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Locke's Theory of Education as a Philosophical Anthropology

Abstract

My article offers an overview of the role of the theory of education in John Locke's system of ideas. First and second sections outline main interpretations of Locke's educational work, from a religious point of view. Important interpretations of John Locke's work within the framework of history of education are discussed in the third section. In the section that follows, I present my hypothesis on the influence of John Locke's philosophical anthropology, as described in his educational writing, on his political philosophy. Coherency of Locke's ideas will be demonstrated at the end of this section on examples from his writings on epistemology, political philosophy, and theology. Locke's work on education is interpreted as a link between these three fields. In the last section, I present several examples of Locke's Central-European reception.

Key words

human condition, human nature, John Locke, philosophical anthropology, theory of education

The aim of my paper* is to show an anthropological change of early modern philosophy in a mirror of a smaller work of a great philosopher of early modernity, namely John Locke and his text on education *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Locke, 1968). This booklet is not a rigorously composed philosophical work intended for scholars of theory of education; it is simply a selection of personal notes and opinions on education, written for a friend. However, while Locke's booklet is not a coherent text – because of its individual, personal character which is an exception in Locke's œuvre – it contains some interesting, original notes on education, that fall out from a conceptual network of a thoroughly constructed scholarly work. The best examples of Locke's new, original thoughts on education are those related to the topic of good command in languages, especially in foreign languages. In Locke's opinion, the way in which contemporary (17th-century) English young ladies are learning French – without a help of a written grammar,

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only through contact with the spoken language of their *bonnés* and their use of language in everyday life – is much more useful and natural than that of a young gentlemen who are learning Latin from books in organised lessons and use it only for reading and writing books. (However, Locke’s notes on language learning depend on his opinions on the nature of language itself; I cannot talk about Locke’s philosophy of language in my present paper.)

Locke’s unique thoughts on differences between the ways in which ladies and gentlemen are learning foreign languages are not the most original part of his “system” of ideas on education. Locke’s main original contribution is a new attitude towards abilities and possibilities of human beings, which is connected to his thoughts in epistemology, political philosophy, and theology. If I am to briefly outline these connections in Locke’s œuvre, I can say: our minds are *tabulae rasae* from his epistemological point of view, we are freeborn human beings as citizens from the point of view of his political philosophy, and we are free from original sin according to his theology. These statements are three faces of the same hidden anthropology, which appears in its clearest form on pages of Locke’s educational work.

I think that this aim to create an optimistic but well-elaborated system of anthropological ideas has been an important prerequisite for modern philosophy, from early modernity of Locke’s time to contemporary time. This anthropology often appears in form of an educational system, like in Locke’s case. His booklet *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was among very few of Locke’s writings which were well-known at the time of Enlightenment and reached out of the circles of scholars. In the following, I shall firstly briefly examine dominant interpretations of Locke’s educational writings. Based on this overview, I shall discuss in more detail two features of the interpretative literature: an interpretation of Locke’s writings that comes from a religious point of view and a relatively new approach which is offered by history of education. In the next chapter I shall contrast the lack of political thought in the analyses from the field of history of education with the importance of civic education in Locke’s texts. The coherency of Locke’s thought, mirrored in his educational writings, will be shown later. At the very end of this article, I shall outline a possible contribution of the Central-European reception of Locke to the European early modern studies. My hypothesis is that a re-interpretation of the role that 18th–19th-century Locke-readings have had in the Central-European cultural context shows a more characteristic role of civic education than it was acknowledged in the modern interpretative literature of his educational writings.

Interpretations of Locke’s educational writings

Before the analysis of Locke’s text, I have to make some methodological notes. Experiences of the researches from past warn that it is not an easy and harmless task to do a research of great philosopher’s non-philosophical writings

and draw a parallel between these two types of his works. In addition, Locke's booklet had an ambiguous reception. It was Locke's best known and highly appreciated work at the time of his life and during the 18th-century in Europe, while it was of almost no interest to 20th-century scholars of history of philosophy. I shall present few examples of that difference in reception. Margaret Ezzel, a historian of the 18th-century education, noted:

"Leibniz, it was reported, considered it [Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*] a more important work than *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and it went through several editions in French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Swedish during the eighteenth century." (Ezzel, 1991, 237)

Ezzel, according to the *Checklist of Printings* of the Cambridge critical edition of Locke's booklet (Locke, 1968, 98–104), did not mention any Central-European edition. Later, in the second half of the 20th century, a year after the publication of the abovementioned critical edition, a representative volume of researches on Locke, edited by John W. Yolton, discussed all aspects of philosophy of Locke; however without any note regarding his booklet on education (Yolton, 1969). More than a decade later, John Dunn, a well-known researcher of Locke and his time, gave only a passing comment on this booklet in his small but wide-reaching monograph on Locke. It said nothing more than that the booklet has had "some historical importance in shaping English toilet-training practices, at least amongst the educated classes" (Dunn, 1984, 15).

In a striking contrast to this ignorance of the historians of philosophy, Locke's educational work was always appreciated in the fields of history of ideas and history of education. Researches in those fields can provide new and interesting insights on connections between Locke's work and the contemporary genre of *courtesy book* as well as on Locke's influence on the perception of childhood as it was presented in the 18th-century English and French novels (e.g. Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Rousseau's *Emil*). The history of Locke's reception, especially in France and Germany, has been by now thoroughly investigated. For example, the research on the relations between thoughts on education of Locke and those of Christian Wolff is nowadays almost a separate field of research in historiography (for an early example see: Brown, 1952). These are very interesting fields of research; however scholars rarely expand their research efforts to finding the correct place of Locke's work on education in his overall system of thoughts.

Only a few authors have offered their hypotheses on the role which the small work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* might have in Locke's oeuvre. Those writers were mainly interested in Locke's anthropological views, so their inquiries were focused on recovering or reconstructing Locke's hidden anthropology. In Locke's booklet they wanted to find what they have not found in an explicit form in his great academic works (e.g. in his *Essay*). The approaches of these authors have surprisingly strong religious and even denominational background. In those works, Locke's anthropology is connected to theological anthropology

of a particular Christian denomination and strongly linked with some speculative thoughts on Locke's personal faith, expressed within a denominational conceptual framework. One question dominates, either implicitly or explicitly: Was Locke an orthodox, a puritan Calvinist, a Unitarian heretic, or a follower of the Church of England? Tendencies to describe Locke's writings in religious terms are especially visible in British work on Locke and his origins, and are being followed by contemporary researchers of Locke as well. Good example is Canadian philosopher David Gauthier who put the religious questions in Locke-interpretations at the central place when he defined Locke's thinking as "theocentric" (Gauthier, 1977). One should have an overview before sinking into the depths of religious interpretations of Locke.

John Locke as an orthodox Calvinist, and/or a Unitarian heretic

Locke's religious standpoints were topics of interest continuously from his time to modern times, at least in the British thought; it was mainly a question of Locke's personal faith, viewed almost as a biographical problem only. During Locke's life it was an important political question, while today it is a biographical peculiarity; however it was rarely a question for history of philosophy and philosophical interpretation. Could we reach a better understanding of Locke's main works through the interpretation of his religious works and his system of religious beliefs? Paradoxically, the first writer who considered Locke's faith as a philosophical problem was Edward Stillingfleet, bishop of Worcester. In his *Discourse in Vindication of the Trinity* (1696) he derived Locke's epistemology from his supposed anti-Trinitarianism. Books of Stillingfleet and other writers were sophisticated denunciations of distinguished citizens of England; however modern interpreters often understand Locke's religious thoughts in the same way. I shall present few characteristic examples.

John Marshall in his well-known monograph demonstrates in details the change of Locke's religious thoughts by using philological tools (Marshall, 1994). He draws a temporal parallel between this process of transformation and chronological order of Locke's non-religious works, yet he hardly uses these data for interpretation. Marshall's concluding statement does not refer to Locke's works, but to Locke's personal views: according to him, Locke was a "Unitarian heretic".

Richard Ashcraft, who examined Locke's personal library, cautiously describes Locke as a faithful of the Church of England in the margin of the flock, with a great number of heterodox religious beliefs:

"An examination of Locke's ownership of theological works, when compared with the holdings of others, therefore, reveals the wide scope of his unorthodox religious views. Locke was neither a Deist nor a Unitarian, and his sympathies with Quakerism were limited by his anti-inspirational notions of religion, but Edwards Stillingfleet, Bishop of

Worcester, rightly suspected that Locke had departed from the path of Anglican orthodoxy." (Ashcraft, 1969, 58)

Ashcraft as well problematizes Locke's personal and institutionalized faith. John Dunn has argued for Locke's orthodox Calvinism (Dunn, 1984), while W.M. Spellman described Locke as either a perfect Unitarian or a latitudinarian faithful of the Church of England (Spelman, 1988; 1991).

In this context, H. McLachlan has to be mentioned as a first modern researcher of the religious thoughts of Milton, Locke, and Newton (McLachlan, 1976). McLachlan was a principal of the Manchester Unitarian College in 1930's and 1940's and his approach to Locke's legacy was from the perspective of an organized Unitarian Church, which did not exist in England in Locke's time. McLachlan framed the problem in the following sentences:

"Was John Locke a Unitarian? The discussion of this question, beginning thus in Locke's lifetime, has been continued down to the present day." (McLachlan, 1976, 74)

His attitude contained some denominational preconceptions and biases: in his opinion, representatives of the Church of England, who during Locke's life have described him as a Unitarian heretic, have to recognize him as a Unitarian today as well, when Locke enjoys the reputation of a classical philosopher. Despite his biases, McLachlan wrote several important methodological notes on research of religious thoughts of early modernity. He summarized his main argument *against* Locke's *non-Unitarianism* as follows:

"These arguments for the denial of Locke's Unitarianism are quite inconclusive. They spring from the writer's apparent lack of acquaintance with the history of English Unitarianism, and from his identification of Unitarianism in the seventeenth century with Unitarianism in the twentieth." (McLachlan, 1976, 90)

"The evidence, direct and indirect, is conclusive. John Locke was a Unitarian; cautious, conservative and scriptural; in all three respects resembling most Unitarians before John James Tayler, James Martineau and their disciples changed the character and foundation of Unitarian doctrine, whilst maintaining unimpaired its central affirmation of the unity of personality in the godhead." (McLachlan, 1976, 107)

McLachlan's denominational biases lead us to an interesting, but rarely thematized question on the role of Locke's works in the curricula of the Unitarian academies in the 18th century. The starting point and the ending point of a chain of influence are parts of English mainstream culture: with Locke at its beginnings and Priestley and Price at its end; however the middle part of that chain – Locke-readings of semi-underground 18th-century Unitarian Colleges – disappears in a fog.

If we use McLachlan's tinged description on Unitarianism for all denominations of early modernity, without his denominational biases, then we must give up on our demand for direct and exact religious classification of Locke as a person. At the same time, we can begin with a more fruitful work: to consider Locke's

works as documents of discussions, both secular and religious ones, in which influences of Socinus or Calvin on Locke have to be understood in the same way as influences of Aristotle, Bacon, or Descartes. In the context of the present paper that means that we can analyze function of Unitarianism and Calvinism in Locke's works without referring to Locke's personal Unitarianism or Calvinism.

Approach of history of education

Religious approach discussed above poses a question on the relation between Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and John Milton's work *Of Education* in terms of development of Locke's position towards education. Milton had an influence on Locke's opinions on politics and other questions of society – the influence of Milton's *Areopagitica* on Locke's *Epistle on Toleration* is well-known – and the religious content is more explicit in his works. In his *Of Education*, Milton writes:

“The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.” (Milton, 1991, 227)

In his interpretation of Locke's *Essay*, W.M. Spellman adds an explication of Locke's educational booklet (Spellman, 1991). He sketches a conceptual and historical framework for anthropological discussion of Locke's time, saying that it was a debate between an Augustinian argumentation for human sinfulness and its consequences on the background of the doctrine of original sin, on the one side, and on the other was a “Pelagian belief that individuals might perfect themselves through the exercise of free will and the help of right education” (Spellman, 1991, 210). Of course, there were a lot of mixed opinions between these two extremes. Spellman within this framework argues against the novelty of Locke's thoughts on education:

“In fact, there is a very little in the work to suggest that the author was breaking new and controversial ground in the area of educational theory.” (Spellman, 1991, 207)

Spellman's clear aim is to re-link Locke to the mainstream tradition of early modern Protestant thinking. He believes that Locke's sentences on “blank slate”, “white paper”, and “tabula rasa” are overestimated in modern interpretations. Spellman emphasizes strong Locke's *loci* on the weakness of human minds and traces them back to the well-known Christian doctrine which views every human being as a creature of God. At the end of this elaboration, he defines Locke as a typical Latitudinarian faithful of Church of England. Spellman writes: “Milton's [above quoted] conviction [...on] education was [...] Locke's conviction as well” (Spellman, 1991, 221). We can notice a hidden interpretation of Milton's words here as well. Spellman interprets these words as they were in accordance with

Latitudinarian attitudes on the consequences of Adam's Fall. In my opinion, one can interpret Milton's words as a sign of Pelagian or Unitarian anthropology with perfectible human beings and without original sin as well. If we can "repair the ruins of our first parents" without any divine help, then we must have at least a heterodox opinion on the redemption, on our Savior, and on ourselves.

On the pages of her abovementioned paper, Margaret Ezell presents another point of view. She believes that Locke's educational work does not present any novelty in details; however when taken as a whole and considering the fact that it was a work of a famous and distinguished author of the *Essay*, Locke's educational work influenced European cultures in the way which cannot be overestimated. Ezell situates herself in a framework of anthropological considerations which is similar to the one of Spellman, but she is taking the perspective of a historian of theories on education. Instead of talking about human nature in general, she speaks about "human nature embodied in a new-born child" which, according to authors of early modern educational theories, can be innately evil, innately good, or "blank". Ezell is not interested in theological consequences; she focuses mainly on earthly circumstances of the educational theory. That was the reason why she considered Milton's and Locke's aims of education as opposed to each other: Milton's end is heavenly, while Locke's end is earthly endeavor.

Alex Neill wrote more serious and unbiased analysis of the role of education in Locke's system of ideas (Neill, 1991). Neill believes that without Locke's booklet on education we could not resolve important contradiction in his anthropology. It is a contradiction concerning the nature of malleability of humans, which is a condition of possibility of habituation, and which has an important role in both Locke's epistemology (construction of mind) and his thoughts on education (habits instead of rules); and both in epistemic and moral human autonomy. Neill's suggestion is:

"A good education, then, fosters autonomy and virtue through habituating the child to self-mastery; however, involves habituating the child to reason." (Neill, 1991, 256)

Consequences for political philosophy

Surprisingly, booklet *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* has rarely provoked a reflection from the perspective of political philosophy or history of political ideas. Genre of this Locke's work comes close to so-called *courtesy book* – a guide-book for the education of noble males, future politically active citizens; under conditions of a political system, which was developed by Locke's activity as well. I think that we can interpret Locke's oeuvre in the following way: in his *Essay* he explained what a human being is; in his two *Treatises* he explained what are society and government. Then, as the last earthly question and before the explanation of the theological consequences of his philosophy (Locke, 2007; 2008),

he dealt with the question of creation of a good human being for a good society. It is the question: Should we create citizens?

I shall present several examples from *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* which could serve as instructions for political education of a prospective citizen. Locke discusses morals in §185:

“I know not whether he [the pupil] should read [...], till he can read *Tully's Offices* [*De officiis* by Marcus Tullius Cicero], not as a School-boy to learn *Latin*, but as one that would be informed in the Principles and Precepts of Vertue, for the Conduct of his Life.” (Locke, 1968, 294)

Cicero's work was well-known and regarded as an important part of the curricula in Locke's time, nevertheless its central and hegemonic role in Locke's booklet is unusual. It has to be mentioned that in the works of several Latin Protestant classics (e.g. in the last paragraphs of Calvin's *Institutions* about the citizen's right for resistance) *officium* means not only a profession, a position, or an obligation, but also a *call* in the very Protestant meaning of this word. According to Calvinist political theology, members of the Parliament must resist the tyrant *pro officio*; it is their *civic obligation* and the *divine call* at the same time.

Another sign could be found in Locke's opinion on the proficiency in mother tongue as opposite to the use of foreign languages. Locke rejects the fashionable Latin grammar and rhetoric, and recommends an ideal English one:

“... whatever foreign Languages a Young Man meddles with (and the more he knows the better) that which he should critically study, and labour to get a facility, clearness, and elegance to Express himself in, should be his own, and to this purpose he should daily be exercised in it.” (Locke, 1968, 301)

These exercises share no similarities with the so-called “language cultivation”, rather it is an everyday training for the public speech and perhaps for the public writing. It is training for a self-controlled and reflected relation of a responsible citizen to his own speeches. This controlled use of language is not the same as learning language; in this point Locke recommends that a contemporary (late 17th-century) method by which ladies learned languages should be practiced with male students as well.

“Nay, Persons of Quality of the Softer Sex, and such of them, as have spent their Time, in Well-bred Company, shews us, that this plain Natural way, without the least Study or Knowledge of *Grammar*, can carry them to a great Degree of Elegancy and Politeness in their Language: And there are Ladies who without Knowing what *Tenses* and *Participles*, *Adverbs* and *Prepositions* are, speak as properly and as correctly [...] as most Gentlemen who have been Bred up in the ordinary Methods of Grammar-Schools.” (Locke, 1968, 277)

Locke's thoughts on education are integrated in his system of ideas where they represent important elements: because of the malleability of human beings, almost every characteristic of humans comes from education. Locke speaks about

a pupil, “who, being very little, I considered only as white Paper, or Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases”. Locke believed that adults, educated in his system, can use their political liberty and epistemic autonomy to free their soul from original sin.

Central-European reception of Locke's theory of education

As it was mentioned at the beginning, the *Checklist of Printings* of the Cambridge critical edition does not mention any Central-European editions, with an exception of a few very modern ones (Locke, 1968, 98–104). That was reflected in the interpretative literature as authors mostly used this information in their research on the reception of Locke's writings in education in Europe during the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, this list is highly incomplete, especially regarding Central Europe. Every researcher should have no problems in finding Locke-editions in European languages that are omitted from the list. In Hungarian libraries alone, I have found three Hungarian editions of two translations and a paraphrase. I am sure that the situation is the same in the neighboring cultures and languages. The interpretation of Locke-reception in the so-called “peripheral” cultures of Europe, based on false data, represents more than a micro-philological fallacy. A map of cultural heritage of European Enlightenment is sketched using similar micro-philological tools, and false tools produce false, misleading map. By the present state of the Locke-studies, the 18th century translations and paraphrases of his works – including his wide-spread educational writings with their different translational prefaces and notes – have an important position in the interpretation of the impact of Locke's ideas in Europe. However, the French editions, based on the translation of Pierre Coste, still figure as central ones. On the other side, without Dutch, Swedish, German, Italian, and other translations we cannot see the process in its complexity. Ignorance of editions in Central-European languages in mainstream interpretative literature goes hand in hand with the lack of perspective on Central-European Enlightenment in the 18th century Locke-readings.

As an example of those hidden Central-European Locke-readings, I shall present two characteristic cases of the Hungarian 18th century reception of Locke. István Weszprémi, a medical doctor from the age of Enlightenment, wrote a paraphrase of a part of Locke's booklet in his book on physical education of children, starting from birth till the age of three. He called Locke a famous colleague and examined his recommendations from the standpoint of a physician (Weszprémi, 1760). His point of view is important as it signals the change regarding the understanding of the body in Enlightenment, based on early modern ideas, with important consequences for the attitude towards human body in the 19th century.

Next to this example of medical perspective in interpretation of Locke's educational work, I shall also mention the 18th-century translation of Locke written by Hungarian Protestant aristocrat of Transylvania Count Ádám Székely, a follower of Voltaire. He wrote a preface to an edition he translated (Locke, 1771). If we here use the method of researchers of history of education, which was deeply influenced by the religious point of view, this preface could at first read as a reintegration of Locke's work into the old-fashioned Augustinian framework: Székely claims that we need education because of our corrupted nature. Closer reading reveals the standpoint that corrupted human nature can be repaired through education done in the manner of previously mentioned Milton's "Pelagian theory". By the end of this preface the reader realizes that the question of translator's greatest concern is how to create active, virtuous, and educated *citizens*; the possible argumentation in favor of religious anthropology is nothing more than a side-note, put in brackets.

Locke's pragmatic political philosophy cannot be properly understood within the abovementioned denominational interpretative framework – therefore we should develop a new frame which could accommodate similar phenomena of the Locke-reception in Central Europe, and modestly modify the scheme of the overall European Locke-reception.

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**Teorija odgoja Johna Locke
kao filozofska antropologija**

Sažetak

Članak donosi pregled uloge koju Lockeova teorija odgoja ima u njegovu sustavu ideja. U prvome i drugome dijelu teksta ocrtavaju se glavne interpretacije Lockeova teksta o odgoju, koje polaze s religijske točke gledišta. U trećemu dijelu raspravlja se o značajnim interpretacijama Lockeova djela u okviru povijesti odgoja. U narednome poglavlju izlažem moju hipotezu o utjecaju koji je Lockeova filozofska antropologija, kako je ocrtana u njegovim radovima o odgoju, izvršila na njegovu političku filozofiju. Koherentnost Lockeovih ideja dalje se prikazuje na primjerima iz njegovih radova iz epistemologije, političke filozofije i teologije. Lockeov rad na pitanjima odgoja interpretira se kao poveznica između ovih triju područja. Na kraju teksta donosim nekoliko primjera recepcije Lockeovih radova u području središnje Europe.

Ključne riječi

ljudsko stanje, ljudska priroda, John Locke, filozofska antropologija, teorija odgoja

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**Erziehungstheorie John Lockes
als philosophische Anthropologie**

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel bringt einen Überblick über die Rolle, die Lockes Erziehungstheorie in seinem Ideensystem spielt. In dem ersten und zweiten Teil des Textes zeigen sich in Umrissen die Hauptinterpretationen von Lockes Text zur Erziehung, die vom Religionsstandpunkt ausgehen. Im dritten Teil erörtert man bedeutsame Interpretationen des Werks Lockes im Rahmen der Erziehungsgeschichte. Im nächsten Kapitel lege ich meine Hypothese über den Einfluss dar, welchen Lockes philosophische Anthropologie, wie sie in seinen Arbeiten über die Erziehung umrissen wurde, auf seine politische Philosophie ausgeübt hat. Die Kohärenz von Lockes Ideen wird weiter an Beispielen aus seinen Arbeiten über die Epistemologie, politische Philosophie und Theologie dargestellt. Lockes Arbeit an Erziehungsfragen wird als Bindeglied zwischen diesen drei Gebieten interpretiert. Zum Schluss des Textes bringe ich etliche Beispiele der Rezeption von Lockes Arbeiten auf dem Gebiet Mitteleuropas.

Schlüsselwörter

Zustand des Menschen, Natur des Menschen, John Locke, philosophische Anthropologie, Erziehungstheorie