* not only into a method but also into a normative program, a "rule of conduct (specifically, for them, a way of healing) drawn from the phenomena observed".⁴⁰

As argued above, Locke defends an originally idiographic and ideational account of madness that emerges from similar commitments. It is idiographic insofar as each case of mental illness must be explained in terms of the unique experiences of the individual, not subsumed under general laws; and it is ideational insofar as explanations are to be made in terms of ideas, rather than underlying causal mechanisms such as faculties or animal spirits. These aspects of Locke's theory of psychopathology are representative of his psychologized epistemology more broadly, in which the ideas out of which propositional beliefs are built result from the particular fabric of an individual's experience.

Locke falls short of advocating for an embrace of *epochē*, even as he adopts Pyrrhonian methods of argument against dogmatism and sympathizes with the Pyrrhonist's pragmatic approach to living – and practicing medicine – under uncertainty. He is ultimately committed to the reality of moral knowledge, and believes that there are some maxims known intuitively or through revelation that we cannot, and should not, question. Another central pillar of his epistemology is that where knowledge is not possible, probable belief is; and some beliefs are more justified than others. While for Sextus Empiricus and other ancient thinkers delusions represent nothing but a form of intellectual

³⁹ Galen, *Three Treatises on the Nature of Science*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Pomata, "A Word of the Empirics", p. 11.

diversity, for Locke they are a class of false ideas, and as such deeply threatening to our theological and political projects.⁴¹ Like the skeptic, Locke holds that delusions cannot be countered by reasoning – one cannot, for example, ease a madman's grip on his mad idea by convincing him of the plausibility of another, contradictory idea. But what is disturbing to Locke about madness is not only that it stops us from being skeptical; it also stops us from being right. In the face of this danger, Locke prescribes not sanguinity but aggressive prophylactics and therapeutics. Where Locke is a skeptic is not with relationship to his epistemic goals, but to his methods.

Sources are mixed about whether the empiricist sect denied that underlying entities could ever be known, or just refused to commit to the possibility one way or the other.⁴² The latter position is the Pyrrhonian one, and indeed Sextus chides empiricists who make dogmatically negative claims about the existence of unobservables:

Some say that the Skeptical philosophy is the same as the Empiric school in medicine. But you must realize that if this form of Empiricism makes affirmations about the inapprehensibility of unclear matters, then it is not the same as Skepticism, nor would it be appropriate for Skeptics to take up with this school. They might rather adopt, it seems to me, what is called the Method; for this alone of the medical schools seems to practice no rashness in clear matters and does not presume to say whether they are apprehensible or inapprehensible, but it follows what is apparent, taking thence, in line with Skeptical practice, what seems to be expedient.⁴³

Locke's theory of madness, in this respect, would have met with Sextus's approval, insofar as it does not deny mechanical hypotheses about the mind, and even engages with them when it is useful. But Locke reminds his readers regularly that these hypotheses should be understood as no more than heuristics. He employs causal explanations about what can be observed (in this case, the connections between ideas, via reflection) in order to practice medicine, broadly understood as encompassing the management of the understanding.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxii, p. 384.

⁴² Hankinson, "Causes and Empiricism", pp. 336-37.

⁴³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, 62-63. Allen ("Pyrrhonism and Medicine", p. 246) has argued that Sextus's favoring of methodism over empiricism here should not be read as a statement of his allegiance to the former school over the latter, but as offering a corrective for other empiricists who reject medical reasoning altogether and are dogmatically opposed to speculation.

⁴⁴ Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*.

Two fragments on medical methodology that Locke wrote in the 1660s, while working in close collaboration with the physician Thomas Sydenham, show the origins of these commitments.⁴⁵ “Anatomia” (1668) argues against the pedagogical value of dissection for the physician: “All that anatomie can doe”, Locke writes, “is only to shew us the grosse & sensible parts of the body, or the vapid & dead juices. all wch after the most diligent search will be noe more able to direct a physitian how to cure a disease then how to make a man”.⁴⁶ The argument is that anatomical study cannot actually reveal the operations of the body, “soe minute. & insensible”. The vital processes will always remain unobservable, which means that explanations given in anatomical terms will always, ultimately, be speculative. In medicine, progress will only come from what *can* be observed of the disease process; its symptoms, course, and response to interventions. The doctor needs experience, not speculative knowledge, much in the way the gardener need not have any knowledge of botany but “may by his art & observation be able to ripen meliorate & preserve his fruit without examining, what kindes of juices fibres pores &c are to be found in the roots barke or body of the tree”.⁴⁷ All that speculation about the anatomical causes of disease can do is “offer new conjectures & fresh matter for endlesse disputations”.⁴⁸ The causes worth consideration are those which can be observed in action.

“De arte medica” broadens this insight beyond just anatomy, arguing that physicians have wasted their time by not resting content “to observe the operacon of nature & the event of things” but, rather being “very inquisitive after their cause”, developing “useless speculations, & diverted their enquirys from the true & advantageous knowledg of things”.⁴⁹ If physicians, starting with the ancients, had focused on observation and experience rather than theorization, Locke laments, medicine would be far more developed. But “proud man not content with that knowledg he was capable of & was useful to him, would needs *penetrate* into the hidden causes of things and lay downe princi-

⁴⁵ While there is now consensus that Locke wrote the fragments himself, there remains debate over Sydenham’s influence on Locke at the time they were written; for an overview and deflationary take on the relationship see Anstey and Burrows, “John Locke, Thomas Sydenham, and the Authorship of Two Medical Essays”, and for a defense of the importance of Sydenham’s influence on Locke see Walmsley, “John Locke’s ‘Anatomia’ and ‘De Arte Medica’”, and Walmsley, “Peter Anstey on Locke’s Natural Philosophy”.

⁴⁶ Walmsley, “John Locke’s ‘Anatomia’ and ‘De Arte Medica’”, p. 30.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

ples".⁵⁰ Locke chastises the physician for ignoring the weakness of his faculties, and for his fashioning of "principles & causes & methods of natures workmanship [...] *out of his owne thought*" that compromise the growth of what Locke calls "practicall knowledg" and the improvement of "useful arts". For in its reliance on experience, the practice of medicine is best conceived of as like other crafts such as gardening, tanning, smithing, and baking.⁵¹

These medical fragments reflect three of the themes that also constituted Sydenham's radical medical methodology: 1) skepticism about our capacity to know the workings of nature, 2) pessimism about the value, therefore, of theorizing about disease etiology, and 3) an emphasis instead on observation and experience.⁵² Locke shared these epistemological commitments and took their practical repercussions very seriously. These commitments can be characterized as "empiricist", but not in the sense that term is loosely applied to the "atomistic, sense-data-oriented doctrine" of the Royal Society, what Wolfe has identified as "experimentalist empiricism".⁵³ When it came to medicine, Locke and Sydenham believed that medical progress would come not through the manipulation of nature but the observation of it. Their flavor of "medical" empiricism shares the commitments of the ancient school that gave Sextus Empiricus his name, and which was familiar to early modern physicians primarily through the works of Galen, who explicitly linked Pyrrhonism and empiricism in *On the Sects*.⁵⁴ Galen's works on empiricism and skepticism were tied by early modern readers to those of Sextus – in the 1560s the two authors were even printed side by side in the same volumes.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

⁵¹ Locke is in step with Sextus, who claims that the practical arts are one of the sorts of "everyday observances" with which the skeptic must live in accordance (Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, p. 9). He cites the methodist physician approvingly as being "conducted by feelings to what corresponds to them" (ibid., p. 63). Barnes writes, "A Pyrrhonian doctor's professional activities can thus be explained by reference to his professional training, without supposing that the explanation involves belief" (Barnes, "The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist", p. 14).

⁵² Walmsley, "John Locke's 'Anatomia' and 'De Arte Medica'", p. 11.

⁵³ Wolfe, "Empiricist Heresies in Early Modern Medical Thought", p. 335.

⁵⁴ "The empiricist will not be a man of many words or of long speeches but will talk little and rarely, just like Pyrrho the Sceptic. Pyrrho had looked for the truth and, not finding it, was in doubt about all the things nonevident, but in his daily activities he followed what is evident whereas concerning everything else he remained in doubt. The empiricist's attitude toward medical matters is like the sceptic's attitude toward the whole of life" (Galen, *Three Treatises on the Nature of Science*, p. 42).

⁵⁵ Pomata, "A Word of the Empirics", p. 21.

By Locke's day the moniker "empiric" had become fraught, equated with the uneducated peddler of folk medicine, so it was not a term that he would have applied casually to himself.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, evidence for his allegiance to the tradition can be found throughout his life. Reflecting on the grounds for assent in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* in the mid-1690s he writes,

For example were it my Businesse to understand physick would not the safer and readier way be to consult nature her self, and informe my self in the history of diseases and their cures [, rather] than espousing the principles of The Dogmatists, Methodists or Chymists engage in all the disputes concerning either of those systems and suppose it true till I have tried what they can say to beat me out of it.⁵⁷

In an exchange with Thomas Molyneux in 1693 regarding medicine, Locke reiterates his view "concerning general theories, that they are for the most part but a sort of waking dreams, with which when men have warm'd their own heads, they pass into unquestionable truths, and then the ignorant world must be set right by them".⁵⁸ Locke laments that physicians ignore the "better way" set out by Sydenham, and, in notably Pyrrhonian terms, advocates for conceiving of medical theory as merely "an art of memory to direct the physician in particular cases" since "there is nothing left for a physician to do, but to observe well, and so by analogy argue to like cases, and thence to make himself rules of practice". Writing to Thomas's brother, William, a few years later in 1697, Locke reiterating his point, contrasting the European physicians "stored with their hypotheses, borrowed from natural philosophy", to the ignorant but more effective healers native to America.⁵⁹ He singles out scholars "tied up to the four humours; or sal, sulphur and mercury; or to acid and alkali, which has of late prevailed". The first of these is a dig at Galenists; the second at Helmontians; and the third at the work of his old friend Boyle, who had authored a medical essay entitled "Reflections upon the hypothesis of Alkali and Acidum" (1675). These are all frameworks that Locke, at various points in his career, employed; what he is opposing here is blind loyalty to any in particular. As

⁵⁶ Locke's scornful employment of the term in the *Essay* is typical of his time: "Men are forced, at a venture, to be of the Religion of the Country; and must therefore swallow down Opinions, as silly People do Empiricks Pills, without knowing what they are made of, or how they will work, and have nothing to do, but believe that they will do the Cure" (Locke, *Essay*, IV.xx.5, p. 709).

⁵⁷ Locke, *Conduct*, p. 222.

⁵⁸ Locke, *Correspondence*, Vol. 4, p. 628.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. 144-45.

Wolfe has wryly put it, "The Skeptical Physitian was far more skeptical than the Skeptical Chemist".⁶⁰

4. *Skeptical outcomes*

So much for the skeptical influences that led to Locke's account of madness as the association of ideas – an account resulting from introspection, rather than speculation. What of its skeptical employments? As Carey has demonstrated, Locke's deep interest in travel literature and anthropology provided the material with which he argues, like Montaigne and other skeptics he admired, from examples of cultural relativity to the denial of universal maxims:⁶¹

He that will carefully peruse the History of Mankind, and look abroad into the several Tribes of Men, and with indifferency survey their Actions, will be able to satisfy himself, That there is scarce that Principle of Morality to be named, or *Rule of Vertue* to be thought on [...] which is not, somewhere or other, *slighted* and condemned by the general Fashion of *whole Societies* of Men, governed by practical Opinions, and rules of living quite opposite to others.⁶²

This is the practice encouraged in Sextus's tenth mode of Aenesidemus, which "is the one depending on persuasions and customs and laws and beliefs in myth and dogmatic suppositions".⁶³ Sextus argues that we can achieve *epochē* by reflecting on cultures in which equal and opposite views on all these themes are held – as Locke would later, he lists examples of cultures whose practices would horrify the members of his own. Also as Locke would, he concludes, "Since so much anomaly has been shown in objects by this mode too, we shall not be able to say what each existing object is like in its nature, but only how it appears relative to a given persuasion or custom and so

⁶⁰ Wolfe, "Sydenham and Locke", p. 208. Anstey ("Further Reflections on Locke's Medical Remains") and Walmsley ("Review of Peter Anstey, *John Locke and Natural Philosophy*") have debated to what extent Locke maintains his interest in chemistry after his medical writings of the late 1660s. Bringing his medical-skeptical sympathies into view can further buttress the case for what Anstey has referred to as Locke's "cognitive dissonance", that is, his tendency to make use of hypotheses that he dismisses elsewhere, insofar as it may be that Locke is manifesting the sensibilities of the Pyrrhonian medical empiricist in employing whatever framework gets results – without committing to its underlying metaphysics.

⁶¹ Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson*; and "Locke as Moral Sceptic".

⁶² Locke, *Essay*, I.iii.10, p. 72.

⁶³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, p. 37.

on”.⁶⁴ Following Sextus, Locke ultimately argues that the products of custom can easily be mistaken for natural commitments, and therefore be wrongly taken to bolster the case for universal knowledge.

Locke’s account of association, written decades after his first sallies against nativism, offer a possible mechanism to explain how acquired ideas and maxims could come to seem so authoritative. More powerful than intellectual laziness, prejudice, or corruption, madness was a force capable of making people cling so tightly to their ideas that differences of opinion become permanent and intractable:

Interest, though it does a great deal in the case, yet cannot be thought to work whole Societies of Men to so universal a Perverseness, as that every one of them to a Man should knowingly maintain Falshood: Some at least must be allow’d to do what all pretend to, i.e. to pursue Truth sincerely; and therefore there must be something that blinds their Understandings, and makes them not see the falshood of what they embrace for real Truth. That which thus captivates their Reasons [...] will, when examine’d be found to be what we are speaking of: [the association of ideas].⁶⁵

Locke, of course, believed innatism to be pernicious to philosophy. He was in full sympathy with his Royal Society colleague Glanvill’s claim that “while we thus mistake the infusions of education, for the principle of universal nature; we must needs fail of a scientific Theory”.⁶⁶ We find Locke writing, for example,

Custom, a greater power than Nature, seldom failing to make them worship for Divine, what she hath inured them to bow their Minds, and submit their Understandings to, it is no wonder, that grown *Men*, either perplexed in the necessary affairs of Life, or hot in the pursuit of Pleasures, should *not* seriously sit down to *examine their own Tenets*; especially when one of their Principles is, That Principles ought not to be questioned.⁶⁷

Here the assumption of innatism is presented as one explanation (among others) for why it is hard for people to maintain a skeptical attitude toward their commitments. Ideas associated by custom, rather than being connected

⁶⁴ Cf. Locke: “Every church is orthodox to itself; to others, erroneous or heretical” (Vernon, *Locke on Toleration*, p. 13).

⁶⁵ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.18, p. 400. Compare Diogenes Laertius, reporting a skeptical truism: “Make a commitment, delusion is nearby” (Vogt, *Pyrrhonian Skepticism in Diogenes Laertius*, p. 23).

⁶⁶ As quoted by Carey, “Locke as Moral Sceptic”, p. 9.

⁶⁷ Locke, *Essay*, I.iii.25, p. 82.

by reason, is another – and the two work together most perniciously when mad ideas, “against which it is not in the power of Reason to help us” are mistaken for natural or inborn ones such that inquiry into the demonstrability of moral maxims stops short.⁶⁸

The contingent and personalized manner in which association comes to blind the understanding makes clear that in cases of “Irreconcilable opposition between different Sects of Philosophy and Religion”, falsehoods grow up as organically as truths in the minds of the warring factions. When purportedly innate principles are in fact demonstrable truths, the cost is not so high: a muddled understanding of our own psychology, and a neglect of our God-given rational powers. When, however, they are the result of errors of judgment, faulty propositions may be adopted as revered maxims. And when they are due to mad ideas, reason is useless against them, and it is inevitable that they “shall unexamined be swallowed for a certain Truth.”⁶⁹ It is in this sense that the mistaking of associated ideas for naturally-formed ones can be epistemically catastrophic. The association of ideas leads to a false sense of certainty, which encourages the judgment that they are innate. When nativism is used to encourage others to adopt mad ideas, the result can be a contagion of over-hasty belief. Locke believes philosophical enthusiasm to be as dangerous as religious enthusiasm in this regard.⁷⁰

Locke's skeptical approach to the natural philosophy of the understanding and its pathologies provided a critical service to his lifelong philosophical project: it supplied him with an agile account of madness with which he could diagnose those false ideas that are able to ape certain knowledge and generate maxims that feel inborn. In this way, association offset an uncomfortable skeptical strain introduced into Locke's account by his adoption of Pyrrhonian modes of argument by making it possible, at least in principle, to distinguish true ideas from those that convincingly *seem* true.

5. *A Christian skepticism*

Locke's use of cultural diversity to argue against inborn universal maxims frequently garnered accusations of moral skepticism, and his employment of

⁶⁸ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.13, p. 398.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, II.xxxiii.17, p. 400.

⁷⁰ Tabb, “Locke on Enthusiasm and the Association of Ideas”.

Pyrrhonian strategies was explicitly singled out for criticism.⁷¹ He responded to accusations of relativism by insisting on the possibility of a demonstrative moral science, which could explain how every rational being could discover God's true laws – at least in theory. His late addition of the chapter on association to the *Essay* provided a final strategy for showing that skepticism about innate ideas need not pave the way to moral relativism. Unlike the Pyrrhonian, Locke is not neutral about the cognitive diversity that he describes. Some ideas are healthy and some are depraved, and even if in the heat of madness we cannot know which is which, the difference will matter for us. At the same time, his arguments for the ubiquity of associated ideas grounded his plea for the adoption of skeptical methods to fight back dogmatism and zealotry.

In taking a normative stance on cases of cognitive diversity, Locke is far from the Pyrrhonian skeptic, for whom mad ideas would be just further examples of the diversity of opinion, a rallying cry for equipollence. Locke argues fiercely against giving association any quarter, urging, for example, “those who have children, or the charge of their Education [...] diligently to watch, and carefully to prevent the undue Connexion of *Ideas* in the Minds of young people”.⁷² Yet even here we find hints of Locke's skeptical commitments, for the prevention of association depends on making *tērēsis* a way of life. Children must be trained such that “they often examine those [ideas] that they find linked together in their minds whether this association of Ideas be from the visible agreement that is in the Ideas them selves or from the habitual and prevaileing custom of the mind joyning them together thus in thinking”.⁷³ Yet ultimately Locke's aim is not *ataraxia*, but the discovery of the laws of the Christian God through the proper management of the understanding. This sort of moralizing therapy was, of course, no part of ancient skepticism – as Barnes has put it, for the Skeptics “*Ταραχή* is a disease, *ἐποχή* the cure”.⁷⁴ For Locke the disease is our fallen state, and *epochē* only a passing means to the end of recovering God's grace.

⁷¹ Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson*, p. 67. See also pp. 51–68, where Carey shows that Locke and those he criticized (namely the Cambridge Platonists) were recapitulating ancient debates between later Stoic philosophers like Epictetus and Seneca and their skeptical critics over the existence of inborn concepts (*emphuton ennoian*).

⁷² Locke, *Essay*, II.xxxiii.8, p. 397.

⁷³ Locke, *Conduct*, p. 230.

⁷⁴ Barnes, “The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist”, p. 18.

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Kathryn Tabb
Philosophy Program
Bard College
ktabb@bard.edu