

John Locke's "New Method of Making Common-Place-Books": Tradition, Innovation and Epistemic Effects

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Abstract

In 1676, the English physician and philosopher John Locke published a new method of commonplacing. He had developed this method and, in particular, a new approach to organizing and indexing the entries, in the course of 25 years of personal note-taking and it proved quite influential. This paper presents the three major approaches to commonplacing as practiced by physicians and other scholars before Locke - the systematic or textbook approach, the alphabetical approach and the sequential or index-based approach – and it analyzes the ways in which Locke himself applied them in his own commonplace books. In comparison with established approaches, his new method offered a maximum degree of flexibility while facilitating the later retrieval of notes and minimising waste of space and paper. Thanks to these features, it was particularly well suited for physicians and natural philosophers who were interested in the infinite variety of natural particulars rather than in elegant quotes on a very limited set of classical topics. In conclusion, the potential epistemic impact of commonplacing on early modern medicine and natural philosophy is discussed, in particular its importance for contemporary debates about species and disease entities and for the emergence of the notion of "facts."

Keywords

commonplacing - John Locke - note-taking - paper technology - natural philosophy

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Excerpting and note-taking was an important and much appreciated art in the early modern period.¹ Commonplacing was a particularly widespread approach to note-taking and had a firm place in contemporary pedagogics. Following the advice of Erasmus and other humanists, schoolboys were already instructed to excerpt useful quotes from well-known authors and to arrange them according to "topics," "headings" or "places." These "common places" were to serve as a model of elegant Latin and as a source of "copia," which would enrich their conversations, speeches and writings.²

One of the most influential figures in the history of Western thought also holds a prominent place in the history of commonplacing: the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704). In 1686, the *Bibliothèque Universelle* published his *Méthode nouvelle de dresser des recueils*.³ An English translation appeared in 1706 under the title *New and Easie Method of Making Common-Place-Books*.⁴ Except for a few earlier poems, it was 54-year-old Locke's very first publication. The *Méthode nouvelle* was written in the guise of a letter to Nicolas Toinard, one

- 1 Cf. Franciscus Sacchini, De ratione libros cum profectu legendi (Ingolstadt, 1614); Jeremias Drexel, Aurifodina artium et scientiarum omnium excerpendi solertia (Munich, 1638); Martin Kerger, "Methodus excerpendi, Drexeliana succinctior" (= appendix to Drexel, Aurifodina (Breslau, 1695)); Johann Peter Titz, Manuductio ad excerpendum de verbis excerpendis, ubi etiam de locutione latina emandata (Danzig, 1660): Vincent Placcius, De arte excerpendi: vom belahrten Buchhalten Liber singularis (Stockholm, Hamburg, 1689); cf. Ann M. Blair, Too Much to Know. Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age (New Haven, London, 2010).
- For overviews see Ann Moss, Printed Commonplace-books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought (Oxford, 1996; Alberto Cevolini, De arte excerpendi: imparare a dimenticare nella modernità (Florence, 2006); Howard Hotson, Commonplace Learning. Ramism and its German Ramifications, 1543–1630 (New York, 2007); David Cowling and Mette B. Bruun, eds, Commonplace Culture in Western Europe in the Early Modern Period (Leuven, Paris, Walpole, MA, 2011).
- John Locke, "Méthode nouvelle de dresser des recueils," *Bibliothèque universelle et historique*, 2 (1686), 315–340. Three different manuscripts drafts of the text have survived, including an English draft, published by G. G. Meynell in 1993 (G. G. Meynell, "John Locke's Method of Common-Placing, as Seen in his Drafts and his Medical Notebooks, Bodleian MSS Locke d. 9, f. 21 and f. 23," *Seventeenth Century*, 8 (1993), 245–267, here 258–263).
- John Locke, "Mr Lock's Letter to Monsieur Toignard [sic], containing a New and Easie Method of Making Common-Place-Books, an exact Index of which may be made in two Pages" in John Locke, *A new method of making common-place-books* (London, 1706); in the same year, the letter also appeared under the title "A Letter from Mr. Locke to Mr. Toignard, containing a New and Easie Method of Making a Common-Place-Book, to which an Index of two Pages is sufficient," in *Posthumous works of Mr. John Locke* (London, 1706), 314–335.

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of Locke's French correspondents. As Locke explained, he had demonstrated his method to Toinard eight years before, in Paris, and Toinard and his friends had found it useful and encouraged him to publish it.

Locke claimed that his new method was the fruit of twenty-five years of experience – and he was, in fact, a very prolific note-taker. Over two dozen of his notebooks have survived and he may well have filled even more.⁵ Some of these notebooks simply offer miscellaneous notes and excerpts. In most of them, however, he used, in one way or another, commonplacing.⁶ Locke started trying out different methods of commonplacing around 1660, and in some of his surviving commonplace books – though by far not in all of them – we find him using the approach he eventually recommended in his *Méthode nouvelle*.⁷

A few of Locke's surviving notebooks are primarily devoted to political, geographical and ethical topics. In the (largely empty) pages of his *Lemmata ethica*, for instance, he wrote entries on a wide range of topics, from *Amazonas flumen*, *Avaritia* and *Antillae insula* to *Monarchia absoluta*, *Voyage de Nassau* and *Uxores*. ⁸ The large majority of his notebooks focusses almost entirely on natural philosophy and, above all medicine, however.⁹ They reflect the very prominent place these fields had in his scholarly and professional life. Through much of his life, Locke was not only in close contact with the most noted physicians and natural philosophers of his time, such as Richard Lower, Thomas Willis, Thomas Sydenham, Robert Hooke and Robert Boyle.¹⁰ He himself studied medicine extensively for many years. He never obtained a doctorate but he served as a personal physician to Lord Ashley in London for some time.¹¹ The large majority

- 8 See e.g. Ms. Locke, d. 10.
- Mss. Locke, c. 4, c. 29, c. 42, c. 44, d. 9, d. 11, e. 4, f. 18, f. 19, f. 20, f. 22, f. 23, f. 24, f. 25, f. 27;
 Ms. Film 77 ("Adversaria 1661"); British Library, London, Add. Ms. 32,554; Biblioteca Marciana Venice, Ms. Lat. 23;
- 10 Peter R. Anstey, John Locke and Natural Philosophy (Oxford, 2011).
- Maurice Cranston, John Locke. A Biography (Oxford, 1985) (orig. 1957), 88–104; Kenneth Dewhurst, John Locke, 1632–1704, Physician and Philosopher: A Medical Biography (London, 1963); Patrick Romanell, John Locke and Medicine. A New Key to Locke (Buffalo, N.Y., 1984).

⁵ P. Long, A Summary Catalogue of the Lovelace Collection of the Papers of John Locke in the Bodleian Library (Oxford, 1959).

My analysis focuses on Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Locke (henceforth: Ms. Locke), c. 42, d. 9, d. 10, d. 11, f. 18, f. 19., f. 20, f. 22, f. 23, f. 24, f. 25, f. 27; Ms. Film 77 (Adversaria 1661, in private possession); British Library, London, Add. Ms. 32,554; Biblioteca Marciana Venice, Ms. Lat. 23

For a more detailed analysis see, in particular, J. R. Milton, "John Locke's Adversaria," The Locke Newsletter, 18 (1987), 63–74, and idem, "John Locke's Medical Notebooks," The Locke Newsletter, 28 (1997), 135–156;

of his commonplace books is devoted exclusively to medical topics. Occasionally, they result from his reading of a particular writer, such as Daniel Sennert, author of a very influential *Praxis medica* and a leading early advocate of corpuscularism and seminal principles.¹² More commonly, his entries reflect a large variety of sources. They cover the whole range of medicine, from the definition of key concepts such as *sanitas*, *symptoma*, *morbus* and *crisis* and the foundations of human physiology (e.g. *humores*, *spiritus*, *sensus*, and *somnus*) to countless entries on the nature and causes of different complaints and diseases such as *apoplexia*, *gonorrhea*, and *phrenitis* and on all kinds of medicinal substances, including chemical drugs, such as *antimonium*, *aurum potabile* and *vitriolum*.

Locke's commonplace books are well-known and have been used by numerous Locke scholars but they have been mined above all for their contents. By contrast, the paper technologies Locke applied in them and the new method that he developed in the process have so far attracted relatively little attention among historians. Drawing also on some of Locke's own notebooks G. G. Meynell gave some useful insights in 1993.¹³ The most comprehensive analysis to date, by Richard Yeo,¹⁴ offers a detailed description of Locke's "new method" and highlights its principal features. However, both authors have not systematically compared the different approaches to commonplacing with which Locke experimented, including the one he eventually advocated in the Méthode nouvelle, with established commonplacing practices as reflected in the notebooks of other, previous scholars. Yet, by Locke's time, commonplacing had long ceased to be a tool merely for the collection and memorization of quotations from classical authors. It was widely used also by physicians and natural philosophers as an important means to collect and organize excerpts as well as personal observations and empirical knowledge acquired from others.¹⁵ Largely ignoring this widespread practice, Yeo wrongly credits Locke with the invention of features which, by Locke's time, were already quite common and does not do justice to what was truly specific to his method.

Ms. Locke f. 18; Biblioteca Marciana, Venice, Mss. Lat. 23; Locke used the 1656-edition of Sennert's works (Daniel Sennert, *Opera omnia*, 2 vols [Lyon, 1656]).

¹³ Meynell, "John Locke's Method."

¹⁴ Richard Yeo, "John Locke's 'New Method' of Commonplacing. Managing Memory and Information," *Eighteenth-century Thought*, 2 (2004), 1–38.

Ann Blair, "Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy. The Commonplace Book," *Journal* of the History of Ideas, 53 (1992), 541–551; eadem, *Too Much to Know*; Michael Stolberg, "Medizinische Loci communes. Formen und Funktionen einer ärztlichen Aufzeichnungspraxis im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert," *NTM – Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Wissenschaften*, *Technik und Medizin*, 21 (2013), 37–60.

My analysis will start with a brief description of the method Locke recommended in 1686. In the second part, I will present the three basic approaches to commonplacing we find in most early modern physicians' and natural philosophers' notebooks and I will take a look at the ways in which Locke used and modified these approaches in his own notebooks. Comparing Locke's new method with traditional approaches to commonplacing, I will then point out more precisely its relative merits and drawbacks. In conclusion, I will discuss some of the potential epistemic effects of commonplacing in early medicine and natural philosophy and their relationship to Locke's natural philosophy and epistemology.

Locke's "New Method"

Locke's method began with an *album*, a stack of white, empty sheets bound together into a single volume. But his commonplace books, like those of many other scholars, differed from ordinary note-books in fundamental respects. First, and this was crucial for turning the notebook into a commonplace book, the entries were organized according to headings or topics or, to use contemporary terms, "heads," "places," or "topoi."¹⁶ Ideally the writer was to choose, as Locke put it, "some important and essential word to the matter in hand," preferably in Latin. These headings were chosen only in the process of note-taking. When the writer took his first note, he decided on a suitable heading – for example *Confessio* – and wrote it on the left (verso- or even-numbered) side of the first empty double page together with the excerpt or note in question and, if necessary, the respective source. If the next entry he wanted to make was on *Avaritia* he wrote *Avaritia* on the following empty double-page and added his notes on *Avaritia*. If he later wanted to make another entry on *Confessio* or *Avaritia* he returned to the double-page on which he had written the first entry.

Second, since there was no pre-established order, an index was needed to allow later retrieval of entries on a specific topic. The index Locke proposed was of a very special kind and was the truly novel feature of his method to which he devoted the greatest part of his paper (see Fig. 2). Before even writing the first entry, he advised his readers, they were to take the two opposing pages of a double-page and divide them horizontally into 25 lines and vertically into 4 columns, i.e. altogether into 100 fields. Each group of 5 lines in each of the 4 columns was devoted to one of 20 letters of the alphabet viz. to headings

¹⁶ From the Greek work "topos" for place. In the modern, largely synonymous usage of "topos" and "commonplace" the connection is still alive.



FIGURE 1 Frontispiece of John Locke's "New Method."

starting with that letter. For K, J/Y and V/W the letters C, I and U were to be used as equivalents. Headings starting with the same letter were further distinguished according to the first vowel after the initial letter by using the five lines within each of the 20 fields. Entries on "Confessio," for example, a term which started with a "C" followed by an "o" would be indexed – just with the page number and without actually writing "Confessio" – in the field reserved for C-words and, within that field, in the fourth, the o-line. "Avaritia," which begins with an "A" and has "a" as the next vowel as well, would be indexed in the very first field on the upper left and the very first line, the a-line, in that field. Words starting with a "Q" were always followed by a "u" and therefore only needed one space. This could be an extra, 101st space or one could simple use the space reserved for Z-u-headings for that purpose, which rarely occurred anyway

Of course, "Avaritia" is not the only Latin word that starts with an "A" with another "a" as the next vowel. Likewise numerous Latin terms start with a "C" followed by "o" as the first vowel – which brings us to the third characteristic



FIGURE 2 Index in one of John Locke's commonplace books, based on his "new method" (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Locke f. 18, 110-111).

and novel feature of Locke's method. The various double-pages were not simply reserved for the first specific heading that was entered, in our example "Confessio" and "Avaritia." Rather all headings which were characterized by the same combination of initial letter and first consecutive vowel were assigned to one and the same double page – until it was full and a new one had to be started (see Fig. 3).

Thus a writer who had started a double page with *Avaritia* and later found he wanted to enter notes on *Amanuensis, Ara* or *Assatura* would use the same double page. For later retrieval, the number of this page or double-page could be found by looking up the field in the index which was reserved for the respective combination of first letter and first consecutive vowel. Since the page-numbers were sufficient and, in contrast to conventional indexes, no headings had to be spelled a single double-page offered enough space.

Locke discussed the possibility of a further subdivision. One could assign a page or double page to each combination of initial letter, and the following two vowels, for example A-o-e. All entries starting with an A, followed by an o and

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FIGURE 3 Double-page from one of John Locke's commonplace books based on his "new method" (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Locke, f. 19, 364-365).

then an e would thus end up on the same page but notes on topics like *Aconitum* which followed the A-o-i pattern would have a different page. In his *Méthode nouvelle* Locke mentioned this possibility which resulted in a large index table with 500 (or 505 if Q gets an extra field) rather than just 100 (or 101) different combinations. He did not generally recommend it to his readers, however, and it is not difficult to see why. As one of his own commonplace books nicely illustrates,¹⁷ most pages, once they had been attributed to a specific triple combination of this kind, were likely to carry only one or two entries because no other note-worthy information on that topic had come up and no other heading either, that was characterized by precisely the same combination of initial letter and first and second consecutive vowel. Thus a large folio page might, in the end, only contain two lines on *gingiva* and remain otherwise empty.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ms. Locke, c. 42.

¹⁸ Ibid., 292.

Approaches to Commonplacing in Early Modern Medicine and Natural Philosophy

Locke's method does not strike the modern reader as the "easie" method as which the English translation advertised it. The note-taker not only had to make himself familiar with constructing and using a very special kind of index. There was also no systematic order and notes on very different topics ended up on the same page, just because they happened to share the same combination of initial and first consecutive vowel. So why did it take Locke 25 years of experimenting to arrive at this method? Why did he believe his method was an achievement which the world should know about? And why did it have such a lasting impact? More than a hundred years later, J. Walker in London still marketed A new commonplace book being an improvement on that recommended by Mr Locke, into which the owner could enter his own excerpts or notes.¹⁹ In the 1830s John L. Burtseli, stationer and account book manufacturer in New York, advertised Locke's common place book altered and improved, in which the various defects found in the author's original plan, are fully obviated, adding some quotations from Locke and Bacon on the advantages of keeping common place books.²⁰ Around 1850 Pitkeathley in London sold a similar Common place book, formed generally upon the principles recommended and practiced, for twenty five years, by John Lock.²¹ Surviving copies suggest that buyers did indeed use these printed, empty commonplace books for their intended purposes.²² Clearly, there was something in Locke's method that made it appear, at least in the eyes of some, as a useful paper tool and a considerable improvement on existing solutions.

In order to understand better how Locke arrived at his new method and why it was considered as an achievement, we have to take a look at existing methods of commonplacing and at how Locke himself, in the course of his life, proceeded in his own notebooks. From a modern perspective some of the following analysis may appear quite technical and detailed. The success of extensive guides to efficient note-taking, such as Drexel's and Sacchini's, in general, and the time and effort many scholars, physicians and natural philosophers, including Locke himself, devoted to their own commonplace books, in particular,

¹⁹ A new commonplace book being an improvement on that recommended by Mr Locke; properly ruled throughout with a complete skeleton index, and ample directions for its use (London, 1799).

²⁰ Advertisement in New-York American, January 8, 1839.

²¹ Common place book, formed generally upon the principles recommended and practised, for twenty five years, by John Lock, Esq. (London, [ca 1849]).

²² Library of Columbia University, New York, Mss. Collection X808; Massachusetts Historical Society, Adams papers, commonplace book kept by Charles Francis Adams (1807–1886).

should alert us, however, to the crucial importance the right method of notetaking had in the eyes and daily lives of contemporaries. Challenged by an increasing "information overload,"²³ they found it highly desirable to conceive a method which best met the five principal demands on any good method of note-taking: order, flexibility, economy of space and time, and easy retrieval.

As I have shown in greater detail elsewhere, we can generally distinguish three major approaches to commonplacing in the early modern period, and in particular, among early modern physicians and natural philosophers, like Locke.²⁴ In what follows, I will present these three approaches and Locke's own use of them and I will compare the virtues and deficiencies of his own, new method with those of the existing approaches.

The first traditional approach, the systematic or *textbook approach* organized the notes according to a given, preconceived system or structure. Before he even wrote his first entry, the author filled the empty pages with headings that reflected a systematic, logical division of a given subject area, like the chapters of a textbook. In fact, the headings were sometimes copied verbatim from the table of contents of a successful textbook and the writer might start by entering excerpts from that book under the various headings. But then he used the same headings also for excerpts from other authors – or indeed for all kinds of notes that were relevant to that specific heading or topic. Surviving manuscript evidence suggests that this approach was quite common, especially among students and physicians and among scholars in the early phases of their careers. Though we lack the evidence, so far, it may also have been used by writers who envisaged the publication of a book and wanted to assemble the necessary material in the corresponding order.

The approach had the advantage of providing an orderly structure. The writer did not need to worry about finding the best, most appropriate headings for his entries either but could borrow them from others. The systematic approach was thus fine and indeed useful for pupils and students, who wanted to take notes on a given, limited range of topics and used commonplacing as a convenient means to memorize more efficiently, through the very act of writing, what they had read or heard. There were obvious limits to this approach, however, which had a profound impact on its ultimate success. Above all, it lacked flexibility. The more advanced student already and even more so the established scholar would sooner or later encounter more and more pieces of memorable information on topics that did not correspond to any of the headings familiar

²³ Ann Blair, "Reading Strategies for Coping with Information Overload, ca. 1550–1700," Journal of the History of Ideas, 64 (2003), 11–28.

²⁴ See Stolberg, "Medizinische *Loci communes.*"

as chapter headings in standard textbooks. In fact, once he had acquired a solid knowledge of the basics of his discipline, the note-taker was likely to be interested above all in such entries that did not have a well-established place in textbook learning. On top of that, at least in medicine, the resulting compendium of orderly notes was not particularly useful for later reference either. The same knowledge could be very conveniently found in printed *Institutiones* or comprehensive textbooks of leading authorities like Daniel Sennert or Jean Fernel,²⁵ or in printed collections of medical commonplaces like the huge volume François Valleriola published in 1562, which presented the whole of learned medicine and was reprinted several times.²⁶

The surviving manuscript evidence bears ample witness to these shortcomings. In the majority of medical commonplaces I have seen, the medical student or physician apparently began with great enthusiasm, bought paper and had it bound and carefully wrote headings on the empty pages. But sooner or later he gave up, leaving many if not most pages almost or indeed entirely empty.²⁷

John Locke used this approach early in his career, in a note-book that Lockescholars have largely ignored.²⁸ He started organizing his topical entries based on the chapter headings of Daniel Sennert's well-known *Institutiones medicinae* – presumably based on an edition of Sennert's *Opera* –, starting with excerpts from Sennert himself and adding excerpts from other authors, such as Thomas Sydenham, Johann Baptist van Helmont and Grunlingius. Locke ended up leaving most pages largely empty, however. This commonplace book is, in fact, the only one he is known to have given away.²⁹ Apparently he thought it was useless for him. He also applied the approach in parts of another surviving notebook but tellingly he soon switched to his own method, starting with an A-e page on *Aer, Alexipharmaka, Appetitus, and Abscessus.*³⁰

²⁵ Daniel Sennert, *Institutionum medicinae libri v* (Wittenberg, 1620); Jean Fernel, *Universa medicina* (Geneva, 1644).

²⁶ François Valleriola, Loci medicinae communes, tribus libris digesti (Lyon, 1562).

²⁷ Examples are Kantonsbibliothek, St. Gallen, Ms. 408, medical *loci communes* written around 1600 by an unidentified writer; Universitätsbibliothek, Erlangen, Ms. 935, *Mnemoneutikon*, by Joachim Camerarius the Younger (1534–1598); Staatsbibliothek, Bamberg, Bamberger Sammlung, Msc. misc. 385, *Memoriale practicum* by Erasmus Reinhold the Younger (1538–1592).

²⁸ Biblioteca Marciana, Venice, Mss. Lat. 23; it is missing, for example, in the list of medical and natural philosophical notebooks which Peter R. Anstey compiled in his recent *John Locke and Natural Philosophy* (Oxford, 2011).

²⁹ According to a note on the manuscript, he gave it to P. Costeo, who later passed in on to the Florentine Antonio Cocchi.

³⁰ Ms. Locke f. 20; I have only seen photocopies and have not been able to consult the origi-

The massive waste of space and paper which resulted from assigning headings to the individual pages beforehand could be considerably eased if the commonplace book was used for second-order note-taking, that is, to organize unsystematic notes previously written on single leaves of paper or in scrapbooks. The Bohemian physician Georg Handsch (1529–1578?) described how he assembled the various notes he had taken on different topics, tried to estimate how much space he would need for each topic and copied the notes accordingly into a notebook.³¹ Cornelis Booth (1605–1678) in Utrecht suggested a similar practice when he noted certain entries in his *Adversaria* he still had to copy into his *Loci communes.*³² The price for this kind of second-order note taking was obvious: the notes had to be written twice with a corresponding expense of time.

The second type of commonplacing, the *alphabetical approach*, ordered the notes not according to their place within a subject area or a system of thought but alphabetically. It came in two major subtypes. In the first subtype, the empty pages were filled beforehand with headings in an alphabetical order. Again there was hardly any flexibility and no place for entries on matters that called for a new, additional heading. Even more than the textbook approach, this subtype was suitable only when the range of topics could be anticipated beforehand. Since there was no systematic order, the approach could work quite well if it was to serve for notes on a limited range of topics which all belonged to the same category, such as different drugs or diseases.³³ It was of little use, however, to the typical note-taker who was interested in a range of topics and did not know beforehand on which topics he would want to take notes.

In the second subtype of alphabetical commonplacing, the headings to be entered were not fixed beforehand but only chosen in the process of note-taking. Before he started entering his notes, the writer only assigned a certain number of pages to each letter of the alphabet or he did not mark the pages beforehand at all and sought to divide the album up alphabetically while filling it. This approach created a much more open tool and was attractive also for the more advanced student or scholar. It almost inevitably entailed either a

nal which seems to be badly damaged. I therefore cannot rule out the possibility that two different notebooks were later bound together.

³¹ Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Cod. 11239, fol. 100v.

³² Universiteitsbibliotheek, Utrecht, Hs VII E25, Cornelis Booth, "Empiricae observationes tum medicorum tum chirurgorum tum etiam vulgi," an empty page at the beginning lists a few terms as "restant referenda ad locos communes."

E. g. Laurenz Blumentrost, around 1650, took notes on different kinds of medicines, sorting them alphabetically (Universätsbibliothek, Marburg, Ms. 935); I am grateful to Sabine Schlegelmilch, Würzburg, who pointed out this manuscript to me.

massive waste of paper or a mess, however. For it was virtually impossible to anticipate precisely the right place for each new heading. For example, if the writer had already devoted a page to Asa foetida and now wanted to take notes on Aurum he could leave a page or more free after Asa foetida, just in case he later needed to make entries, e.g., on Aura and Auris. Those free pages might never be needed, however. On the other hand, if he left no pages free in between and then did read or observe something interesting about Aura or Auris he either had to start a new notebook, or insert extra leaves or add headings to pages he had assigned to other topics, or in other ways make a mess of his notes. On top of that, many pages he had reserved for a certain topic would still be almost empty, at the time, when the first pages devoted to topics on which the writer had taken particularly numerous or detailed notes offered no more space and he had devoted the successive pages to other topics already. At this point, the writer had to start a new notebook - or he had to write his notes on places that were not intended for them and order was no longer maintained. In retrospect, a fairly easy solution to this problem would have been the use of individual slips of paper or cards which were kept in an alphabetical order. Only very few scholars, in the seventeenth century are known to have resorted to this practice, however.³⁴ Most remained faithful to the traditional tool of the notebook, perhaps also for fear that individual slips of paper might get too easily lost or mixed up.

Waste of paper and space could be drastically reduced, if the note-taker relinquished the traditional idea of assigning every page only to a single heading. If the writer assembled indiscriminately all notes on topics starting with a certain letter on the same page or range of pages, the paper would be used much better, provided the writer correctly anticipated the amount of pages he had to reserve for entries with the same initial. On the downside, notes on totally different topics would now end up on the same page, just because they happened to start with the same letter. As a result the note-taker might have to browse through 20 or 30 pages devoted to headings starting with an "A" or a "C," just to find a single entry on, say, *Ataraxia* or *Caro* – or none at all. Locke used this approach in some of his notebooks but he modified it in one crucial respect, which was then to evolve into an important feature of his published method. Rather than assigning a certain number of pages indiscriminately to all topics starting with the same initial, he subdivided each section devoted to one initial letter

³⁴ The best-known case is Joachim Jungius; see Christoph Meinel, "Enzyklopädie der Welt und Verzettelung des Wissens: Aporien der Empirie bei Joachim Jungius," in Franz M. Eybl, Wolfgang Harms and Hans-Henrik Krummacher, eds, *Enzyklopädien der frühen Neuzeit: Beiträge zu ihrer Erforschung* (Tübingen, 1995), 162–187.

depending on the first following vowel. One of his commonplace books, for example, starts with *Aphthae*, *Asthma*, *Anthrax* and *Ascarides*, followed, on the next double page, by entries on *Atheroma*, *Appetitus caninus*, and *Aemulus* and arrives eventually at *Ulcus cacoethes* and *Vulnus*.³⁵

In the use of this approach, Locke tried to reduce the confusion of entries on the individual pages further by using also the second vowel that followed the initial letter and the first vowel after that. One possibility was a rough subdivision of the pages in five parts or columns assigned to the five vowels which decided where precisely on the page the note was to be entered. A note on the *Amazonas* would thus figure on the A-a page but, in view of the following "o" start only from a vertical line somewhere at the right (see Fig. 4).

The third major approach to commonplacing, which I have called the sequential or index-based approach, resembled, in many ways, an ordinary notebook or what contemporaries often called "adversaria."36 Here notes on all kinds of topics were entered one after the other, just as they occurred, with neither systematic nor alphabetical order, until all the pages were filled. There was a crucial difference, however, compared to a mere random collection of notes, as, for example, the medical notebooks of the Bohemian physician Georg Handsch (1529–1578?) and the Loci communes Johannes Magirus (1615–1697), a physician in Berlin and Zerbst, compiled around 1650 illustrate.³⁷ The writer put a characteristic heading or key word next to the entry, often in a separate column or in the margin. In addition, he was well-advised, as Handsch did in several of his notebooks, to create an alphabetical index based on these headings, to permit quick retrieval of notes on a specific topic. In addition, one could cross-reference to previous and successive entries on the same topic. Compared to the other two approaches, the sequential or index-based approach was by far the most flexible. The note-taker could enter whatever kind of information he deemed memorable and assign new headings whenever it suited him. Since the pages were simply filled one after the other, no paper was wasted.

Locke experimented with this approach (see Fig. 5), but there were also some significant disadvantages. Entries on one and the same topic no longer appeared on a single page or at least in a section of the note-book devoted to the same

³⁵ Ms. Locke f. 24.

³⁶ Using the term in different meaning, probably taken from a distinction that Jeremias Drexel had made in his influential *Aurifodina*, between the more extensive "adversaria" and brief "lemmata," Locke called some of his commonplace books "adversaria" and others "lemmata"; Drexel distinguished both, in turn, from "historica."

³⁷ Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Cod. 11006, Cod. 11200, Cod. 11205, with corresponding index in Cod. 11206, and Cod. 11207; Universitätsbibliothek, Marburg, Ms. 97.

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FIGURE 4 Flawed experiment with sorting headings based on first letter and the two following vowels (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Locke, d. 10, 1).

heading or letter. Instead the physician had to go, one by one, to the various pages the index indicated or follow the cross-references. On top of that, producing the index could be quite tricky and messy if one did not want to wait until all pages were full, which, until then, would have made it very time consuming to identify entries on a certain topic. Since the writer could not foresee, how many headings would appear under each letter, he needed to reserve generous space for each letter and before and after each index word. If the writer used many different headings, the index might extend over numerous pages. Nevertheless, he was likely, in the end, to have to squeeze additional headings between two existing terms. At some point, Locke tried to remedy this problem at least in part by constructing an index-table in which the indexed terms were written next to a vertical line which corresponded to their first letter (see Fig. 6). In this manner headings could be consecutively entered into index, yet those starting with the same letter could be still identified at a glance. Considerable

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FIGURE 5 Example of sequential or index-based commonplacing (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Locke f. 18, 2-3).

problems were bound to arise, however, as soon the note-taker used a greater number of different headings which would force him to use several index tables of this kind – or an extra-long sheet of paper which could be folded.

The Merits of Locke's "New Method"

In the light of the three major, well-established approaches to commonplacing and their respective advantages and drawbacks, it becomes clearer why Locke devised his own method of commonplacing and why it appeared as an important achievement to others. Waste of space and paper was still a problem in Locke's method but it was much reduced compared to the systematic and the alphabetical approach. Not a single page in the notebook remained entirely empty and the individual pages were also put to a much better use. If he had started a double-page, for example, with an entry on *Labor*, reserving this double-page for L-a headings, no other entries on *Labor* might follow. But there

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Colica 186 Honatal osserucho 192	Restaurant 114
Alvus astricta 160	Porracemanta 115
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FIGURE 6 Alternative type of Index (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Locke f. 22, 364-365).

were numerous other terms such as *Laetitia* or *Lacrima* which also started with L-a and were assigned to the same double page. Of course, there were also some rather uncommon combinations such as Z-i but they would often not come up at all and would therefore not occupy a (double-) page of their own in the first place. Some combinations, such as L-a or C-e, on the other hand were so common that one double-page would often not suffice but here Locke's method offered an easy solution. Once a double page with entries on a common combination of first letter and first vowel had been filled, a new double page could be started on the next available empty double page. When all the double pages in a notebook had been assigned to a certain combination, it still could be used for further entries. At that point the note-taker, Locke suggested, could look for those double pages in which the right page was still entirely empty – and assign these right pages to new, different combinations.³⁸ Thus, in the end,

³⁸ In his own notebooks, Locke tried to go one step further and used the lower half of pages that had remained largely empty for headings with a different combination of initial let-

when the note-taker was finally forced to start a new note-book many pages were filled with notes from the top to the bottom and not a single page remained entirely empty.

The traditional sequential or index-based approach was even less wasteful of paper than Locke's but his new method, while maintaining utmost flexibility, offered a considerable degree of order and facilitated later retrieval. Notes on one specific same topic or heading were concentrated on a very limited number of pages. Indeed, the various entries on a certain topic could often be identified at one glance on a single double-page. Only if a certain combination had received a particularly large number of entries the note-taker might have to look up, via index, various double-pages or pages corresponding to it. For example, in medical commonplacing, entries on *Hypocondria* might spread over a number of H-i pages, mixed with entries on other, similarly popular topics or headings such as *Hippocrates, Hydrops, Hydra, Hiatus* and the like.

Once the note-taker had understood the principle, Locke's index demanded little space and was also much easier and quicker to produce while the commonplace book was still in the process of being complied. The writer did not constantly have to struggle with leaving sufficient space for new headings in the right place of the anticipated index. He also was saved the trouble of writing every heading again. He only had to insert the page number in the appropriate space of the grid. The major drawback of Locke's index was that the note-taker could not identify immediately, by looking at the index, whether there were any notes on a topic that interested him and where to find them. Instead he had to look at all the pages which the index indicated as reserved for words with the respective combination of first letter and first following vowel. This could become quite cumbersome once a prolific note-taker, like Locke himself, had filled a series of commonplace books. If he wanted to retrieve all his entries, for example, on Gaudium he might have to browse through the indexes of half a dozen or a dozen notebooks for all the pages assigned to G-a topics. He then would have to look up each of these pages, possibly faced with a humble-jumble of entries on diverse topics such as Gratia, Galbanum, Gladium, Gravitas etc. And in the end, having gone through all the G-a pages in his various commonplace books he might find that there actually was not a single entry on Gaudium at all. And, just in case, he had made his notes on Gaudium under the more general headings Affectus or Passiones animae he might have to do the same exercise again, looking, quite possibly again in vain, at the A-e and the P-a pages indicated by the index.

ter and the first vowel after it, adding, e.g. an entry on *victus* on the lower part of a page so far devoted to *potus*, *polipus* and *podagra* (Ms. Locke f. 21, 216).

Conclusion: Commonplacing, Empiricsm and the History of "Facts"

Richard Yeo has identified the flexibility of Locke's new method, the "manner in which it refuses to pre-assign space to topics or their heads" and the possibility to choose "more arbitrary" or indeed "idiosyncratic" headings as the crucial novel element in Locke's "New Method."³⁹ As we have seen, it was not new at all. By Locke's time, this had been common practice at least for a century. The truly novel and characteristic feature of Locke's commonplace books which rightly also stood at the center of his "New Method," in 1686, was the sorting of entries based on the initial letter and the first (and possibly also second) consecutive vowel which allowed for an index that occupied only a single double page.

Undoubtedly, Locke did privilege an approach to commonplacing, however, that permitted the greatest flexibility in the number and scope of headings. While humanists who collected commonplaces from the works of classical authors could easily be content with a fairly limited range of well-known, given topics, it was flexibility, the unlimited possibility to choose as many new headings as needed, that made commonplacing also an extremely useful paper tool for early modern physicians and natural philosophers. Their interests focused on natural history, i.e. on the virtually infinite realm of natural particulars, on the hundreds or indeed thousands of plants, animals, stones and other things in nature. Every single one of these might deserve a heading of its own, under which the writer could assemble his own observations as well as what he had read or heard about it from others.

In fact, in the hands of physicians and natural philosophers, commonplacing was not just a mnemonic device. It also had the potential to produce considerable epistemic effects. Collecting the divergent or contradictory observations of different authors and their opinions on a certain topic under one and the same heading or even, as in Locke's case, on the same pages, could not only promote a general critical and skeptical attitude towards authoritative knowledge claims. When dealing with natural particulars, commonplacing could also exert powerful synthetic effects. After all, assigning empirical observations to a common heading created a kind of virtual unity, an entity that could be distinguished from other related entities, which had their own respective "places."

This was especially relevant in the context of early modern medicine. Recording a growing number of empirical observations under the heading of a specific disease name supported the notion of specific disease entities, i.e. the idea that every disease, like a plant or animal, had its peculiar nature and char-

³⁹ Yeo, "John Locke," 28 and 20.

acteristics that distinguished it from other diseases. This "ontological" understanding of disease⁴⁰ was quite different from the predominant disease theories of the 16th and 17th centuries, which attributed most illnesses to corrupted, putrid or otherwise pathological matter of varying specificity. The notion of specific diseases which could be distinguished from each other like plants by careful empirical observation was, in particular, at the core of Thomas Sydenham's approach.⁴¹ Locke collaborated closely with Sydenham who is thought to have exerted a considerable influence on Locke's empiricism.⁴²

Locke scholars have widely described Locke's notion of plant "species" as a nominalist one but as Anstey and Harris have recently shown, Locke, in line with his idea of seminal principles, explicitly argued for "real distinctions and differences" by which plants could be distinguished, "whether we think of them or name them or no."43 Much more even than botanical classification, the notion of specific disease entities has immediate practical relevance. It provides the rationale for the administration of drugs that do not target the presumed genesis of the patient's complaints inside the body - this was the predominant, "causal" approach in early modern learned medicine – but which experience had shown to work against a certain disease.⁴⁴ As Michael Ben-Chaim has argued, Locke regarded complex ideas – human representations of natural things - as constructs and explanations that were based on human definitions of particular natures as arbitrary. "A representation that explained how empirical properties were related was sufficiently adequate, for all purposes."45 This kind of preliminary, practice-oriented understanding of natural phenomena in our case diseases – that linked individual observations under a term but was not predicated on a given definition was precisely what commonplacing promoted.

⁴⁰ Walter Pagel, "Paracelsus, Virchow und die Wandlungen im ontologischen Krankheitsbegriff," Virchows Archiv A, 363 (1974), 183–211.

⁴¹ On Sydenham's "ontological" unterstanding of diseases as quiddities and his search for a "natural history" of diseases see Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine*. 1550–1680 (Cambridge, 2000), 448–463.

⁴² Cranston, *John Locke*, 92–93.

⁴³ Peter R. Anstey and Stephen A. Harris, "Locke and Botany," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and biomedical sciences*, 37 (2006), 151–171, quotation at 168, from Locke's letter to William Molyneux, 20 January 1693.

⁴⁴ Cf. Michael Stolberg, "Empiricism in Sixteenth-Century Medical Practice: The Notebooks of Georg Handsch," *Early Science and Medicine*, 16 (2013), 487–516.

⁴⁵ Michael Ben-Chaim, *Experimental Philosophy and the Birth of Empirical Science. Boyle, Locke, and Newton* (Aldershot, 2004), 100–120, quote at 119.

It is unclear, at this point, which role disease-specific medicines played in Locke's own medical practice. Certainly, he recorded such medicines in his notebooks, just as the writers of "popular" recipe books had done for centuries,⁴⁶ which incidentally, in many ways, resemble medical commonplace books, with short entries assigned to headings indicating disease names, complaints or medicinal substances. Some of the medicines that Locke recorded were "for the liver" or the "stomach," others against certain complaints, such as "cough" or "colics." But there were also medicines to be used against distinct diseases such as "cancer," "podagra," "gout," "scurvy" or "plague" ("pestis").⁴⁷ Occasionally Locke even explicitly used the word "specific" in this context, noting, for example a "specific" against dysentery.⁴⁸

One notebook, which contains a whole series of recipes for different medicines, raises further intriguing questions in this respect. On the cover it carries the words "Farrago John Locke – Agnis Locke," in what clearly seems to be Locke's own hand-writing.⁴⁹ "Agnes" was the name of Locke's mother, the daughter of the tanner Edmund Keene – which raises the possibility of a very different, familial influence on the development of Locke's empiricism, one to which Locke scholars to my knowledge have so far paid little attention (see Fig. 7).⁵⁰

Last but not least, commonplacing of medical and natural-philosophical empirical observations without any preconceived order and with headings chosen according to necessity may well have played an important part in the history of the more general notion of "facts."⁵¹ Some years ago, Lorraine Daston asked the deceptively simple question "Why are 'facts' short?"⁵² The growing status of "facts" in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural philosophy, she argued,

- 47 Such recipes can be found, amongst others, in Mss. Locke e.4, f.18, f. 20, f.23 and f. 25.
- 48 Ms. Locke f. 25, 225, "Specific ad Dysenteriam."
- 49 Ms. Locke e.4; "Agnis Locke" is written underneath, separated by a little decorative element.
- 50 It should be added, that historians have by now come to agree widely that the empiricist credo that all knowledge ultimately rests on experience was already firmly established among physicians and natural philosophers long before Francis Bacon and John Locke penned their influential treatises; see, e.g., Ben-Chaim, *Experimental Philosophy*.
- 51 See Stolberg, "Medizinische *loci communes.*"
- 52 Lorraine Daston, "Perché i fatti sono brevi?," *Quaderni storici*, 108 (2001), 745–770.

⁴⁶ Over the last years, early modern recipe books have attracted growing scholarly attention; see e.g. Elaine Leong, "Collecting Knowledge for the Family: Recipes, Gender and Practical Knowledge in the Early Modern English Household," *Centaurus*, 55 (2013), 81–103; for the context see William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature. Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton, 1994).

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Double-page from Locke's notebook starting with a recipe collection by his mother (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Locke e.4, 12-13) FIGURE 7

resulted from the ideally pure, neutral, theory-free status of what appeared to be brief accounts of empirical observations by reliable witnesses. "Facts" did not follow a given order; they could simply be put into tables or into numbered lists. Indeed, ideally, she wrote, facts could be shuffled, ad libitum, like cards, put into one order or another and mobilized to support a range of arguments, theories or classifications. I find Daston's claim convincing that the capacity of "facts" or "factual" observations as smallest units of empirical knowledge to serve as versatile tools for a wide range of intellectual endeavours made them very attractive to early modern and Enlightenment naturalists. But the growing appreciation for short "facts" in early modern natural philosophy and medicine probably must also be seen in the light of the widespread practice of commonplacing in contemporary medicine and natural philosophy. In the same manner in which learned scholars across all disciplines entered short quotes from the works of established authors, physicians and other natural philosophers began to assemble, more particularly, brief "quotes" taken from the "book of nature," which then could be put to all kinds of uses. Francis Bacon, often praised as the father of modern empirical science and another major influence on Locke, explicitly recommended that the natural philosopher should keep a commonplace book.⁵³ It seems more than fitting in this light that John Locke, widely considered another founding father of modern empiricism, not only kept a whole series of commonplace books with short observations - including even medical recipes – but, in one of his commonplace books, after various double pages devoted, amongst others, to Cartesius, Cardano and Canne or Repressio and Religio filled a whole series of pages under the heading Intellectus with a longer text of his own: the first known draft of what many consider a foundational text of modern empiricism, his Essay on concerning humane understanding.54

⁵³ Francis Bacon, *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum, libri 1X* (= Opera, vol. 1) (London, 1623), 264.

⁵⁴ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Film 77, 56–89 and 94–95.