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The Hidden Roots of Critical Psychology: Locke, Shaftesbury and Reid

Michael Billig

To Sheila

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1 Introduction

On September 29 1694, a young man wrote to his old teacher and family friend about the progress of his studies. No, he had not made any new discoveries, he wrote. And if he had, he would have kept quiet about them. Mankind did not need any more so-called inventions. So, it was all the better that he little to report. Perhaps down the ages, young people have written in this way to teachers and parents, justifying why their youthful promise was remaining unfulfilled. Such letters hardly deserve to be preserved for posterity. But this letter was different. It symbolises a crucial moment in the history of psychology – but it is a moment that has become forgotten, even hidden.

The teacher was John Locke, whose Essay Concerning Human Understanding sought to show how the human mind operated. Locke's Essay has been justly hailed as one of great books in psychology's early history. It changed the way that later generations thought about the human mind and it laid the basis for today's cognitive psychology. The young man would become the third earl of Shaftesbury. His name is no longer familiar today, particularly among psychologists. Yet, in arguing against the views of Locke, he proposed a very different way of understanding human nature. He was, it will be suggested, a great psychological thinker, whose ideas deserve far more than the general neglect that is their present fate.

To recognize the intellectual importance of Shaftesbury requires a rewriting of psychology's history. In most histories of psychology, he does not even figure as a footnote. The first volume of a recent magisterial Handbook of Psychology was devoted to the history of psychology (Freedheim, 2003). None of the contributors to this large volume mention Shaftesbury. He is beyond the scope of psychology's past, as seen by psychologists. Any claim to the contrary involves reversing a number of assumptions that have become entrenched within the discipline. This is why the revision is so important: more is at stake than events that occurred over three centuries ago.

Of course, the temptation is to ask why on earth psychologists should bother with Locke and the third earl. The topic might be vaguely interesting in its own right, but surely it hardly merits great attention. Academic psychologists are extremely busy people. They have studies to design, data to analyze, papers to write. From all sides, the journals keep rolling out new research reports. One must not slip behind. International congresses must be attended, sponsored workshops organized, and opportunities for funding pursued. There is simply too much to be done. It seems unreasonable to expect psychologists to attend to exchanges between long dead figures. The past will have to wait for the peaceful, future moment that never seems to arrive.

Nevertheless, there are a good number of reasons why Locke and Shaftesbury – and other figures discussed in this book, such as Thomas Reid and Pierre Gassendi - matter to the present. The past is never finished. As new intellectual challenges arise, so our views of the past change. Sometimes it is necessary to ask what the conventional views are

overlooking: what is being concealed today by the histories that have been regularly told? Is there something decisive that needs to be recaptured? The works of Shaftesbury, with their wholly different psychological insights, are one such gain from a revision. They are, indeed, a treasure worth digging up.

There are particular reasons why the re-evaluation of the psychology's past is so timely. At present, the orthodox ways of doing psychology are being challenged by the emergence of new forms of psychology. These new forms can be loosely bracketed under the heading of 'critical psychology'. The label is not entirely felicitous, but it will do for present purposes. Critical psychology includes such trends as social constructionism, post-modern psychology, discursive psychology and a number of forms of feminist psychology. By and large, the critical psychologists accuse conventional psychologists of having an overly narrow view of humans.

This can be seen in relation to a key, psychological question: How do we get our ideas of the world? The dominant form of psychology over the past thirty years has been cognitive psychology. In answering the question, cognitive psychologists tend to look towards the functioning of the individual brain or mind. They seek to understand how an individual receives information from their senses, computes this information and structures it into representations of the world. By and large, critical psychologists take issue with this perspective. They contend that we do not construct our ideas of the world purely from our own individual minds. We receive ideas from others. Thus, our ideas, even before they enter our minds and become ours, have a long, social history. In this

way, our minds – or, rather, our ways of thinking – are constructed by the social processes of history.

In this clash, two visions of psychology can be discerned. The cognitive perspective is concerned with the processes of individual thought. The analysis of society is left to sociologists, social historians and other social scientists. It is, as it were, put beyond the boundaries of psychology. The critical perspective, by contrast, seeks to break down these disciplinary boundaries. It claims that the analysis of the individual mind cannot be separated from understanding social processes, for the so-called ‘individual mind’ is always part of the wider social world. It is easy for critical psychologists to imagine that, in posing this challenge to cognitive psychology, they are breaking with established patterns of thinking and, thereby, proposing new ideas.

This is where the confrontation between Locke and Shaftesbury is so fascinating and so important. In many respects, their differences three hundred years ago mirror the debates of today. Locke was the cognitivist, shutting out history from his analysis of the mind. Shaftesbury was deeply immersed in history, stressing the social nature of humans. Their respective views of the human condition reflected their views of their own work. Locke imagined that he was doing something entirely novel, breaking with past traditions of understanding. Shaftesbury always took the historical perspective. He connected his own vision of the human condition, as well as Locke’s opposing vision, with a long history that stretched back to ancient times.

One big difference between critical and cognitive perspectives lies in their respective stances towards history. According to the critical perspective, historical and social analyses are part of psychology. There is no firm boundary to demarcate exactly where the psychology stops, and where the history starts. If we are examining how history creates patterns of thinking – how social processes create the individual mind – then there cannot be a clear boundary. For this reason, the present inquiry is not purely, or even primarily, a study of history. Strictly speaking, it is not a history of psychology: as if history is the subject and psychology is the object. The psychology and the history are mixed together. This is as much a psychological investigation – or, at least, an investigation of psychological ideas – as it is a historical one. It is, if anything, a plea for psychological ideas to be understood historically.

This applies to the critical perspective itself. If the critical perspective is to be genuinely historical, as well as being genuinely critical, then it needs to pay critical attention to its own history. This is where the necessity for revising the history of psychology comes in. Any sustained challenge to the present ways of doing psychology should involve a challenge to the way that its past is understood. The matter can be put quite simply. Critical psychologists are arguing that the scope of psychology should be widened. Ways of thinking and doing research, which were not traditionally part of the discipline of psychology, are now being encouraged. These new forms of psychology have not come into the world without a past. They, too, have a history. As they become part of psychology, so they should be bringing with themselves a different past into the scope of psychology.

A figure such as the third earl of Shaftesbury would scarcely have seemed a psychologist a while ago. He did not conduct experiments or write treatises that sought to systematise the inner processes of thinking. In the eyes of standard experimentalists or today's cognitive scientists he is not recognizable as a psychological thinker. However, it will be argued that many of the central themes of his writing anticipate post-modern ways of understanding the nature and practice of thinking. The parallels can, indeed, be quite striking. On so many matters, Shaftesbury's ideas resemble those of Mikhail Bakhtin, who has been so influential in recent years, especially within critical psychology. Thus, with the emergence of critical psychology, Shaftesbury becomes identifiable as a psychological thinker.

In addition, Shaftesbury's ideas about the importance of 'common sense' influenced the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Thomas Reid took up the notion of 'common sense' and developed it in an original way. In so doing, Reid anticipated the ordinary language philosophy of the twentieth century and, in particular, what has come to be known as Speech Act theory. Discursive psychologists, who criticise the theories and methodologies of cognitive psychology, have been using Speech Act theory to investigate how language, and particularly how psychological language, is used in everyday life. In doing this, they are using ideas and insights with a longer history than is often supposed.

One might ask why this history is not generally appreciated. The present book is not primarily an investigation into the forgetting of thinkers such as Shaftesbury and Reid – that would require an examination of the nineteenth century rather than the eighteenth. However, the issue cannot be avoided. It is possible to point to occasions when the historical roots have not merely been forgotten; they have also been wilfully neglected and sometimes even hidden. The story of critical psychology's hidden roots cannot avoid stories about accusations of plagiarism.

Structure of Book

In general outline, the book will move forward in time. After a theoretical chapter, examining the relations between psychology and history, there will be two chapters on Locke. Then there will be three chapters on Shaftesbury. And finally there is a chapter on Reid. The sequence is clear, going from the late seventeenth century, when Locke published his Essay, through to the late eighteenth century, when Reid's final works appeared. Because this is a psychological investigation, as well as a historical one, the narrative does not simply move forward. Past psychological ideas are continually being reflected against present ones.

The narrative movement not only shuttles between past and present, but also between the early modernity and an even more distant past. Locke may be thought to be a starting-point. He may have imagined that he owed no intellectual debts to forebears. But his ideas, as Shaftesbury argued, have a history. And so, in considering Locke, the movement

is not only forwards, to see how his ideas fare in terms of modern cognitive science. The movement also goes backwards to his neglected forebear, Pierre Gassendi, and from there even further back to the Epicureans of the ancient world. A chronological table is included following the last chapter, in order to help readers unfamiliar with the events and periods discussed.

The first of the Locke chapters outlines his cognitive approach, which came to be known as his 'way of ideas'. The radical nature of Locke's 'way of ideas' cannot be appreciated without some understanding of the dangerous times in which he lived and worked.

Therefore Locke's life and its political context are described. In this chapter, Locke's ideas about the mind will be evaluated in terms of modern cognitive science. The second Locke chapter attempts to go further. It examines the historical roots of Locke's own ideas, questioning the cognitive account that he tries to give of his own thoughts. Locke claimed that he spun his ideas from his own mind. The record is much more ambiguous. There are much longer lines of historical continuity.

The following three chapters deal with Shaftesbury. The first of these three chapters outlines Shaftesbury's life and his relations with Locke. There we meet the young letter-writer tactlessly dismissing the 'discoveries' of thinkers such as his teacher and showing his impatience with Locke's sort of cognitive psychology. The ancient ideas of stoicism were attracting him. In the second of these three chapters, we find Shaftesbury reacting against the basic Locke's cognitivism and particularly against his individualism.

Shaftesbury emphasized the social nature of humans; we are not merely driven by

individual motives but we possess moral and aesthetic natures. Locke's theories of judgment were, in Shaftesbury's view, fundamentally flawed. And so was Locke's failure to develop a full historical consciousness.

The third chapter on Shaftesbury discusses how the third earl proposed some surprisingly post-modern views about the mind. He emphasized the importance of language, suggesting that we discover truths through dialogue, and especially through using ridicule in conversation. Thinking was not an inner, perceptual process, as Locke envisaged, but it involves dialogues with the self; and that necessitates a divided ego. Generally, Shaftesbury championed contradictions and varieties of opinion – or what Bakhtin in the twentieth century would call 'heteroglossia'. On a whole range of issues, Shaftesbury was proposing a pre-Bakhtinian psychology. This is not entirely surprising, given some hidden links.

Chapter Eight traces the influence of Shaftesbury on Reid and then shows how Reid systematically challenged Locke's 'way of ideas'. In doing this, Reid was developing an approach that would become associated many years later with Wittgenstein. Reid was criticising metaphysical speculation in the name of common sense. Most importantly, he was questioning the reality of Locke's concept of 'ideas'. Reid's criticisms could just as easily be applied to the notions of 'mental representation' or 'cognition', as used today in cognitive science. Reid's view that we do things with words – rather than use words to mirror ideas – was an argument directed against Locke. More than that, it strikingly anticipates the view of language which was seemingly created anew in the mid-

nineteenth century and which is currently so influential in discursive psychology today. Again, there has been forgetting in the interests of celebrating the so-called 'new'.

Caveats

One problem with tracing the history of psychology back into the early modern period is that the word 'psychology' was not then in general use, at least not in English. Locke, when he was writing about the nature of understanding in his Essay, believed that he was writing philosophy, not psychology. At that time, the term 'philosophy' had a much wider significance. The natural sciences, then, were typically described as being 'natural philosophy'. The borders between 'natural philosophy' and 'philosophy' were porous. There were no guards checking documents to see which side of the boundary particular thinkers belonged to. The result is that the thinkers discussed here often used 'philosophy' in ways that today would include psychology.

Readers will not be continually warned about the undisciplined use of the word 'philosophy'. For example, a later chapter will mention a letter Shaftesbury wrote complaining of Locke's theory. According to Shaftesbury, Locke was implying that all desires have to be learnt. Very poor philosophy, Shaftesbury commented. There will be no addition in brackets, warning readers that Shaftesbury actually meant 'Very poor psychology'.

In part, the absence of routine warnings about the word ‘philosophy’ reflects stylistic considerations. To avoid continually breaking up the text, it is hoped that this general warning will suffice. In part, there is a theoretical reason for the absence of continual reminders. By and large, critical psychologists regret the expulsion of philosophy (as well as other disciplines) from the disciplinary territories that psychologists have founded for themselves and that they jealously protect. Continual reminders would have the effect of suggesting that certain matters are ‘really’ psychology, while others are ‘really’ philosophical. In this way, the reminders might have the effect of re-instating boundaries that merit being challenged.

A word about quotation is also necessary. Late seventeenth and early eighteenth century English does not look the same as modern English. Most obviously, there are differences in spelling and the use of capital letters. In those days, letter-writers were very free with their spellings and abbreviations. There is more than a passing resemblance between the letter-writing of that period and modern codes of text-messaging. For the sake of convenience, quotations from early English printed texts and letters have been rendered into standard, modern English formats. For this reason, Lawrence Klein’s text of Shaftesbury’s Characteristicks is used, for Klein has already undertaken this task of linguistic modernization. But, as the previous sentence indicates, there is one inconsistency. For the name of Shaftesbury’s great work, the old spelling has been retained. Modernizing the title of that obstinately un-modern work seems to take away more than just the penultimate letter.

Telling the story of Locke and Shaftesbury, of course, does not mean that there are no other historical stories worth telling. The present account concentrates on the development of psychological ideas and counter-ideas in Britain, at the expense of similar developments elsewhere. Certainly, late seventeenth century Britain was a special place. The scientific spirit was in the air. The Royal Society was founded, with Locke as an early member. Newton and Boyle, both of whom were friends of Locke, were uncovering the secrets of the universe. As will be argued, Shaftesbury was reacting against the idea that the scientific spirit would transform our knowledge of ourselves, as it was transforming our knowledge of atoms, gravity and corpuscles.

Although critical psychologists have largely ignored Shaftesbury's reaction to Locke, some have sought to find other early modern roots for their ideas. They have tended to look towards Italy, rather than Britain. Some have seen Giambattista Vico as an early radical thinker, who recognized the social nature of humans (e.g., Glasersfeld, 1984; Shotter, 1986 and 1993c). There would be good reason to explore in detail the links between Shaftesbury's and Vico's ideas. The issue will be touched upon in the first chapter on Shaftesbury. But one thing can be predicted with a fair degree of confidence. If there are links between Vico's and Shaftesbury's ideas, then the links should run from Shaftesbury to Vico, rather than in the opposite direction. The remembering of Vico as an early psychological thinker makes the forgetting of Shaftesbury all the more poignant.

There is another matter. This concerns the selection of intellectual ancestors. It may be objected that the present account of the past is only being extended to encompass more

males. In the case of the third earl and his views on gender, there is much to make the contemporary admirer cringe with embarrassment. It must be conceded that this search for roots predominantly uncovers male contributions. But it is not an exclusively male story. Along the way, we will also see Lady Damaris Masham make her philosophical entrance, albeit all too briefly. The present work will mention Shaftesbury's use of Epictetus and, less centrally, Condillac's debt to Locke. However, it will not explore the intellectual contribution to the times made by Elizabeth Carter, the seventeenth century blue-stocking who translated Epictetus into English; nor will it discuss Mlle Ferrand, who, as Condillac admitted in the preface to his Traité des sensations, was the intellectual genius behind that work and deserved to be credited as its author (Condillac, 1754/1798, pp. 12ff). It would be too much of a diversion to go into these stories. Without a doubt, these tales should be told.

Theoretical reasons can be given for recounting the history of Locke and Shaftesbury. Theory, however, has its limitations. There is an additional reason: it is a wonderful story. The personal relations between the two are probably unique within the history of ideas. Once the history of ideas becomes a dry account of concepts, removed from all considerations of personality, politics and private life, then something crucial is lost. Accordingly, the story of Locke and Shaftesbury deserves to be re-told, as a tale which mixes the personal and the philosophical. This makes the story of their disagreement all the more fascinating.