Greg Forster’s *Starting with Locke* (Continuum, 2011) argues that Locke’s theology, views of religious toleration, political and epistemological thought all had something in common. They were answers to how a society torn apart by religious differences could become more peaceable. Religious fragmentation caused by the Reformation, what Forster terms “the earthquake,” (4) brought on social conflicts, violence, wars, and divisions along the proliferating lines of religious differentiation and identification. These divisions and conflicts were motivated by the underlying assumption that peaceable societies could only be secured if members had shared religious worldviews and commitments, but “after the Reformation, the assumption of a shared faith was removed” (122). “The earthquake” was then “the catastrophic breakdown of social consensus about the intersection of religion, morality, and politics” (2). Locke, affected by these developments, strove to reconcile politics and religion and to find new grounds of political membership. Those new grounds were, to use Rawls’s phrase, related to the idea that “comprehensive conceptions of the good” were not legitimate bases of political or civil coercion or dispute (yet, to be sure, Forster does not make any connections between Rawls and Locke). New criteria of political membership could then be argued for, where agreements and disagreements were limited to civic matters and where religion was privatised so that mutual agreement could occur even in the face of deeper, metaphysical disagreements. Forster argues, then, that the motivational underpinning to Locke’s thought was to help “people of mutually hostile religious beliefs build a common citizenship” (2) or again, to develop “some account of how to build moral consensus in the absence of religious consensus” (146). Contemporary societies, Forster notes, are still grappling with reaching consensus among disagreements and with the issue of how metaphysically far political disputes should go, so the problems that Locke chose to tackle are akin to our own and this is one reason why Locke is still relevant.

Another central issue for Locke, argues Forster, was the appropriate limits of political power, which, since Henry VIII, appeared, by virtue
of Locke’s Whig politics, to be increasingly abused by English kings. In reaction to this awareness and to the felt possibility of religious persecution under a new variety of power-hungry Catholic monarchs, Locke maintained that power was not the basis of political authority and rather that its business was to secure justice, or natural law. And by putting forward a non divine right theory of political authority and by developing a view of political legitimacy that starkly opposed tyranny, this enabled Locke to develop a “revolutionary politics” that justified overthrowing predatory despots.

As one might surmise from the above, Forster is concerned with “reconstructing the real Locke,” the “real, historical Locke,” who has been for two centuries “reduced to a dry peddler of airy abstractions” (x). However, the publisher Continuum sets the overarching aim of the book in place. The book is part a philosophical series that “offers clear, concise and accessible introductions to key thinkers in philosophy… [and these series are] ideal for first-year students starting out in philosophy” (ii). As this is the promised purpose of the book, I will review how adequately it meets this purpose.

Before going there, I should note that Forster is chiefly concerned with summarising Locke’s thought within the particular historical context of Locke’s times. By Locke’s times, Forster means the English Civil War in response to the Reformation, Locke’s stay at Christ Church, Oxford, Locke’s friendship with Anthony Ashley Cooper, Ashley’s participation in the Cabal Ministry, Charles II and the Exclusion Bill, Locke’s and Ashley’s time in the Netherlands, the Glorious Revolution, and Parliament’s officiating the Bill of Rights. I note this because Forster does not aim at demonstrating connections between Locke and liberal theory and societies. Nor could Forster fall into a group that C.B. Macpherson pointed out in his introduction to the Second Treatise of Government—where Locke provided an “acceptable theoretical fall-back for publicists who accept the modern liberal state and society uncritically.” (Hackett Publishing Company, 1980, vii). While Forster does not fall into such a grouping, he is also not critical of Locke. To the contrary, he regularly paints him as a down-to-earth innovator.

In terms of Locke’s biography, Forster capably describes Locke’s transformation from having Anglican theological and political persuasions (that is, at the time) in his early days at Oxford to becoming a constitutional monarchist with a “revolutionary politics” in his later days, as much influenced by his friendship with Lord Ashley and his experiences in the Netherlands. Being that Forster’s Locke is concerned with finding moral consensus amid religious divisions, Forster’s reconstructing of “the real
Starting with Locke involves illustrating how Locke’s corpus sought to create a model of moral consensus amid religious hostilities. It is for this reason that a good part of the book covers the intersection between Locke’s theological and political thought (Chapter 3, 63-86). Here, Forster writes on Locke’s views of religious toleration and its basic limit, Locke’s dismissive views on tradition as properly grounding religious belief, a discussion on why Locke thought faith and reason to be compatible, and the proper division between religion and the state. This chapter could be used for newcomers to the seminary or for a philosophy of religion class where the focus was on social matters.

While I think Forster successfully offers a “clear, concise, and accessible introduction” to the historical Locke, I am, in the end, less convinced that the book is ideal for the first-year philosophy student. For example, let me take Forster’s discussion of Locke’s epistemology. Forster writes that Locke “provides a detailed account (which we need not review here) on the various different types of ideas in each of these categories, and of how simpler ideas combine to form more complex mental structures. Locke’s emphasis on the central importance of ideas in epistemology was unprecedented” (52). The latter could be an interesting claim were Forster to discuss Locke’s philosophical understanding of ideas, but this is dismissed by Forster for its irrelevancy. Forster has a chapter devoted to Locke’s epistemology, but his discussion of ideas goes no further than saying that ideas are “anything the mind is directly aware of thinking about” (52). This move impairs the reader’s ability to comprehend the philosophical meaning of Forster’s further discussions on Locke’s epistemology. As a matter of mere accounting, there is no discussion of (the passivity of) simple ideas, ideas versus qualities, and hence, no discussion of primarily/secondary qualities or the corpuscularian hypothesis/epistemological atomism. Nor is there mention of the origin, retaining, comparing, abstracting, compounding, or discerning of ideas as what the human mind does in its reasoning and understanding. No matter how one might go about discussing Locke’s understanding of ideas, the reader will not know what Locke means by them by the end of the book.

Perhaps more interestingly, Forster’s discussion on Locke’s epistemology does not contain the word “empiricism” or the phrase “Classical British Empiricism.” Of course, one could discuss the idea of empiricism without using the word, but Locke’s empiricism, one way or the other, is not represented. Aside from Forster’s discussion on Locke’s view on miracles, which he writes can be described as an “evidence-based approach to faith,” (79) I am doubtful that a first-year philosophy student
with little background, after reading this book, could distinguish between rationalism and empiricism—or know that Locke was an empiricist. This raises another point. Forster, in more than one place, describes Locke’s focus on ideas to be unprecedented. To memorize this without an argument may do a disservice to the beginner interested in Locke’s thought (who after all need not be a student). For Locke is placed in the ‘Way of Ideas’ tradition (i.e., we are only immediately aware of ideas), whose popular minister was Descartes, and Locke certainly makes use of Descartes’ notion of clear and distinct ideas in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Speaking of Descartes, Forster’s only formal discussion on the man portrays him as a rather absurd fellow doubting his existence, nightgown attired—so much then for arousing curiosity in the beginner’s mind in he who is often identified as the first modern philosopher. The reader will know that Locke and Descartes are not philosophical comrades. The basic reason for this, Forster tells us, is that Descartes was too engaged with those ‘airy abstractions’—so one will not know their philosophical breaking points.

Forster’s states that Locke’s attack against innate ideas (where the target in this case is Descartes) is a “subtle argument” (50) and the rest of the discussion is subtle. For example, consider the passage,

Instead, Locke is simply arguing that beliefs undergo a process of discovery and formation. The doctrine of “innate principles” implies that some beliefs transcend such processes. Locke wants to establish that all beliefs are subject to some sort of constructive process within the mind, by which the mind figures out what it believes (51).

Locke wants to establish a foundational epistemology upon which any science could be based (yet Forster states that the primary reason for Locke’s epistemological project was to discover the differences between opinion and knowledge, which Locke is concerned with, but not first and foremost—and one may say so because Locke tells us what his aims are in Book I, Chapter I, of the Essay). This being Locke’s main aim, his attack against innate ideas is not a matter of subtlety—it is essential and decisive for Locke in order to go further in the Essay. I am unclear as to why one needs to say to beginners in philosophy that Locke’s arguments against innate ideas are somewhat understated. To the contrary, Locke offers a slew of arguments in the modus tollens format against innate ideas, which makes those arguments at least structurally straightforward. Most importantly, the upshot of Locke’s attack against innate ideas is not represented—that the human mind is a tabula rasa and that experience and observation source all
the operations of reasoning and are the bases of all knowledge. Rather, the upshot of Forster’s discussion on innate ideas is that we nevertheless “have innate powers of reasoning and perception” (which sounds Kantian, and, in Locke’s language, one might instead say ‘innate capacities of reflection and sensation’) and that “we’re not born [already believing in something] – we have to go through a process of realization” (51). Whatever the reader might take that to mean, this nevertheless eschews the important philosophical point—Locke’s empiricism.

Finally, while Forster has several sections discussing Locke’s understanding of the degrees/limits of knowledge (although he doesn’t explain, as Locke does in Book 4, Chapter 2 of the Essay that those degrees fall into the clusters of intuitive, demonstrative, and sensitive) the neophyte will not know what I would regard, if I may say so, to be two fundamental points about Locke’s view on the limits of knowledge. First, the definition of knowledge as being a matter of indubitableness and is no more than the perception of the agreeability or repugnancy between ideas. Second, that, for Locke, natural philosophy cannot be made into a natural science because we can no have no clear and distinct idea of the genuine, and not merely qualitative, quintessence of substances. Rather, the conclusion of Forster’s discussion on Locke’s view of substances is that “we should not reify these concepts [of essences] into rigid categories, because we lack the power to directly perceive these essences” (57) and that “The real workings of the physical universe are much too mysterious, in Locke’s view, for anyone [to decipher anything about]” (58). Had Forster said that Locke holds that humans only have immediate cognitive access to ideas, this important point could have been clearer, as this could have helped to explain why Locke maintained “we can never mentally connect to the world” (53), which Forster just asserts. In that case, the reader would have known that a central part of Locke’s worldview (the chapter on Locke’s epistemology is called “Locke’s Worldview”) is that there are ideas and everything else in the world, where the latter is an idea’s causal basis and its representation. In sum, Locke’s epistemology is unavoidably based on a doctrine of ideas, and as this is not addressed, the clarity of Forster’s discussions on Locke’s epistemology is diluted.

I have two major misgivings with Forster’s presentment of Locke’s political views. First, Forster states several times over that “the whole justification for creating government in the first place…is because [people are] bias[ed] in their own favor” (127) and this without addition. The careful first-year student in philosophy, I think, will find this claim a bit weak without stating what this bias involves. Locke clearly states in Chapter 9
of the *Second Treatise* (section 124, 125 and 126) that people in the state of nature face three main “inconveniencies,” related to bias, which civil society corrects. The beginner will not know what these inconveniencies are.

Second, Forster writes, “seeking God’s will is the main business of human life” (77) and this without much addition. Locke is clear in Chapter 2 of the *Second Treatise* that the ‘main business of human life’ involves discerning and working towards one’s own private ‘mission’ that God has sent him or her into the world to do, and so, no one should unjustifiably infringe upon that private mission. As the ‘main business of human life’ is to discern and work towards one’s ‘God-given mission,’ this is why the purpose of government is to preserve one’s property, life, health, and liberty—as Locke understands those to be necessary conditions in order to live out one’s individual life plan. The intimacy between Locke’s understanding of the human good and the proper role of government—which, as Locke writes over and over again, is to secure private property—is not made (the latter point, independently, is not made).

Some fundamental oversights, I think, are made in this book and I have highlighted some of them. However, this should not discourage. The book offers a bright, accessible, and concise biography of Locke; connections between Locke’s times and thought are crisply made. The last chapter effectively presents Locke’s “revolutionary politics,” its influence on the Declaration of Independence how this was seminal in inaugurating the ‘era of revolutions.’ This implies that the book could be used in introductory humanities or history classes. Forster skilfully and interestingly presents the connections between history and the history of ideas, and perhaps is best at giving one a sense of the spirit of the times. However, the book is less successful in meeting its intended purpose—an ideal philosophical introduction to a philosopher’s thought. My corrective, for what it’s worth, is conservative. An introductory philosophical text, which, arguably, has become less popular, should be methodological and carefully explain principal philosophical premises and arguments based on, I think, key segments of a philosopher’s text, largely done within a philosophical context. Although, no doubt, blending depth with information for beginners is no easy task.

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