‘A Philosopher and his Notebooks:
John Locke (1632-1704) on Memory and Information’

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The ways in which information is organized, retrieved and communicated have a history. The systems for managing information and knowledge that we now take for granted barely existed before 1600. However, by the early 1700s, a fair number of these were already in place. I am referring to the periodical journal (with book reviews), the transactions of scientific societies, library and museum catalogues, encyclopaedias in the vernacular, arranged in dictionary format and, at a more particular level, the alphabetical book index, and more or less agreed conventions for footnoting and citation of sources. These practices and publications formed part of an Enlightenment culture that stressed, at least in principle, public access to knowledge and free circulation of ideas across religious and territorial boundaries.

John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) is routinely cited as an early announcement of this modern world in which concepts and arguments are evaluated without reference to the authority or status of their source. For my purposes, it is striking that Locke, a hero of the Enlightenment, was closely associated with the commonplace book, a genre with a pre-Enlightenment pedigree. Promoted by the leading Renaissance humanists as a mode of study and note-taking, commonplace books were private notebooks in which one entered choice extracts encountered in reading the major literary texts, such as those of the classical Roman authors, especially Cicero, Livy, Virgil, and Seneca.

Since its recommendation by humanists such as Erasmus, Agricola, and Melanchthon, the method of commonplacing also entered the pedagogy of the grammar schools. Students and scholars made their own private commonplace books in which extracts from books were kept as aids to memory. In his influential *De Copia* (1512), Erasmus advised that an abundant stock of quotations and maxims from classical texts be entered under various *loci* (places) to assist free-flowing oratory. Arranged under ‘Heads’ and recorded as ‘common-places’ (*loci communes*), these commonplace books could be consulted for speeches and written compositions designed for various situations — in the law court, at ceremonial occasions, or in the dedication of a book to a patron. Typical headings included the classical topics of honour, virtue, beauty, friendship, and Christian ones such as God, Creation, faith,
hope, or the names of the virtues and vices. This practice did not endorse slavish regurgitation, but rather encouraged improvisation on a theme or topic. Thus the metaphor of the bee, as delivered by Seneca, became a commonplace in its own right: the bee gathers material, but it also selects and transforms; so too should the good orator, by embellishing and adorning.

Locke was one of the most extensive users of commonplace books, and other notebooks. This is curious, and significant, because in some ways the practice of commonplacing was under attack by ‘moderns’, such as Locke himself, who regarded it as part of the ‘bookish’ culture they rejected in favour of empirical inquiry and critical application of reason. The reading and glossing of books smacked too much of deference to authority — to the authority of revered authors, such as Aristotle.

**Locke’s Reputation**

This is not our current portrait of Locke. For us, and indeed for most readers since the eighteenth century, he is one of the parents of the Enlightenment, the advocate of legitimate rebellion against a ruler, the founder of empirical psychology and novel views on the education of children. In his major work, the *Essay*, Locke begins by stating that his main aim was to clear ‘the ground a little, … removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge.’ (*Essay*, Epistle to the Reader) His method was one of looking back to origins, searching for our earliest recoverable beliefs and opinions, and arguing that the mind at birth carried no innate knowledge, no pre-given stock of ideas. Hence Locke’s name is attached to the metaphor of the white, or blank, sheet or page; the mind as a *tabula rasa* on which experience impresses our developing knowledge of the world (*Essay*, II. i. 2; I. iii. 22). Regarding the education of children, Locke urged the importance of the early years, since this was when the mind was plastic and malleable, allowing the formation of habits, attitudes, and opinions. In *Some Thoughts on Education* (1693) Locke gave practical advice to his friend, Edward Clarke, about the proper training and ‘Breeding’ of Clarke’s son. As Locke put it, the work was ‘designed for a Gentleman’s Son, who being then very little, I considered only as white Paper, or
Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases (section 217). This is why Locke is seen as a foundational figure for behaviourist psychology, with its principle of the ‘association of ideas’ (a phrase coined by Locke), or what (after Ivan Pavlov) we now call conditioning.

One of Locke’s other major contributions lies in the field of political philosophy. His *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), which appeared anonymously, in part because its content was incendiary at the time, has been reprinted and debated without a break over the last 314 years. Interestingly, it also aimed to pursue origins — to inquire into the beginning of civil society and also of private property. It, too, included a version of the blank sheet metaphor, in this case applied to the notion of empty, unused land or territory before parcels of the common property bestowed by God had been claimed as private possessions. Locke announced that ‘in the beginning all the World was America…’ (*Second Treatise*, paragraph 49). In other words, all land was then *terra nullius*, waiting to be claimed, through personal labour, be it farming, or fencing, or scientific investigation. The reverberation of both these metaphors — the blank tablet of the mind, and that of empty, unclaimed land — are still with us, even if we have never read Locke. This is a sure measure of his impact.

I am interested in yet another blank sheet: the empty white page that Locke confronted when he began a new notebook. I will come to that soon; but since this year marks the 300th anniversary of his death, in October 1704, it is appropriate to say a little more about Locke and his time.

Locke was a student at Westminster School, London; he was there on Tuesday, 30 January 1649 when Charles I was executed, only a stone’s throw away, in Westminster Hall. According to Locke himself, the students were confined to their classrooms, so that they could not join the crowds gathering to view this event. But Samuel Pepys, a fifteen year-old schoolboy at St Paul’s school, was present at the execution. His school seems to have declared a holiday. Both Locke and Pepys were educated in Puritan religious and political values; both at this stage rejoiced in
the downfall of the monarchy. While a student at Christ Church College, Oxford (from 1652), Locke wrote two poems (one in Latin, the other in English) celebrating the victory of Oliver Cromwell against the Dutch fleet in 1654. But in these decades, political affairs and allegiances moved quickly; and in 1660, eleven years after the beheading of Charles I, the monarchy was restored. This time, when Charles II processed through the streets of London, both Locke and Pepys were there, acclaiming the new king. However, they were both shocked by the decision in early 1661 to disinter the body of Cromwell so that his head could be displayed on a pole at the south end of Westminster Hall on the anniversary of the death of Charles I. It remained there for the twenty-five years of Charles II’s reign — a ghastly warning to those, like Locke and Pepys, who were once schoolboy republicans (Tomalin, pp. 117, 408 n.50) Pepys was terrified, as he recorded in his diary for 1 November 1660, when a former school friend reminded him that he had been ‘a great roundhead when I was a boy’. In this climate, diaries and journals were a potential death warrant. No wonder that Pepys wrote his diary in shorthand and kept it hidden. Locke never recorded explicit political comment, especially from the time (1667) of his connection with Anthony Ashley Cooper (the Earl of Shaftesbury), the leading Whig politician who, from the early 1680s, planned a rebellion against the King. Indeed, it seems that Locke excised some entries from his notebooks that might have put him under suspicion.

Notebooks
The Australian travel writer, Bruce Chatwin, religiously carried the special ‘Moleskine’ notebooks used in early twentieth century by Henri Matisse and Ernest Hemmingway. In 1986, when Chatwin heard that the last small French firm still producing them was about to close, he bought one hundred of them. Chatwin remarked that to lose his passport was inconvenient, but losing a notebook was a catastrophe.

Locke spent most of his life keeping careful notes. We know this because a large number of these have survived, together with about a third of his personal library of printed books. These are now held in the Lovelace Collection at the Bodleian
Library, Oxford. This collection holds an even greater percentage of Locke’s unpublished manuscripts. These comprise about 3000 letters to Locke and about 150 of his draft replies. The extant correspondence, now gathered from copies all over the world, consists of 3655 letters, of which about 1000 are from Locke. These have been printed in *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols Oxford, 1976-89, edited by E. S. de Beer. In addition there are miscellaneous papers and notebooks totally some 1000 items. Among these there are thirty-eight bound notebooks, both commonplace books and journals. Another journal is held in the British Library and one commonplace book is in private possession in France. One estimate is that these notebooks (and papers) contain ‘tens of thousands of quotations from more than a thousand different books’ collected by Locke during his lifetime (Milton, p. 90). What can these notebooks tell us?

Private notebooks are, and perhaps always will be, intriguing to biographers and historians. There are now thriving academic industries around the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, Charles Darwin, the novelist George Eliot, Sigmund Freud, and others. The allure of notebooks belonging to great thinkers is that they might offer some insight into the genesis of ideas and discoveries, or the act of creation, as Arthur Koestler called it; and also that they might reveal undisclosed conflicts and decisions. We have a notebook belonging to Isaac Newton (a friend of Locke, if Newton can be said to have friends) in which, as a young man of twenty he devoted several entries to the sins he recalled committing. He lists these in two categories: before and after Whitsunday 1662. They are in shorthand and those committed before 1662 are numbered from 1 to 49. Here is a sample:

1. Using the Word [God] openly
2. Eating an apple in Thy house
3. Making a feather while on Thy day
4. Denying that I made it
5. Making a mousetrap on Thy day
13. Threatening my father and mother Smith [the name of his foster father] to burne them and the house over them
Locke seems never to have engaged in such self-disclosure, even in his private notebooks; but this is not to say that these do not tell us anything about him. They have allowed scholars to trace the development of his thought; to reveal, for example that in his early years Locke was far more conservative about religion and politics than in his later published works. My interest includes such uses, but also focuses directly on the practice itself. Do notebooks have a history that can be told? Or are they purely an individual and idiosyncratic form that betrays no discernible pattern over time?

A focus on Locke’s notebooks allows a perspective on this practice. In the century or so after the Renaissance and the Reformation — the early modern period — notebooks were part of a system of instruction and a discipline of study. A special kind of note-taking was prescribed, taught and practiced by humanist scholars and the grammar schools they established. This was called the tradition of commonplaces. As Ann Moss has written, ‘the commonplace book was part of the initial intellectual experience of every schoolboy’ and ‘every Latin-literate individual started to compose one as soon as he could read and write reasonably accurately’ (Moss, p.viii). There were conventions and expectations about the compiling and use of notebooks. Of course, since these were private notebooks under the control of each individual user, such conventions were often flouted; and there were other related forms — the diary and the journal — that were not expected to conform to the standards of the commonplace book. These standards gradually lapsed, giving way to a more laissez-faire attitude toward the content and organisation of private notebooks. During the eighteenth century, the commonplace book lost its central position in education and its form and use was left to the individual; its contents became more miscellaneous, less ordered. This demise in status is registered in the very word ‘commonplace’: it came to mean something unremarkable, quotidian, even trivial — the very opposite of its meaning in the Renaissance when it indicated
something worth collecting and reciting, something choice and valuable because sanctioned by authority and tradition.

In some ways the humanist commonplace book became a victim of information explosion. By at least 1600 there were complaints about the ever-growing number of books. In 1680 the great German philosopher and polymath, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, complained in a letter to Louis XIV about that ‘horrible mass of books which keeps on growing’ (cited in Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions*, p. 87). Leibniz diagnosed that the flood of publications, containing both old and new knowledge, had exceeded the integrating capacities of individual readers and so threatened to burst the accepted circle of learning. For scholars trained in humanist methods, the commonplace book was an obvious means of responding to this problem: quotations and extracts from a range of sources could be stored under Heads, together with references to the books from which they were taken. Separate notebooks could be kept for different subjects. Techniques from bookkeeping and commercial accounting could be applied. By the 1500s, merchants kept at least two kinds of notebooks: a ‘waste book’ in which to enter daily transactions, and a larger account book ruled up in the double-entry columns invented by Luca Pacioli and given in his *De Computis et Scripturis* (1494). Similarly, humanist scholars advised keeping a rough pocketbook for making short entries, perhaps while travelling; these were then to be transferred, possibly extended, and entered under appropriate Heads in a large ‘table-book’ used as the commonplace book.

Those working across several fields felt the problems of collating, storing and retrieving information. Francis Bacon predicted the need for better management of information; indeed, the programme he outlined for large-scale collections of observations and experiments in natural history required it. One of Locke’s friends, the chemist Robert Boyle, sought to advance this Baconian project; but he admitted that his own notes lacked proper system and order. Another confession of this kind came from Leibniz, who was not careful in keeping track of his notes, papers and ideas. Writing to a correspondent in March 1693, Leibniz confessed that: ‘After having done something, I forget it almost entirely within a few months,
and rather than searching for it amid a chaos of jottings that I do not have the leisure to arrange and mark with headings, I am obliged to do the work all over again’ (Cited in O’Hara, p. 160).

Anyone who has inspected Locke’s notebooks, journals, or library catalogue, would find it difficult to imagine him in a similar predicament. Careful recording may have been something he grew up with: we know his father, John Locke, a solicitor, kept a detailed notebook from 1623-55, some of it in commonplace arrangement. It mainly contained information about properties (his own included) that he managed, and his work as clerk to the justices of the peace, the most influential of these being Alexander Popham, who orchestrated the Puritan army in Somersethshire. There are some medicinal recipes and an entry on ‘Philosophy’ that may be in the hand of the young Locke. Newton also inherited a large notebook from his father, who had died before he was born (Gleick, pp.16-7; 20). Newton senior had numbered the pages and written theological headings on the first few; but the rest were empty. For whatever reason, Newton did not adopt methodical habits of note-taking, although, of course, he wrote thousands of pages of notes, drafts etc. Newton had a habit of ‘dog-earring’ his books, with the point of the ‘ear’ indicating the part of the page he wanted to note. (The examples I have seen are in Newton’s copy of A Catalogue of Chymicall Books, London: W. Cooper, 1675, held in the Babson Collection, Burndy Library, Dibner Institute, MIT). Locke almost never marked his books, rarely even adding marginal annotations, except for the tiniest mark to remind him to make a notebook entry. More often, he made a list of page numbers on the inside back cover to indicate the pages from which he had taken notes.

Why did Locke keep such extensive notebooks? How did he manage the range and diversity of the information he collected? What implications can we draw from Locke’s own explicit reflections and advice on note-taking? And are there any connections between his note-keeping and some of his philosophical concerns, including those about the capacity and function of memory?
Locke’s ‘New Method’

Locke used commonplace books with an awareness of the conventions surrounding them; but he challenged some of the assumptions that informed this tradition. In 1686 the Bibliothèque Universelle, a leading periodical of the European Republic of Letters, carried an article entitled ‘Methode Nouvelle de dresser des Recueuils’. When translated for publication in English in 1706 it was called ‘A New Method of a Common-Place-Book.’ This was Locke’s first mature publication (though it carried only his initials). On his own account in this piece, and from what we know about his practice, Locke’s method extends and complicates the previous functions of commonplace books, making them part of a personal system for managing information.

What was new about Locke’s ‘New Method’? The advertised feature was the manner in which his index offered a solution to the problems confronting all makers of commonplace books: how many pages to assign various Heads within the one notebook, where to enter them, and how to find them again on later occasions. These problems were evident, for example, in the commonplace book (‘Questiones quaedam philosophicae’, or ‘Certain Philosophical Questions’) of the young Isaac Newton, which he began at Cambridge in early 1664. He listed thirty-seven Heads at the start of a small notebook and then distributed these throughout, trying to guess how many pages each would need, without much success. Typical Renaissance commonplace books pre-assigned pages to major topics, that is, to common topics encountered in the canonical Latin texts; in contrast, Locke’s approach is adapted to a wider and unpredictable array of Heads, in keeping with the more diverse information he collected. Locke refuses to pre-assign space to topics or their Heads; his index allows entries on different topics to run on from each other, on the same page, and across pages scattered through the notebook. They are tracked by the first letter/first vowel codes, as presented in the index. Unlike a normal index compiled after a book is completed, this one grows as the notebook does.
Importantly, Locke did not abandon the practice of keeping information under Heads; however, the position of these Heads in the notebooks was determined only by their alphabetical disposition. Consequently, quotations about ‘Virtue’ might be next to ‘Viticulture’ (given Locke’s interest in the wine of the Montpellier region). Nor were quotations entered with a view to memorising them for rhetorical performance; in contrast to the models of the day, Locke’s extracts were not grouped together, by topic, in the same pages of the notebook, so that one could see all or most of the quotations on Beauty, Honour, or Friendship.

We can therefore interpret the ‘New Method’ as one intended to deal with information in non-rhetorical, non-pedagogic contexts, and without a strong link to memory training. Locke shifts the emphasis from rhetoric to research: he makes the commonplace book part of a personal system for storing a more diverse range of information, in which retrieval, not recall from memory, is the rationale. He used such notebooks to suit his own purposes, and kept separate notebooks for different disciplines: medicine, natural philosophy and natural history (that is, science), moral philosophy (including travel reports on customs of other places), and theology.

Locke stressed personal choice. He granted licence to individuals to compile and order their notebooks in ways that best suited them. This now seems unremarkable; but Renaissance commonplace books were intended for use in public situations, and relied on widely endorsed values. Indeed, it was assumed that these notebooks could be shared, and read with benefit by other educated individuals. This practice took for granted the presence of a broad consensus on the topics under which material might be collected. Such commonplace material (tropes, maxims, and quotations) was effective because its status was unchallenged and its authority could, with appropriate skill, be transferred to the particular case being argued. Cicero, and other classical authors, had stressed that the most effective orator was able to appeal to commonly held notions. Cicero has one of his speakers put this reminder: ‘although you yourself are able to speak with novelty and brilliance, the loci from which you derive what you say are nevertheless the sources of familiar maxims and widely accepted principles’ (Cicero, De Oratore, cited in Skinner, p. 117).
Indeed, printed commonplace books supplied these headings ready-made. Thomas Farnaby’s *Index Rhetoricus* (1634) provided a two-page alphabetical list of Heads for the classical and Christian virtues and vices, and the subjects of the liberal arts, a list that he expected students to use in the course of their reading and note-taking. Locke’s commonplace books break with this world of shared expectations.

**Arts of Memory**

During the Renaissance, commonplace books were closely tied to the cultivation of memory. This reflected the ancient Greek and Roman heritage. In his *Topica*, Aristotle formulated a doctrine of ‘places’ (*topoi* or *loci*) that incorporated his ten categories. A link was soon drawn between this doctrine of ‘places’ (which were, for Aristotle, ‘seats of arguments’, not quotations from authors) and the art of memory. Cicero built on this in *De Oratore*, explaining that ‘it is chiefly order that gives distinctness to memory’; and Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* became an influential formulation. This stress on order and sequence was the crux of what came to be known as ‘topical memory’, cultivated by mnemonic techniques (‘*memoria technica*’) involving the association of ideas with visual images. These ideas, forms of argument, or literary tropes were ‘placed’ in the memory, conceived in spatial terms as a building, a beehive, or a set of pigeon holes. This imagined space was then searched for the images and ideas it contained (see Yates and Rossi). In the ancient world, the practical application of this art was training in oratory; yet Cicero stressed that the good orator needed knowledge, not just rhetorical skill, so that memory had to be trained to store and retrieve illustrations and arguments of various kinds. Although Erasmus distrusted the mnemonic arts, like all the leading Renaissance humanists, he advocated the keeping of commonplace books as an aid to memory. The emphasis on reciting material remained strong: for example, as an undergraduate at Oxford, Locke was expected to memorise the Sunday sermons.

By the seventeenth century, mnemonic arts unaided by written records were regarded as inadequate for managing the increasing array of information. Bacon addressed this issue at length in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and in the Latin version, *De Augmentis* (1623). Here he debunked ostentatious feats of artificial
memory as tantamount to the ‘tricks and antics of clowns and rope-dancers’. Tellingly, however, he felt it necessary to respond to the criticism that ‘the transferring of the things we read and learn into common-place books’ was detrimental because it invited ‘the memory to take holiday’. In rebutting this, Bacon affirmed the role of a ‘good and learned Digest of Common Places’: The great help to the memory is writing; and it must be taken as a rule that memory without this aid is unequal to matters of much length and accuracy’. Significantly, he added that this was especially the case now that there was a need to manage large amounts of new information, such as that gathered ‘in inductive philosophy and the interpretation of nature’ (Bacon, vol. 4, p. 436).

Most advocates of commonplace books in the seventeenth century took a similar position. Even the preacher, Thomas Fuller, renowned for his prodigious memory, declared that ‘Artificiall memory is rather a trick than an art’. Yet Fuller himself practised the art of memory, being famously able to repeat forward and backwards all the signs of shops and street names in London, from Ludgate to Charing Cross. However, he recommended the use of ‘Note-books’ to relieve the burden of memory. This was also advisable, he said, because if one trusted solely in memory, one ‘violent disease’ might ‘rob and strip’ one of everything. Nonetheless, most proponents still conceived commonplace books as externalised memory palaces: the training and improvement of natural memory was still an aim, albeit one now supported by note-taking. Between 1500 and 1700 there was a subtle shift in the function of such notebooks: from being repositories of the material that individuals sought to memorise, they came to be seen as ways of retaining information that could never be memorised.

**Locke on Memory**

Locke calls memory ‘the Store-house of our Ideas’, thereby adopting a metaphor from the tradition of Mnemonic arts in which memory was conceived as a physical space holding ideas and images (Essay, II. x. 2). Like Bacon and René Descartes, he is impatient with artificial memory techniques; but he makes more of a point in
underscoring a pessimistic picture of what natural memory can do — viewed against
what it is, ideally, called upon to do. In the Essay, he presents the situation in quasi-
tragic terms: on the one hand, memory plays an indispensable role in the formation
of knowledge from sensations and ideas, and in comparing and combining ideas; on
the other hand, it is weak and fragile. The two major ‘defects’ he diagnoses are
decay of ideas over time and slowness in retrieval (II. x. 8). Underlying all Locke’s
remarks about memory is the stark confrontation of the fact that without special
attention, or other precautions, ‘Ideas in the Mind quickly fade, and often vanish
quite out of the Understanding, leaving no more footsteps or remaining Characters
of themselves, than Shadows do flying over Fields of Corn; and the Mind is as void
of them, as if they never had been there’ (II. x. 5). That is, we lose many ideas
without realising that we ever had them.

In fact, for Locke, the storehouse function of memory, rather than evoking the
confident tone of those who advocated mnemonic techniques, actually highlights
the limits of mental capacity: For the narrow Mind of Man, not being capable of
having many Ideas under View and Consideration at once, it was necessary to have a
Repository, to lay up those Ideas, which at another time it might have use of’. He
contrasts this with the powers of ‘some superiour created intellectual Beings’ whose
memories can hold ‘constantly in view the whole Scene of all their former actions,
wherein no one of the thoughts they have ever had, may slip out of their sight’. He
even suggests that since the Creator can communicate any of his perfections to his
‘created finite Beings’, examples of extraordinary memory do exist among mortals.
It is significant, I think, that Locke does not mention here the stories of
extraordinary feats attributed to the art of memory; instead, he gives the case of the
French mathematician, Blaise Pascal, reciting the claim of Pascal’s sister, that until
the decline of his health her brother ‘forgot nothing of what he had done, read, or
thought in any part of his rational Age’. (II. x. 9; additions to this section from the
second edition, 1694). What Locke implies is that Pascal was blessed with a gifted
natural memory, not an artificially enhanced one.
Locke sometimes refers to his bad memory. This might seem to endorse the humanist conception of commonplace books as memory aids, but Locke does not believe that memory can be trained in ways that guarantee transfer across subjects and situations. This separates him from many of his near contemporaries for whom the commonplace book was still a stimulus in training memory to recall and recite selected quotations. For example, consider this recommendation from a book on grammar schooling: ‘That they [students] have daily some special exercise of the memory, by repeating somewhat without booke; … The reason is, because the daily practice hereof, is the only means to make excellent memoryes’ (Brinsley, p. 51). By contrast, Locke did not see the practice of making entries in commonplace books as a way of improving memory. The message in all his major works is that natural memory — however it functions — is constitutionally a weak instrument, one that could not be significantly improved by various exercises. He firmly rejected the opinion ‘that Children should be impoy’d in getting things by heart, to exercise and improve their Memories’. In his view, ‘strength of Memory is owing to an happy Constitution, and not to any habitual Improvement got By Exercise’. Locke claimed that ‘what the Mind is intent upon, and careful of, that it remembers best’, adding that ‘if Method and Order be joyn’d, all is done, I think, that can be, for the help of a weak Memory’ (Some Thoughts, section 176). He believed that some kind of written record, such as a commonplace book, was essential to assist recollection of diverse and complex information gathered over time from various sources.

In De Oratore, Cicero recounts the story of how Themistocles is approached by a person who offers to teach him the ‘art of memory’. Upon inquiring what that art could do for him, he is told that it would enable him to remember everything. Themistocles replies that he would be more grateful if the person ‘could instruct him how to forget, rather than to remember what he chose’ (Cicero, De Oratore, pp.171-2). Cicero, of course, did not agree with this sentiment; Locke did. His method of note-taking reduced dependence on memory; it allowed one to forget. But it also provided a means of finding required material at a later time. Retrieving, not remembering, was his aim.
Information

Locke also kept another type of notebook — a journal. Whereas commonplace books were arranged by category or subject, journals and diaries (roughly as we know them today) were chronological. The practice of diary keeping became an established one from the Elizabethan period. The habit required was supported by various social factors, including the growing importance of household accounts, the need to record observations made by travellers on both land and sea, and the emphasis on self-examination in wake of the Protestant Reformation. A good example of the Puritan diary is that of John Beadle, published in 1656 as *The Journal or Diary of a Thankful Christian*; but a similar approach is seen in other diaries of the time. Thus the royalist virtuoso, John Evelyn, who began a diary in the 1640s, recalled his father’s methodical work habits and absorbed what he took to be the convictions underlying this practice: the belief in the ‘infinite benefit of daily Examination; comparing to a Merchant keeping his books, to see whether he thrived, or went backward; and how it would facilitate our reckonings; and what a Comfort on our death bed’ (cited in Tomalin, p. 84). The most famous diary from Locke’s time is, of course, Samuel Pepys’ daily account of the period from January 1660 to May 1669. Written in shorthand, it runs to a million and a quarter words. Pepys recorded political and other events in London; but, as Robert Louis Stevenson later judged, all the events Pepys recorded, even major public ones, centred on ‘that entrancing ego of whom alone he cared to write.’ (*Cornhill Magazine*, July 1881, cited in Tomalin, p. 88). We thus have many entries concerning his own thoughts and fears, usually governed by the conviction that he is the most interesting person alive.

As with his use of the commonplace book, Locke resisted some of the contemporary features of the journal, especially those of the Puritan diary. Anyone looking for close introspection will be disappointed. Locke began to keep a journal on his visit to France, from 1675-1679, and then continued this practice, with somewhat less intensity, for the rest of his life. His first journal starts on 12 November 1675 in a notebook into which he stitched the French (Protestant) almanac for that year. He used a separate notebook for each year. He made an
entry for each day of the year, even if only writing the date and a remark about the weather; yet only occasional days do not yield notes, some of which extend for pages. What Locke chose to record tells us something about the attitude to information collection in the late seventeenth century. He took notes on a large range of subjects: apart from the standard observations of travellers on the sights and sounds of the countryside and towns, and on the hardship and pleasures of travel, there are detailed entries on coinage, currency, wine making, farming, horticulture, cooking, medical treatments, taxation, and the legal situation of religious groups, especially the Huguenots.

Some of the information Locke noted in his journals might have been accessible in printed form; but being away from his own books and other libraries, he collected quite extensive information from oral, manuscript, or printed sources as he moved about France. Even when living in Oxford or London, Locke collected various sorts of information in private notebooks because much of this was not reliably available in the public domain. We should not transfer our expectations about public information to the late seventeenth century.

One might risk a generalization here: a feature of information in the early modern period was that it was usually anchored to a geographical location and was only reliably gathered and evaluated at that place. Depending on the type of information, this might be the court, the vicinity of Parliament, the Inns of Court, the university, the ports, or the markets. This also meant that individuals were often carriers of recent news and first-hand reports, either because they were based in a certain location, or able to travel to and from key sites throughout Europe. Indeed, many individuals carved out employment as information brokers, selling their findings. But this filtering and inflection of information via particular place and person meant that it was often not accessible beyond small circles. Of course, such restriction was precisely the point of much diplomatic and trade reporting. The Venetians were early masters of the relazioni — reports that summed up the strengths and weaknesses of the state to which their ambassadors had been sent; there was also the Machiavellian suggestion that these could be used to spread misinformation,
which was seen as more effective than incomplete secrecy. Moreover, such
information gathered for specific purposes and for limited audiences was often not
readily usable, even if open to other eyes. Even State papers were considered as the
private possessions of the office-holders who dealt with them: for example,
Cardinal Richelieu left his papers to his niece. By the early eighteenth century effort
was invested in the better administration of government and other archives;
however, this information continued to bear the imprint of the office that collected
it. This meant that it was difficult to use for different, or new, purposes (see
Brewer, Burke, Yeo).

The situation was somewhat better in the scholarly world, although the full range of
reference works later taken for granted did not yet exist. Libraries were private, not
public, and only some had printed catalogues. One attempt to redress this was the
compilation of so-called universal bibliographies or lists of books held in a number
of libraries throughout Europe. These functioned as virtual libraries: by consulting
such a bibliography one could see what had been written and where it could be
found, even if not able to obtain and read it. In the new (physical and natural)
sciences, the archiving of reports and experiments was only just beginning: the
transactions of the Royal Society of London, usually in the form of letters and short
papers from members, embarked on this task from 1666. Given these limitations,
the Republic of Letters, ideally seen as transcending religious and political
differences, did in fact offer a model for free exchange of knowledge and
information. Such an ideal did not necessarily reside in the universities, but rather in
the imagined cosmopolitan community of scholars, even if some of its most
prominent members engaged in bitter dispute (for example, Newton and Leibniz
over the invention of the calculus). But modern universities are, and should be,
custodians of this important legacy.

The significance of the word ‘universal’ in so many eighteenth-century journal and
dictionary titles is that it professed a commitment to make information accessible
beyond a specific place, available to an audience not involved in its collection.
Making information ‘public’ required that it be first rendered ‘universal’ in this sense
— that is, freed from the local and idiosyncratic conventions by which it was gathered and ordered. Could personal notebooks play a part in this collection of ‘useful’ information for public dissemination?

At first glance this seems an unlikely option because private notebooks of the kind kept by Locke, Newton and Pepys were regarded as custodians of secrets. Locke’s practice is instructive here. When travelling in France he began to use shorthand (which he had learnt in 1666 when about to leave on a diplomatic mission to Brandenburg). While most entries in his journals are in longhand, he sometimes used shorthand to limit the exposure of some passages, should the journal ever be mislaid. On one occasion he interpolated material, in shorthand, making it look like a continuation of a longhand entry on a philosophical topic. In fact, the passage contains (and conceals) his thoughts about Shaftesbury’s speech in the King’s Bench on 29 June 1677, pleading for his release on bail from the Tower of London. Later, in safer times, Locke openly recommended the use of shorthand for protection of personal thoughts. Consider this remark from Some Thoughts Concerning Education: ‘Short-hand ...may perhaps, be thought worth the Learning both for Dispatch in what Men write for their own Memory, and Concealment of what they would not have lie open to every Eye’ (section 161). All this fits with Locke’s carefully guarded behaviour: even after the Glorious Revolution which installed William and Mary of the Netherlands as Protestant rulers of England, Locke did not feel able to put his name on the title page of the Two Treatises of Government (1690). More amazingly, he listed this work (and his Letter concerning Toleration of 1690) as ‘Anonymous’ in his own private library catalogue.

Another relevant point here is that Locke’s advice on commonplace books broke with the traditional hierarchical arrangement of categories and topics, allowing each individual to choose Heads suitable to the purpose at hand. In his own case, these were subjects on which he was working at the time, or on which he might want references in the future, or simply things that struck him as worth storing. His manner of note-taking was laconic, condensed, and often cryptic, using abbreviations and undisclosed adaptations of the standard shorthand systems. This
meant that his notebooks were of little use to others. On the other hand, Locke did recognize the importance of the cross-checking of sources: he invented, for himself, conventions for citations from books and other sources, making it easy to return to the full reference in his own library catalogue or to a book in another library. He used these conventions consistently, so that we can follow this aspect of his practice without much trouble. In principle, this was a method that could be universalized; and so Locke made a contribution to the process by which information was put in a form enabling transfer across time and space.

In spite of the secretive character of private notebooks, some contemporaries thought that these could be used to collate information of public utility. By the early seventeenth century, books of advice to travellers encouraged them to make gather their observations under some agreed set of Heads, following the tradition of the humanist commonplace book. These Heads typically included climate, topography, commerce, form of government, religion, laws, fashions, and customs. Armed with such a framework the industrious traveller could become a surveyor of foreign lands, ideally contributing to a general ‘political arithmetic’ of the kind advocated by William Petty, and to natural history in its widest sense, which included facts and observations about the natural social, and political worlds (see Shapiro). The question here was whether this commonplace method — a practice of reading and selecting from texts — could be applied to such varied and complex empirical data.

Locke’s interests in travel narratives, and measurements of weather phenomena, illustrate some of the issues involved. Both these topics belonged to natural history, as defined by Bacon and, following him, by the Royal Society of London, of which Locke was a member (from 1668). Locke was an avid reader and collector of travel literature dealing with various parts of Turkey, India, China, Southeast Asia, and North and South America (see Carey). He may well have possessed one of the largest private collections of books of this kind. The reports and anecdotes these books contained were rich fodder for his notebooks. Locke commonplaced material from these accounts, often assigning then to various Heads such as
government, medicine, coinage, and a highly sensitive group of topics pertaining to moral and religious beliefs and practices, such as marriage, children, death, and atheism. This method allowed him to group together accounts by various travellers on particular subjects, allowing him to see inconsistencies and confirmations. Locke realised that such reports (from both eyewitnesses and others) had to be corroborated; however, the collation of this material under Heads that made sense to him possibly entailed the danger of assuming that the travellers themselves were operating with these categories when they made their observations and recorded the reports of others. Travel literature could be commonplaced and indexed, just as the works of the classical authors were treated in humanist education; but the risks here were greater.

Another aspect of the commonplace method was tested by the requirement of Baconian natural history. Delegated note-taking, such as that involved in instructing an amanuensis to copy passages (or perhaps even to select them), was normal practice for leading scholars of the seventeenth century. Could such a practice be extended to observations (including experiments) of nature made by groups of investigators? Locke had to confront this question when he became involved in Robert Boyle’s research on atmospheric air, its qualities and effects. The results of this collaborative Baconian project (which drew on the observations of several people) that began in the 1660s were published in The General History of the Air, designed and begun by the Hon. Robert Boyle, Esq. (1692), about a year after Boyle’s death. Locke was the effective editor of this volume. He wrote the ‘Advertisement of the Publisher to the Reader’ that serves as its introduction. Moreover, the work contained the weather observations Locke had collected at Oxford from June 1666 until June 1683. Locke kept this ‘Register’ in the back of one of his commonplace books, although he turned it upside down to record the measurements, indicating that these were distinct, in his mind, from the commonplace entries in the rest of the notebook. His careful record keeping contrasts with Boyle’s loose management of the project as a whole. The heading Boyle gave to the weather records of another collaborator nicely captures this: ‘Mr Townley’s Register, if I misremember not’ (Boyle, vol.12, p. 69).
In the ‘Advertisement’, Locke acknowledged that the project laboured under difficulties, not least of which was lack of clear agreement on the scope of inquiry and the meaning of terms, even though Boyle did issue ‘Heads’ of inquiry. For future reference, Locke urged the importance of agreement on topics, questions, modes of measurement and recording. For his own case, he described the three different ‘Thermoscopes’ he used over the years, and the ‘Hygroscope’ which, he explained, gave ‘the Degrees of Moisture, as marked by an Hygroscope made of the Beard of a wild Oat.’ (‘An Explication of the foregoing Register’, reprinted in Boyle, vol. 12, pp. 88-9). For this reason, his records could be used even today as data for historical patterns of temperature, rainfall, humidity and atmospheric pressure — all of which Locke tabulated.

As I argued earlier, however, this emphasis on consensus and agreement is decidedly not the message of Locke’s ‘New Method’. This left the choice of Heads to the individual; hence these could be personal, and neither understood nor used by others. In moving the commonplace method away from the common themes of humanist rhetoric, Locke played his part in making feasible a translation of this method from the noting of books to the noting of things in the world. But the ‘new philosophy’ needed to reinstate some consensus about what was to be collected and how this was to be done. Locke made the commonplace book (and the journal) a tool of personal research, and tolerated quite radical individualism in recommending his method to others. However, collaborative scientific research presupposed a community of individuals sharing common goals and a common vocabulary. The new sciences, as understood by the Royal Society, required a more disciplined consensus — ironically, not unlike that which operated, at least in principle, in the humanist tradition of commonplacing ancient authors.

**Conclusion**

The history of notebooks therefore touches on themes that were much debated in the eighteenth century, usually regarded as an age of Enlightenment, and also, from an Anglo-American perspective (or prejudice), as the Age of Locke and Newton.
This was the period that saw the emergence of publications, institutions and techniques that sought to store and order knowledge and information: public libraries and museums, catalogues of archives and other collections, indexes and finding aids, dictionaries and encyclopaedias, reviews of books in periodical journals, transactions of learned societies, and traceable citations in footnotes and bibliographies. These are considerable achievements. Alongside these developments, the issues of secret and shared, private and public, information and personal versus universal methods of noting, arranging and storing material were always in play. They continue to have relevance today, especially as we embark on the massive task of putting manuscript and printed materials into digital form.

I have said that Locke’s method of note-taking, especially his practice of commonplacing, stressed the retrieval of information, rather than its recall by memory. Certainly, he believed that there could be no recourse to the ambitions of the art of memory, but this is not to say that Locke gave up on natural memory. Indeed, he acknowledged its profoundly important role in allowing each individual to absorb and integrate new ideas, to build knowledge over time. In current neuropsychology and cognitive psychology it is accepted that individual (or biological) memory stores information in various ways still not adequately understood. Fifty years ago, Karl Lashley coined the term ‘engram’ to denote ‘a single entry in the biological memory system’ (Lashley, 1950). Together with such internal encodings, our individual memories use what have been called ‘exograms’ — namely external prompts of various kinds, such as knots, rhymes, diagrams, and also, of course, notebooks or electronic notepads. These are all ‘exograms’ that embody memories and combine with the distributed ‘engrams’ in the brain. But here is the catch, as one writer explains: ‘exograms and engrams are both interpretable by the individual mind, which must provide the referential basis for understanding the memory record’ (Donald, pp. 308-16, at p.315; also Sutton). So even with notes, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, archives, and search engines we need facts, ideas, and values to be present in the mind when making judgements. This is what Locke realised. He made the point that in everyday life and conversation we cannot be constantly re-checking our ideas: individuals have to accept the testimony
of their own memories. Depending on how we view it, this point either ameliorates or intensifies his dark thoughts about the frailty of memory and the loss of ideas: at worst, if we lose some crucial concepts and frameworks, we become unable to integrate new ideas.

Locke’s notebooks gave him an externalised memory bank or ‘Store-house’ and, when he began to date entries, he also possessed material for a history of his own thought. At this point, the individualism with which he is tagged in epistemology and political theory, returns in another guise. After all, this is the man who characterised his book, the *Essay*, as ‘a copy of my own mind, in its several ways of operation’ (*Works*, vol. 4, p.139). He is also the author who proposed what, for its time, was a controversial and disturbing notion of personal identity. Locke made distinctions between the concepts of the soul (or mental substance), human being, and person. After showing that personal identity is not founded in identity of ‘substance’ — either material (human body) or immaterial (soul or mind) — he argued that it is constituted by continuity of consciousness. He contended that self-consciousness (including memory of past thoughts and actions) is required to support an enduring sense of personal identity over time. Speaking of the ‘self’, he reasoned that ‘it is by the consciousness it has of its present Thoughts and Actions, that it is self to it self now, and so will be the same self as far as the same consciousness can extend to Actions past or to come’ (*Essay*, II. xxvii. 10). In this sense, Locke’s notebooks are personal, even if, unlike those of Pepys, they are not explicitly introspective.

Three hundred years after his death Locke’s major contributions to the disciplines of philosophy and psychology are generally accepted. Some of his specific doctrines and arguments in political, religious and educational thought continue to inspire debate. In contrast, the scholarly methods and disciplined habits on which such a wide-ranging intellectual effort was founded, are less well known. The extensive array of personal notebooks, not intended for eyes other than his own, must surely be a crucial part of Locke’s legacy. Admittedly, the scale and rigour of his practice is unrepresentative, since it is the work of a genius; however the imperative to collect,
abbreviate, and order information, to base arguments on clearly referenced sources, to relieve memory of factual information, but to rely on it for our sense of self — all these features of Locke’s work tell us much about the preoccupations and values of his time and, by both comparison and contrast, about our own. The person who left us this archive from the seventeenth century deserves enormous respect.

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Bibliography
(I have kept in-text references to a minimum. I have drawn upon the following sources for this lecture).


