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LOCKE AND MÜLLER ON LANGUAGE, THOUGHT AND RELIGION

ABSTRACT. Sztajer Sławomir, *Locke and Müller on Language, Thought and Religion* [Locke i Müller w sprawie języka, myśli i religii] edited by M. Adamczak – „Człowiek i Społeczeństwo”, vol. XXXIV, Poznań 2012, pp. 249-259. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISBN 978-83-232-2518-8. ISSN 0239-3271.

This article is a contribution to research on the influence of John Locke's philosophy on Friedrich Max Müller's science of language, thought and religion. In the present study, *influence* is understood not merely as a more or less original continuation of Locke's philosophy, but also as an opposition to his achievements and criticism of his thought. While in the former case Locke's achievements form the basis for philosophical considerations, in the latter they constitute a negative point of reference which determines, to a considerable degree, debates on philosophical issues. The author of this article argues that many hypotheses elaborated by Müller, especially in the fields of the science of language and the science of religion, are based on Locke's philosophical achievements. Among the theories developed by Müller are the conception of mythology as a "disease" of language, the theory of metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon that allows language users to represent those domains of discourse which transcend sense experience, and a study concerning the relation between language and thought.

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This study is a contribution to research on the influence of John Locke's philosophy on 19th-century thought. *Influence* is understood here not merely as a more or less original continuation of Locke's philosophy, but also as an opposition to and criticism of his achievements. While in the former case Locke's achievements form the basis for philosophical considerations, in the latter they constitute a negative point of reference which determines, to a considerable degree, the debates on philosophical issues. Among the thinkers who made a significant contribution to the intellectual history of the 19th century was the British philologist, student of religion and philosopher of German origin – Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900). Müller is well-known as the creator of comparative religion and is often regarded as the founding father of the science of religion.

From the point of view of the modern science of religion, Müller's contribution to the development of this discipline is unquestionable. Müller was not only a student of religion, but also an editor and one of the translators of the monumental fifty-volume book series *Sacred Books of the East*. Müller was born in the German town of Dessau. He started his academic career as a philosopher. In 1843 he completed his doctoral dissertation *On the Third Book of Spinoza's Ethics, "De Affectibus"* at the University of Leipzig, and then moved to Berlin, where he studied with Friedrich Schelling. Under the influence of Schelling, he started studying The Vedas and Indian culture. In 1946, after a short stay in Paris, where he continued to study Indian sacred texts, Müller travelled to London and settled permanently in Oxford, where he was made a professor. Among his greatest works are: *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1864), *Chips from a German Workshop* (1867-75), *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873) and *The Science of Thought* (1887).

Philosophical considerations play an important, though not principal, role in Müller's scientific pursuits. They can be found in nearly all of his works. It seems legitimate to call him not only a philosopher who had extensive knowledge of the history of philosophy, but also a thinker who grappled with the philosophical problems posed by modern philosophers. These especially concern such objects of philosophical investigation as cognition, thought, language and religion. It can be claimed that the fundamental conceptions developed by Müller in the field of the science of language and the science of religion were, to a considerable measure, inspired by John Locke's philosophy, especially his *Essay concerning human understanding*. In reference to language, this claim does not mean that Locke was the only, or even the most important, thinker among those who influenced Müller. It must be remembered that Müller also studied the German philosophers. Nevertheless, the influence of Locke's philosophical work on Müller seems to be substantial. Locke's philosophy of language exercised the most profound influence in the 18th century¹, a century before Müller created his works. At that time and later, at the beginning of the 19th century, the so-called *linguistic turn* in German philosophy took place, represented by such thinkers as Johann Georg Hamann, Johann Gottfried von Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt. In spite of the fact that Müller's theory of language is not acknowledged as part of this *turn*, Müller can be seen as one of the pioneers of a new way of thinking about language.

Müller refers to many philosophers who examined the relation between language and thought, yet Locke's philosophy had a special importance for

¹ H. Aarsleff, *Locke's Influence*, in Vere Chappell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, Cambridge 2006, p. 271.

him. A substantial part of his *Essay concerning human understanding* was dedicated to language. Although the role ascribed to language in his philosophy is only secondary in comparison to that of ideas, Locke's work may be seen as the initiation of the study of language that culminated in the *linguistic turn*, firstly in German philosophy (the 18th and 19th centuries) and then in Anglo-American philosophy (the 20th century)².

Despite the fact that the conception of language as proposed by Müller considerably diverges from the view of Locke, it can be said that in many respects it was related to the issues contained in Locke's philosophy. The consequences of this philosophy turned out to be revolutionary since they forced philosophers and other students of language to reconsider their views on the relationship between language and thought, and to acknowledge that language is not only a tool of thought, but also an active power that shapes it. Not many of Locke's interpreters have noticed the innovative character of his linguistic considerations. Müller, on the contrary, emphasised this aspect of Locke's philosophy and applied it in his research on language, religion and mythology.

Müller confirms the view that Locke's achievements in the philosophy of language were not properly appreciated by his contemporaries, but have lately received confirmation from the science of language. However, what he means by the new science of language are not the theories of language created by various 18th and 19th century thinkers, but rather his own work *Lectures on the Science of Language*. Among the most important conceptions that can be found in Locke's philosophy are the following remarks presented in the *Essay concerning human understanding*: (1) words are not the signs of things, but rather the signs of concepts; (2) language came into being together with abstraction; (3) animals have no language because they do not possess the power of abstraction³. The first idea is an immediate consequence of the second; therefore, it can be said that there are only two, not three essential remarks. According to Müller, the importance of these observations consists in the fact that they anticipate what was confirmed by the modern science of language, namely, that "every word in every language which has ever been carefully analyzed, is derived from a root, and that every root expresses a concept"⁴. This is also the reason why Müller

² For an insightful analysis of the linguistic turn in German philosophy see C. Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London 1999; the main ideas of the *linguistic turn* in Anglo-American philosophy were presented by R. Rorty (ed), *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1967.

³ F.M. Müller, *Science of Thought*, vol. 1, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1887, p. 290-291.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 291.

describes Locke's work as a critique of language by analogy to Kant's "critique of reason", and why he claims that the works of Locke and Kant taken together constitute the real point of departure for modern philosophy⁵.

A more detailed analysis of the way in which Müller was inspired by Locke's philosophy requires taking into consideration three other issues not mentioned above: the origin of knowledge, the relationship between language and thought, and the concept of metaphor conceived as a tool enabling the subject to represent abstract domains of discourse.

In his works concerning language and thought, Müller repeatedly refers to the fundamental issues of the theory of knowledge. The problem of the origin of knowledge is one of the most important issues. Quoting an empiricist statement that "nothing is in the intellect which was not first in the senses" and adding that this is true only in principle, but not completely, Müller focuses his attention on an epistemological metaphor that underlies Locke's assumption⁶. The metaphor pictures the human cognitive system as consisting of two "chambers" – the sense and the intellect – through which the object of cognition passes. According to this metaphor, intellect is generally passive. Locke's principle needs to be complemented by Immanuel Kant's claim that the intellect without sense is empty, as sense without intellect is blind. Therefore, Müller proposes a reformulation of Locke's principle into two mutually interconnected statements: "There is nothing in the intellect that is not at the same time in the sense" and "There is nothing in the sense that is not at the same time in the intellect"⁷. In his critique of the metaphor of the *tabula rasa*, Müller points out that impressions made on the human mind depend on the very nature of the mind, just as impressions made on sand depend on the nature of the sand. When making an attempt to explain human cognition, Müller refers to the aprioric structure of the human mind as described by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

However, the critique of Locke's empiricism is connected not only with Kant's Copernican revolution, but also with the study of another mental ability, i.e. the faculty of faith. While this faculty underlies religion, the latter cannot be reduced to it. "If then there is a philosophical discipline which examines into the conditions of sensuous or intuitional knowledge, and if there is another philosophical discipline which examines into the conditions of rational or conceptual knowledge, there is clearly a place for a third philosophical discipline that has to examine into the conditions of that third faculty of man, co-ordinate with sense and reason, the faculty of perceiving

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ It must be added that the aforementioned principle was first formulated by Aristotle, not by John Locke.

⁷ F.M. Müller, *Science of Thought*, vol. 1, p. 132.

the Infinite, which is at the root of all religions"⁸. Such a faculty of perceiving the Infinite is, according to Müller, a third, independent of intellect and the senses, power of the mind. However, irrespective of Müller's reassurances, it would be difficult, on the basis of his theory, to defend the thesis that perception of the Infinite constitutes a separate source of representations. As will be pointed out, it is rather that all religious representations can be reduced to particular sensuous ideas.

Locke and Müller share the conviction that language plays an important role in human thinking and that studying language is very important, if not necessary, for the understanding of the nature of thought. According to Locke, "most men, if not all, in their thinking and reasoning, within themselves, make use of words instead of ideas: at least when the subject of their meditation contains in it complex ideas"⁹. This means that man has a tendency to substitute words for complex ideas. This takes place because complex ideas are often unspecified, whereas the words that substitute them are more clear and distinct. It can be said that names stabilise the complex ideas of substances, thus making them more orderly and precise. However, this does not concern simple ideas, where the mind has the ability to represent the right idea regardless of whether there are any words connected to it or not. Thus, only in some cases are words indispensable for thinking. Müller does not accept this limitation, i.e. he does not agree that the constitutive function of language is limited to complex ideas. He questions Locke's assumption that thought can exist without language and that people can arbitrarily ascribe names to ideas that were created before they were expressed in language.

Müller defends the idea of the inseparableness of language and thought, claiming that the discovery of this identity was "a complete revolution in philosophy" and that now the idea is the fundamental tenet of the science of language. In his opinion, "thoughts are impossible without words, or if it is necessary to add what is perfectly understood, without some other signs answering the same purpose as words"¹⁰. Irrespective of criticism, credit goes to Locke for the discovery that at least in some cases names necessarily accompany, and sometimes even substitute, words.

According to Müller, Locke's achievement in the field of the philosophy of language was that he pointed out that names are not the signs of things but rather the signs of concepts¹¹. He appreciated the fact that Locke was not the first philosopher who proposed such a solution (among his prede-

⁸ F.M. Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Religion*, Scribner and Co., New York 1872, p. 18.

⁹ J. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.5.4, London 1825, p. 440.

¹⁰ F.M. Müller, *Science of Thought*, vol. 1, p. 51.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

cessors was, for instance, Thomas Hobbes); however, the way in which Locke used this solution in his theory of knowledge was original and of great importance for philosophy. On the basis of the statement that names are the signs of concepts, Müller considers the relation between words and concepts and comes to the conclusion that this relation is not arbitrary. This does not mean, however, that names are the necessary signs of concepts. They are rather, as the author says, “reasonable and intelligible signs of concepts”¹². But what does this mean? At first glance, apart from a few exceptions, names seem to be related to concepts in an arbitrary way – in the everyday perspective, i.e. from the point of view of the ordinary user of language there is no natural relation between names and concepts. Locke thinks in a similar way: different languages have different words for the same concept. If, however, one considers the genesis of words by studying their etymology in the distant past and using the methods of comparative grammar, one finds that they come from a common root which in the past determined a given concept not arbitrarily, but in a way based on a reasonable and intelligible aim. For example, the word “name”, which signifies what we call a thing, is similar in many languages (Latin *nomen*, Greek *onoma*, English *name*, German *Name*) and has its root in the language of the primitive Aryans. Müller points out that the Sanskrit *naman* consists of the root *na*, originally *gna* – to know, and a suffix connoting an instrument or action. Thus, the word *name* originally meant much more than what is called a “name” today. Moreover, it was not an arbitrarily selected word, on the contrary, it was thought to express an act or instrument of knowledge. Müller quotes many examples of such motivation, arguing against the view that the relation between names and concepts is arbitrary. Although the aforementioned example is an argument against the arbitrariness of names, it also corroborates the Lockean view that names are the signs of concepts and not the signs of things.

According to Müller, Locke’s statements concerning the relation between thought and language are ambiguous. “Locke [...], though fully aware of the importance of language in all philosophical discussions, could not bring himself to say that thought is either impossible or possible without language”¹³. In Locke’s opinion, thought is almost impossible without language. Nearly all people replace their ideas with words. The problem with Locke’s conception is that he proposes neither a general theory nor a rule concerning the relations between thought and language. He uses such expressions as “most men” and “almost impossible” without determining

¹² Ibidem, p. 79.

¹³ F.M. Müller, *Three Introductory Lectures to the Science of Thought*, The Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago 1898, p. 52.

exactly where the boundary is. By contrast, for Müller there is no such boundary – language and thought are identical.

Contrary to many interpretations of Locke's philosophy of language, it seems that his view is not limited to the conception according to which language is only a hindrance to knowledge, but as Michael Losonsky indicates, it "gives language a constitutive role to play in the construction of thought"¹⁴. Similarly, Max Müller emphasised the essential role of language for the constitution of thought and cultural forms, such as mythology and religion. According to his conception, language was not an inactive medium for expressing thoughts, but rather played a crucial role in constituting the worlds of myth and religion. Moreover, language is, in a sense, out of human control, it is detached from man¹⁵. Its morphological and phonological characteristics cannot be intentionally changed by the speaker. This is the reason why the science of language is said to be a physical science. "For although it is in the power of one individual to change empires, to abolish laws, to introduce new customs, new forms of government and new ideas, no King or Dictator has ever been able to change the smallest law of language. Language belongs in this respect to the realm of nature, whose laws are invariable, and can be deduced as such, by repeated observation"¹⁶.

The influence of Locke's philosophy on Müller's theory of language is most apparent in the conception of language as a tool by means of which various fields of symbolic culture, such as myth and religion, are created. The thesis that primitive mythology and religion, the latter to the extent to which it is mythological, are a result of language change, belongs to the most important and original ideas formulated by Müller.

Müller's considerations on religion and mythology were influenced by his philosophy of language. He claimed that there is a clear relationship between language and mythology, as well as between language and religion. Thanks to this close relationship, it can be said that the classification of languages constitutes a basis for the classification of ancient religions¹⁷. Religion is not the same as mythology. Religion can be defined as the perception of the Infinite that influences the moral character of man¹⁸. In other

¹⁴ F.M. Losonsky, *Language, Meaning, and Mind in Locke's Essay*, in: L. Newman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 300.

¹⁵ L. Dowling, *Victorian Oxford and the Science of Language*, PMLA 97.2 (Mar., 1982), p. 167.

¹⁶ F.M. Müller, *Comparative Philology*, *Edinburgh Review*, Oct. 1851, p. 300.

¹⁷ F.M. Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, Longmans, Green, and Co., London 1873, p. 215. In another chapter of this book there is a stronger statement that "the only scientific and truly genetic classification of religions is the same as the classification of languages..." (p. 143).

¹⁸ F.M. Müller, *Physical Religion*, Longmans, Green, and Co., London 1898, p. 296.

words, religion, apart from its cognitive dimension, contains a behavioural component in the form of action and attitudes resulting from religious ideas. Mythology, on the other hand, is characteristic of the early stages of the development of human culture. Müller, as many other students of religion and myth of the time, talks about the “mythic period” that constitutes a separate chapter in the history of human language and thought¹⁹. However, mythology is not limited to the distant past, it sometimes affects religion and other fields of human thought. Under the influence of mythology, religion undergoes degeneration. Amongst all fields of human activity, religion is the most liable to mythological degeneration because its ideas transcend sense experience and may be represented only through the use of metaphor²⁰.

Mythology springs from the improper use of language, it is a “disease of language”. Although this erroneous use of language predominates above all in the primitive mentality, it is sometimes widespread in the higher stages of culture. It appears in both religious and secular language. “Whenever any word, that was at first used metaphorically, is used without a clear conception of the steps that led from its original to its metaphorical meaning, there is danger of mythology; whenever those steps are forgotten and artificial steps put in their places, we have mythology, or, if I may say so, we have diseased language, whether that language refers to religious or secular interests”²¹.

The reason Müller defines mythology and mythological religion as a disease of language is that language users, after creating metaphorical expressions, lost the consciousness of their metaphorical character. Importantly, it is not metaphor itself that infects language; the disease is caused by the fact that the metaphorical character of language has been forgotten by people. Just as not every organism is equally liable to a particular disease, not every fashion of speaking undergoes mythological distortion. The language which expresses objects that do not fall under the senses seems to be the most liable to such distortions. Although Müller’s definition of mythology as a disease of language contains a value judgement, his description of the cognitive and linguistic processes on which the phenomenon in question is based is value-free and needs more thorough investigation. Among

¹⁹ In the mythic period, thought and language were based on two tendencies: polyonymy and homonymy. Polyonymy consists in the fact that one and the same object which is perceived in various ways receives many names. Homonymy arises when objects perceived as different by the human mind nevertheless receive the same name (F.M. Müller, *The Science of Language*, vol. II, Longmans, Green, and Co., London, p. 453-454).

²⁰ F.M. Müller, *The Science of Language*, vol. II, p. 524; F.M. Müller, *Physical Religion*, p. 293.

²¹ F.M. Müller, *The Science of Language*, vol. II, p. 456.

these processes are metaphor and the so-called *phonetic decay* that results in folk etymology.

Since the majority of words used in mythology and religion are expressive of immaterial conceptions, there must be a mechanism by which these words came from words expressive of sensuous ideas. According to Müller, it is metaphor that provides the possibility of representing extra-sensual ideas. Even the most sublime ideas and most abstract words came from sensuous impressions. This conception was borrowed from Locke, who claimed that all complex ideas of substance arise from simple ideas, which in turn have their source in sensation or reflection²². This refers not only to ideas, but also to words: "It may also lead us a little towards the original of all our notions and knowledge, if we remark how great a dependence our words have on common sensible ideas; and how those which are made use of to stand for actions and notions quite removed from sense, have their rise from thence, and from obvious sensible ideas are transferred to more abstruse significations, and made to stand for ideas that come not under the cognizance of our senses"²³. Words expressive of ideas that do not come under the senses had to come from words expressive of sensuous ideas. This means that originally words signified sensuous ideas, and then, in the course of language development, some of them changed their signification – they acquired a metaphorical meaning. This is also true of religious ideas, which not only transcend sense experience, but also seem to transcend human cognitive abilities. For instance, according to Locke, the word "spirit" was originally a word that signified breath, "angel" signified a messenger. It can be claimed that the same rule also refers to the word "God", as this is a complex idea derived from simple ideas of reflection²⁴. In summing up Locke's considerations, Müller emphasises that all words signifying objects which transcend experience came from names of sensible objects: "Look at any word expressive of an object which cannot fall under the immediate cognizance of the senses, and you will not have much difficulty in testing the truth of Locke's assertion that words are invariably derived from other words which originally were meant to express the objects of the senses"²⁵. His philological talent allows him to investigate the etymology of many words expressive of objects which do not fall under sense perception.

Müller defines *metaphor* as the transferring of a name from one object to another. The former object is that to which the name belongs properly and

²² J. Locke, *Essay*, 2.23.37, p. 211.

²³ J. Locke, *Essay*, 3.1.5, p. 290.

²⁴ J. Locke, *Essay*, 2.23.33, p. 210.

²⁵ F.M. Müller, *The Science of Language*, vol. II, p. 437.

the latter is in a way analogous to the former²⁶. The author does not claim that this analogy is objective, but that it is rather an analogy as perceived by men. There are two kinds of metaphor: the radical and poetical. In the *radical metaphor* two different conceptions receive one name from the same root. By this process the root is adapted to each conception. On the other hand, the *poetical metaphor* consists in transferring the name of an object to another object, for example applying the word "star" to a flower²⁷. Metaphors play a fundamental role both in ancient and modern religion. Since the only possibility to represent abstract ideas is to use metaphor, the language of ancient religions abounds with them. In modern times, many, if not all, of these metaphors have been forgotten. Religion, as well as mythology, may be explained by reference to the discoveries of the science of language and, especially, to the theory of metaphor understood as a tool of representing abstract objects in terms of words expressive of sensuous objects.

The second factor determining the origin of mythology and some kinds of religion is folk etymology, which is based on the so-called *phonetic decay*. The author characterises these phenomena as follows: "By means of phonetic decay many words have lost their etymological transparency; nay, words, originally quite distinct in form and meaning, have assumed occasionally the same form. Now, as there is in the human mind a craving after etymology, a wish to find out, by fair means or foul, why such a thing can be called by such a name, it happens constantly that words are still further changed in order to make them intelligible once more; or, when two originally distinct words have actually run into one, some explanation is required, and readily furnished, in order to remove the difficulty"²⁸. Throughout the development of language, the meaning of some words has been distorted. But since the knowledge of the meaning of words is a natural need of human beings, people attempt to ascribe new meanings to words whose previous meaning has been forgotten. In doing this, they are influenced by the phonetic and morphological form of these words. Müller gives dozens of examples of names which underwent phonetic corruption and then were misinterpreted. A study of a word's etymology can be used not only in order to investigate changes that took place throughout the history of the word, but also in order to find an answer to the problem of the origin of mythological ideas. This sort of application of etymology was previously proposed by Locke, among others, who in the section of his "Essay..." subtitled "Words ultimately derived from such as signify sensible

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 448.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 479.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 651.

ideas" gives the rationale for using etymology in order to reconstruct the history of thought²⁹.

The linguistic theory of the genesis of mythology was criticised by many scholars studying the relation between myth and language. According to Ernst Cassirer, *myth* cannot be derived from language since it is an irreducible symbolic form. Moreover, language and myth cannot be separated in the early stages of the development of human culture³⁰. The same is true for religion. It cannot be explained and reduced to a disease of language. Indeed, it would be impossible to determine the linguistic factors which contributed to the origin of all typically mythological and religious ideas. The methods of linguistic analysis and criticism of language seem to be useless in reference to various words from the mythological and religious lexicon. Nevertheless, Locke and Müller's contribution to the study of religious language and thought does not consist in pointing out that all names of ideas that do not fall under the senses come from the names of sensuous ideas, but rather in pointing out the ways in which abstract domains of discourse are represented in terms of metaphor. Müller and Locke's conception enables one to explain the possibility of religious discourse, i.e. it explains how it is possible to talk about the supernatural reality which transcends not only the sense experience, but also other human cognitive abilities. Interestingly, the mechanism of metaphor as described by Locke and Müller is similar to that described by the cognitive theorists of metaphor. According to the cognitive approach, "metaphor ('X is Y') links an *abstract* and complex target domain (X) as explanandum with a more *concrete* source domain (Y) as explanans, which is more simply structured and open to sensual experience"³¹. And although both Locke and Müller are suspicious of metaphor as a potential source of error, they are also known as the creators of metaphors that have had a great influence on the minds of their successors.

²⁹ See H. Aarsleff, *Locke's Influence*, p. 273.

³⁰ E. Cassirer, *Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg 2006, p. 119; *Language and Myth*, Dover, New York 1953, p. 9.

³¹ O. Jäkel, *Hypotheses Revisited: The Cognitive Theory of Metaphor Applied to Religious Texts*, *Metaphoric.de*, 2/2002, p. 21.