

ORDINARY CITIZENS: LOCKE’S POLITICS OF “NATIVE RUSTIC REASON”

By

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## ABSTRACT

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John Locke (1632-1704), an early philosopher of liberalism who lived and wrote during the period we call the Enlightenment, wrote a short treatise on the pursuit of truth and on what it means to be "enlightened," entitled *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1704). In addition to deserving a close analysis for its own sake, the *Conduct* provides an ideal setting for an exploration of Locke's other works. Locke is the author of important works on political philosophy, on epistemology, and on religion; the *Conduct* helps us to understand how these various works fit together in Locke's thought. In this dissertation I explore the *Conduct* and its relationship to Locke's other major works in order to examine the following questions at the heart of Locke's political philosophy: what does it mean to be "enlightened"? How are freedom of mind and intellectual independence, which are the goals of Locke's enlightenment, related to his argument for political freedom and security, which are the goals of his liberalism? And finally, can we learn anything for ourselves from Locke about the activity of pursuing the truth and of freeing our minds to receive it? These questions are the focus of this dissertation. I argue throughout that Locke supports and defends in a variety of ways a single "Lockean" proposition: ordinary minds possess the moral and intellectual capacity for the independence of mind required for self-rule and self-government. I find that Locke considered intellectual independence of ordinary individuals to be crucial to the success of his politics of limited government.

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## **Introduction: Locke and the Politics of “Native Rustic Reason”**

At the heart of modern political life in the West is the distinction between a public and a private sphere. Within the tradition of Western political philosophy, this distinction received its first thoroughgoing defense in the thought of John Locke. Locke defended the idea of a limited government that protects a private sphere where individuals are free to pursue the good as they see fit within the bounds of the law as if it were the only legitimate kind of regime. Today, many nations possess a limited government in just this sense: “liberalism” is ascendant. The awareness of the possession of this kind of political freedom reverberates today in statements overheard frequently, especially in the United States, such as, “It’s a free country, I can do what I want” and “It’s a free country, I can think what I please.” These claims do not express a right to rule others; on the contrary, they express a singular attachment to the idea that we are free to live as we choose. They crudely reflect a healthy pride and confidence in the notion that we can manage our own affairs without having to be imposed upon by another’s vision of what is good for us.

The existence of this private sphere, where neither throne nor altar is acknowledged to have a right to impose its comprehensive vision of the human good, is evinced in Locke’s political philosophy most clearly by his teaching on the ends of government—ends which place upper limits on the legitimate use of political power. According to Locke, those ends are nothing “but the Peace, Safety, and publick good of the People,” ends which are best served, in Locke’s view, by the protection of everyone’s rights (*Second Treatise*, § 131). The limits of political power, as distinguished from and subservient to those ends, are expressed most clearly in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*: government in this world extends only to the things of this world, such as “life, liberty, health . . . and the possession of outward things”; “the care of Souls cannot

belong to the Civil Magistrate” (*Letter*, 26-27). Of course, the public good, the care of the body, and the protection of rights are not the same as the moral or intellectual perfection of individuals.

Though political power, understood in this way, makes no official claim about what constitutes the perfection of an individual, and can even accommodate various competing conceptions of that perfection, it cannot afford cold indifference to all kinds of human thought and action. The preservation of a good society in the liberal sense—one that protects a robust private sphere—still requires that citizens treat each other with a modicum of moral decency. In this sense liberal politics, too, must forever rest on a moral basis. At the least, the majority of citizens must learn, for example, to live near one another in peace and to respect each others’ property. In liberal political communities citizens need not be paragons of moral virtue, but they do need to know how not to antagonize or oppress other members of the community into violent conflict. Locke has a reputation for having defended the private sphere against those who would attempt to eliminate or dominate it politically, but he also has a reputation for having neglected to care properly for what citizens should do with their freedom once they have it. He tends to be remembered for having defended individual freedom at the expense of human excellence. The feeling that it is necessary to respond to this criticism has set this dissertation in motion.

Locke’s reputation in this respect is not entirely deserved. Locke points to the requisite moral consensus for political liberalism in this way: “A Good Life . . . concerns also the Civil Government: and in it lies the safety both of Mens Souls, and of the Commonwealth” (*Letter*, 46). He thereby suggests that the civil government—and by extension the whole political community—is put at risk when citizens fail to live, in some sense, “a good life”; civil government, as Locke conceives it, will not last long unless it is supported by citizens who lead

“a good life.” But what, for Locke, is a good life? If it were the case that Locke’s conception of the good life was such that he could reasonably expect the average citizen to live it with minimal effort, it would hardly have been necessary for him to point out the connection between a good life and the safety of the commonwealth; in that case governments and commonwealths would be, on average, decent enough. But Locke thought that the institution as well as the continuous and prolonged life of genuinely decent liberal regimes would require more than a minimal effort. In his view, it requires a kind of large scale educational project.

The well Educating of Children is so much the Duty and Concern of Parents, and the Welfare and Prosperity of the Nation so much depends on it, that I would have every one lay it seriously to Heart; and after having well examined and distinguished what Fancy, Custom or Reason advises in the Case, set his helping hand to promote every where that Way of training up Youth, with regard to their several Conditions, which is the easiest, shortest, and likeliest to produce vertuous, useful, and able Men in their distinct Callings (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Epistle Dedicatory).

Now, it is worthy of note that the education that would make such citizens possible and likely nowhere appears in any of Locke’s writings to be the responsibility of public power. In fact, on the contrary: the education that Locke recommends is a private education. This is strange. If “the Welfare and Prosperity of the Nation” depends so much on “vertuous, useful, and able Men,” why does Locke’s political teaching bind the hands of political power precisely where they might best work to benefit the nation as a whole? Here, then, is a puzzle. Locke’s “private education” must also be somehow “public-spirited.”

A properly formed government, according to Locke, permits its citizens an enormous amount of real freedom. And when one looks beyond the *Two Treatises* and the *Letter* one begins to see the extent, the great extent, to which Locke conceived of his political-philosophic task as an effort to educate the judgment of those persons who would bear the responsibility of



such freedom. The reason for undertaking such a task is easy enough to find: real freedom depends on some kind of knowledge, some kind of understanding. In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke insists that “without Understanding, Liberty (if it could be) would signify nothing. . . . He that is at liberty to ramble in perfect darkness, what is his liberty better than if he were driven up and down, as a bubble by the force of the wind?” (2.21.67). In this passage Locke describes an important link between our understanding and our freedom: if individual and political freedom is to be distinguished from license and chaos, the individuals who possess that freedom must have knowledge and understanding of some kind as well as the ability and the fortitude to act in accordance with it.

In Locke’s view, understanding makes us free because it teaches us a prudent and healthy kind of restraint. Political freedom requires reasonable citizens who are capable of the reasonable moderation that will enable them to preserve their freedom, for they will be required to preserve it not only from those who would abuse the power entrusted to them by elective consent, but also from themselves and the danger of forfeiting it through their own misuse. How might the state cultivate this kind of moderation? “It would be a grave misunderstanding of Lockean liberalism,” writes Nathan Tarcov, “to think that because it denies the legitimacy of the state’s using coercive force to promote salvation or perfection, it also denies the state’s right to promote civic or liberal virtue by force or other means.”<sup>1</sup> Locke’s concern for the cultivation of reasonable and good citizens shines through even though defending the body politic from

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Tarcov, “Lockean Liberalism and the Cultivation of Citizens,” in *Cultivating Citizens: Soulcraft and Citizenship in Contemporary America*, eds. Dwight D. Allman and Michael D. Beaty (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 64.

domineering princes, ambitious priests, and misguided intellectual elites takes the more central place in his religious, political, and epistemological writing as a whole.

It is to this side of Locke, the one concerned with the characters and thoughts of men, that I turn. In matters of education Locke's primary focus is the cultivation of what I will call an independent mind. For Locke, the cultivation of an independent mind is both a moral and an intellectual enterprise and has implications for traditional political and religious authority. As one scholar has nicely expressed it, "what unites Locke's scientific, epistemological, moral, and theological concerns is . . . a keen interest in defending the independence of the individual in his judgments on these matters, where this independence is always to be governed by reason."<sup>2</sup> In discussing the development of this independence in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1706), Locke writes that the end result is a person who can "stand upon his own legs and know by his own understanding" (§ 15). What, then, does it mean to know by our own understanding?

In order to see what Locke's goal looks like at the individual level, as distinguished from the level of society, I focus on Locke's *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1706), which was originally intended to be a part of his more famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), to which I also appeal. In the *Conduct* the cultivation of individual judgment itself takes center stage and becomes the focus of Locke's analysis and concern. Because of this focus, I expect the *Conduct* to reflect at the individual level many of those transformations he worked to effect in his other major writings on theology, philosophy, and politics. In order to round out the conception of this goal and the means to it I also appeal at various points to Locke's other writings on education, such as *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), *Of Study* (1677),

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Feser, *Locke* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 34.

and *Some Thoughts Concerning Reading and Study for a Gentleman* (1703). With the exception of the *Essay*, this constellation of Locke's texts on education is understudied and will be very useful for an inquiry into the character of liberal citizenship that Locke envisioned.

Of the *Conduct*, Locke wrote to a friend,

I have lately got a little leisure to think of some additions to my book, against the next edition, and within these few days have fallen upon a subject, that I know not how far it will lead me. I have written several pages on it, but the matter, the farther I go, opens the more upon me, and I cannot yet get sight of any end of it. The title of the chapter will be "Of the Conduct of the Understanding," which if I shall pursue as far as I imagine it will reach, and as it deserves, will, I conclude, make the largest chapter of my *Essay*.<sup>3</sup>

The projected placement of the *Conduct* suggests we are free to draw appropriate connections with the *Essay* in our interpretation of the work, and that I will do.

Locke's *Essay* is long and difficult: it denies the naturalness of any fully developed moral code (Book I); advances a theory of the origins of knowledge (Book II); elaborates a theory of what knowledge is and the problems attending its clear expression (Book III); and outlines the limits of knowledge and the implications of these limits for morality and revealed religion (Book IV). The *Essay* is full of elaborate arguments on a range of important issues. It invites questioning and rumination and takes a good long while to digest; and it often seems that the questioning and rumination produced by problems raised in the text are exactly the point.

If by this Enquiry in the Nature of the Understanding, I can discover the Powers thereof; *how far* they reach; to what things they are in any Degree proportionate; and where they fail us, I suppose it may be of use, to prevail with the busy Mind of Man, to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its Comprehension; to stop, when it is at the utmost Extent of its Tether; and to sit down in quiet Ignorance of those Things, which, upon Examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our Capacities (*Essay*, I.1.4).

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<sup>3</sup> *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E. S. de Beer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976-85), vol. 6, p. 87, no. 2243.

By involving the mind in important questions it cannot answer with confidence, the *Essay* shows simultaneously the limits of human understanding and the necessity of sound practical reason.

Genuine perplexity can have a political effect, too: it can cool the inflamed passion of zealous partisans who defend opposing moral, religious, and political points of view. Elsewhere, too, Locke supports the view that his inquiry in the *Essay* is of practical importance: “The end of study,” he writes, “is knowledge, and the end of knowledge practice or communication. ‘Tis true delight is commonly joined with all improvements of knowledge; but when we study only for that end, it is to be considered rather as diversion than business, and so is to be reckoned amongst our recreations.’”<sup>4</sup> Students of Locke are warranted in calling attention to the practical reason that may guide the theoretical journey on which Locke leads his readers throughout the *Essay*, a journey that ends, according to Locke’s projected placement, with the *Conduct*.

In contrast to the *Essay*, however, the *Conduct* is much shorter and more practical. It is a guide for clear thinking and its explicit teaching is one of neutrality, fair-mindedness, and non-partisanship. Locke does not here lead his readers to those rough intellectual terrains wherein it seems wisest to admit one’s ignorance; rather, he takes the existence of such terrain, and the appropriate response to it—the adoption of a neutral frame of mind—as starting points. He then recommends that one’s principles, especially one’s guiding principles, be examined carefully.

In these two things, viz., an equal indifferency for all truth (I mean the receiving it in the love of it as truth, but not loving it for any other reason before we know it to be true) and in the examination of our principles and not receiving any for such nor building on them till we are fully convinced, as rational creatures, of their solidity, truth and certainty, consists that freedom of the understanding which is necessary to a rational creature and without which it is not truly an understanding (*Conduct*, §12).

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<sup>4</sup> Locke, “Of Study,” in *The Educational Writings of John Locke*, ed. James Axtell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 406.

The *Conduct* sharpens an individual's ability to examine doctrines and propositions (especially his or her favorite ones) in their claim to express truth; it thereby helps those ready for it take sure-footed steps as they begin both to wander through the universe of learning ("books") and the world itself ("experience") on their way to becoming enlightened and reasonable citizens. Through an appeal to both the *Essay* and the *Conduct*, I try to discover those qualities of mind and heart that Locke viewed as essential for the management of one's own freedom among others who are equally free. And as these qualities have a place in both private and public life, both a private and a public dimension of the argument are developed. Locke's education tends to mold a certain kind of human being as well as citizen. And according to Locke, a "properly framed" government allows in principle the possibility for a large convergence between the two.

The idea for my project was born during an encounter with Nathan Tarcov's *Locke's Education for Liberty* (1999). Tarcov develops a detailed analysis of how Locke's education in *Some Thoughts* prepares men, mostly gentlemen of the then upper class (although its principles are more broadly applicable), for citizenship in a liberal society. Tarcov showed how Locke would educate free men to moral virtue, but refrained from writing much about the intellectual component of this education, especially that which would guide liberal elites and democratic leaders, because it would have made necessary in his view the writing of another book.<sup>5</sup> I pursued the idea. It led me to investigate the relationship between intellectual virtue and politics as Locke understood it. How, I asked, does this relationship look through Locke's eyes?

It seems to me, upon reflection, that Locke wishes intellectual self-reliance or, as I will call it, independence of mind, to become the central virtue in the education of those who have

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<sup>5</sup> Nathan Tarcov, *Locke's Education for Liberty* (Lanham: Lexington, 1999), 198.

reached the “age of reason.” Independence of mind enables individuals to grasp the truth for themselves insofar as they can, and it allows citizens to deal fairly with themselves and others in important spiritual, political, and personal matters. The “Lockean” citizen aspires to be “reasonable;” reason, Locke asserts, is truly a man’s “only Star and compass” (*First Treatise*, § 58). And yet what does it mean, exactly, to be “reasonable” after the manner of Locke?

### Outline of Dissertation

In the broad sweeping story that is the history of political philosophy, Locke is properly located within the epoch we today call the “Enlightenment.” Enlightenment thinkers tend to have in common the optimistic view that the religious and philosophic traditions of the past are full of prejudice, superstition, dogmatism, and error; and they wish to be understood as bravely emancipating their fellow men, by the universal propagation of reason and truth, from the shackles of spiritual, political, and intellectual servitude. To say the least, enlightenment thinkers were ambitious. Moreover, they were not above engaging in polemical and rhetorical warfare to achieve their ends; those ends often involved the attempt to undermine traditional sources of authority (“throne,” “altar,” and, perhaps above all, “university”). Locke is not exceptional in this regard; he, too, has much that is critical to say of what is “traditional.” But rhetoric and polemic aside, insofar as our modernity (or post-modernity, as some think) is the product of an enlightenment brand of philosophizing—insofar as we, too, are children of the enlightenment—the eternal seduction to know ourselves calls us to honestly assess the thought of our intellectual forefathers. It is just such an assessment with regard to Locke that I attempt in this dissertation.

At the heart of my dissertation is an investigation into Locke's understanding of the relationship between intellectual and political freedom. The five chapters of the dissertation are designed to show how Locke lays out and supports a single "Lockean" proposition: ordinary minds (as distinguished from extraordinary ones) possess the moral and intellectual capacity for self-rule and self-government. The democratic tendency of such a proposition is plain enough, but whether it is true is another question. The five chapters are organized as follows. The first two chapters describe Locke's posture towards the past, especially the morality and metaphysics at the heart of the Christian natural law tradition, a tradition that still dominated the universities in Locke's time (and although it does not dominate the university today, it still exists). In these chapters, I argue that Locke's metaphysically neutral teaching on human knowledge not only privileges the empirical study of the natural world (the "new science," natural science) over the study of metaphysics, but also, and most importantly, makes possible and necessary a revision in our moral understanding of ourselves. Locke's revision, I will argue, boldly places the activity of reason at the heart of moral life and diminishes the ideas of conscience and free will.

In the central part, chapter three, I describe what I call Locke's politics of "native rustic reason." I argue that although Locke regards reason as man's "only star and compass," traditional representatives of wisdom—those we call philosophers, but also intellectual elites generally—play a diminished role in a Lockean regime. Why should this be? How could the rule of philosophers be unnecessary, if Locke wishes for reason to rule? I explain this puzzle by appealing to Locke's emphasis on moral and practical knowledge and his cautious optimism regarding the possibility of enlightenment in these two respects for ordinary citizens. Locke was sure the "law of nature"—which contains the rules of morality and of prudent self-government,

for both individuals and society—was beyond almost no one’s grasp. He mistrusted intellectual elites on account of their tendency to intellectual dishonesty and hubris, tendencies he thought were deeply rooted in vanity, ambition, and the love of recognition. “God has not been so sparing to Men to make [men] barely two-legged Creatures,” Locke says (in a swipe against the scholastic tendency to reduce natural reason to art of making syllogisms) “and left it to *Aristotle* to make them Rational” (*Essay*, 4.17.4). For Locke, ordinary persons possess the requisite capacity and intelligence to manage their freedom and govern their own lives. The only real question is how to get them started and how to motivate them to continue making progress in knowledge and understanding once they do.

The last two chapters, on prejudice and Christianity respectively, describe obstacles and aids to the enlightenment Locke thinks possible for ordinary citizens. In these chapters I find that, according to Locke, prejudice, which he understands as both a moral and an intellectual pathology, is the major obstacle to making progress in understanding and that it can only be cured in individuals by individuals themselves. At the political level, while there is no one institutional solution for the problem of prejudice, a policy of religious toleration makes it both possible and more likely that an individual will undertake the care of his or her own epistemic hygiene. In the last chapter, I argue that in Locke’s view part of the cure for prejudice consists in a more reasonable understanding of Christianity. The teachings of Christianity, according to Locke’s own argument, overlap significantly, although not entirely, with his understanding of the law of nature. While Locke insists that an understanding of the law of nature is possible for all men (Christian or no) on the basis of reason alone, in Locke’s hands Christianity lends the law of nature enormous moral and rhetorical support. In fact, Locke goes so far as to portray Jesus in



*The Reasonableness of Christianity* as divinely prudent and therefore a master practitioner of the law of nature. In general, then, the arguments I advance in the dissertation are two: first, Locke considered the intellectual independence of ordinary individuals to be crucial to the success and longevity of his politics of freedom, prosperity, and limited government; and second, Locke considered this kind of intellectual independence to be possible for ordinary citizens.

Since the Things, the Mind contemplates, are none of them, besides it self, present to the Understanding, 'tis necessary that something else, as a Sign or Representation of the thing it considers, should be present to it: And these are *Ideas*.<sup>6</sup>

—John Locke

## Chapter One: Locke and the “Way of Ideas,” or, How Not to Be a Metaphysician

### Why “Enlightenment”?

Locke is familiar to us today as the founding father-philosopher of English empiricism—of the idea, that is, that all our claims to knowledge are well-grounded or true only insofar as they are rooted in the empirical or scientific study of the world as we know it through sense experience. This portrait of Locke is true enough: “Whence has [the mind] all the materials of Reason and Knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, From *Experience*: In that, all that our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self” (*Essay*, 2.1.2). Experience—which includes reflection on the activity of our own minds (we “sense” things outside ourselves, and “reflect” on things within)—is for Locke the foundation of all human knowledge.

In the *Essay* it is Locke’s goal, on the basis of this foundation, “to search out the *Bounds* between Opinion and Knowledge; and examine by what Measures, in things, whereof we have no certain Knowledge, we ought to regulate our Assent, and moderate our Perswasions” (*Essay*, 1.1.3). Locke intends to redraw the map, so to speak, of what we can and cannot know. But such an inquiry is somewhat puzzling, given the age in which Locke lived. After all, was not Locke’s age the dawn of the “age of reason”? Was not Locke caught up in the middle of the emergence of modern science as we know it? Was his not the age that witnessed the birth of the Royal Society, “the incomparable Mr. Newton,” and the great chemist Robert Boyle—each of

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<sup>6</sup> *Essay*, 4.21.4.

whom Locke knew personally—not to mention a whole host of others as well as budding new fields of knowledge? What, then, is Locke doing still groping about in an effort “to search out the bounds between Opinion and Knowledge” with a view to regulating assent and moderating persuasions? It would seem an odd endeavor for a philosopher—let alone one so partial to empiricism and the sound study and investigation of nature—to undertake at such a promising time. But here is Locke, in his own words: “it may be of use, to prevail with the busy Mind of Man, to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its Comprehension; to stop, when it is at the utmost Extent of its Tether; and to sit down in a quiet Ignorance of those Things, which, upon Examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our Capacities” (*Essay*, 1.1.4). What is it that justifies or makes necessary such an undertaking? What motivated this turn to the limits of knowledge at a time when those limits were being daily and continuously surpassed?

Though his reserve has an untimely, even a conservative feel, Locke intends for the argument of the *Essay* as a whole to have a salutary effect, especially on the activity that is the advancement of knowledge: “The Commonwealth of Learning, is not at this time without Master-Builders . . . [but for me] ’tis Ambition enough to be employed as an Under-Labourer in clearing Ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge” (*Essay*, Epistle to the Reader). The *Essay*, though it begins by calling attention to what we cannot know, is nevertheless understood by Locke to be a help in making straight the paths of new knowledge. How, then, does Locke’s argument for teaching us a “quiet Ignorance” go together consistently with his presentation of himself as an “Under-Labourer” for “Master-Builders,” whose aim is the acquisition, even the unlimited acquisition, of knowledge? Is Locke tearing down or building up? Is Locke’s an attempt to humble or to exalt the human mind?

The ground of knowledge advanced by Locke, which is experience, immerses us in “this world”—the one we can touch, hear, smell, taste, and see—and does indeed constrict and narrow the sphere of what we can count as genuine knowledge. And so, when Locke speaks about learning “a quiet Ignorance,” he thereby points to those systems or structures of traditional knowledge that do not have experience as their basis; about knowledge claims made on the basis of foundations other than experience we must learn to confess our inability for genuine knowledge. Precisely this “quiet Ignorance,” however, this narrowing of the sphere of knowledge, leads to the question of the status of those other important areas of knowledge—like morality or ethics, the idea of justice, and religion or faith. Knowledge from these areas guide us in the use of both our public and private freedoms and our choices, judgments, and actions in the world, especially as these relate to our obligations to others. Can this sort of knowledge be based on experience and science, too? Can nature, as we come to know it by reason working through experience, serve as the foundation for this sort of knowledge?

The argument of this chapter is this: according to Locke, we can know what we need to know on the basis of experience in order to live our lives; the foundation of genuine knowledge, which is experience, need not undermine morality. “How short soever [our] Knowledge may come of an universal, or perfect Comprehension of whatsoever is, it yet secures [our] great Concernments, that [we] have Light enough to lead [us] to the Knowledge of [our] Maker, and the sight of [our] own Duties” (*Essay*, 1.1.5). On the basis of experience alone, the knowledge necessary for our “great Concernments” remains, according to Locke, secure. I suggest that Locke’s contention here, and his argument in support of it, is, while not the whole, a large part of what Locke means by his “under-labour” in the service the “Commonwealth of Learning.”

Locke attempts to make the world safer for science in particular, and progress in knowledge in general, by showing how these need not imply the undermining of religion or the moral decay of the political community, or even the sincere and private belief of reasonable men.<sup>7</sup> If this is correct, then the *Essay*, which defends the idea of unlimited progress in empirical knowledge of the world, has for its most important audience those traditionally-minded men and women who were worried that scientific inquiry undermines the foundations of our moral—and thus also of our political—life. Understood in this sense, Locke’s “Under-Labouring” goes together with his desire to cultivate a “quiet Ignorance”: however small is the moral knowledge we might acquire from reason working through sense experience when compared to all that we might know or might wish to know, that knowledge is enough to guide us in our moral and political lives; we can know what we need to know.

In this chapter I support the argument about Locke just sketched by, first, describing Locke’s theory of knowledge. I then focus on the implications of his claim—that all genuine knowledge is rooted in experience—for two crucially important and traditional metaphysical ideas: substance and infinity. In each case, I try to show how Locke critiques and transforms our understanding of the concept, and then I try to show the implications of this transformation for Locke’s understanding of the foundations of morality.

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<sup>7</sup> Here is a striking example: Locke writes, “All the great Ends of Morality and Religion, are well enough secured, without philosophical Proofs of the Soul’s Immateriality.” *Essay*, 4.3.6. Locke argues in the *Essay* that the immateriality of the soul, or the question, in other words, of whether soul is something other than body—and thus, perhaps also, is separable and immortal—can hardly be definitively demonstrated or refuted by empirical enquiry on the basis of reason working through sense experience alone. Our inability in this regard means, for Locke, that technically we must remain agnostic concerning the answer; nevertheless—and this is the point—ignorance on this score need not mean an inability to live decently and well, whether we look to reason or revelation to define the meaning of “decently and well.”

For many centuries, and especially for many representatives of scholastic thought, the substance of a man was his soul, and infinity was thought to be a necessary and essential characteristic of God. In attempting to critique or reform the understanding of these ideas Locke treads awfully close to some sacred ground. This is precisely the reason why his critiques are, to my mind, quite interesting; they present a peculiar transformation and defense of the fundamental ideas that served as foundations for the coherency of traditional moral life. Before I address substance and infinity, however, I discuss Locke's approach to the problem of skepticism and compare it with our own. What for us is so common an experience as to be called second nature—our skepticism regarding precisely these moral foundations—was in Locke's age experienced rather differently, namely as a problem, and a need. Without first calling attention to this historical change, the spirit that informs and guides Locke's *Essay* will, I think, be lost.

### Our Need for Moral Knowledge and the Problem of Skepticism

According to Locke, there are no innate principles: we are born by nature ignorant of what we are to do with ourselves in the world and how we should live. We are born by nature with a capacity for morality, for the recognition and observance of moral rules, but there is no set of moral rules or fully developed moral code written "on our hearts," waiting for us to grow into and manifest. To be sure, however, we are not at a loss for opinions on this score; we learn them from our parents, our friends, our society, our religion, our comedians, and our therapists. And we know the ready response to those who would presume to tell us how to live our lives, especially if we do not recognize them to speak with any particular authority: "I can run my own life, thanks; mind your own business."

And yet, the variety of ways of life available to us, the opinions concerning both what is true and what ought to be done that support them, and the confidence and assurance with which these are often maintained by those of different persuasions who disagree—this moral and intellectual cacophony, as it were—might easily perplex a thoughtful and considerate man.

Locke invites his readers to observe the manifold

Persuasions, which are to be found amongst Men, so various, different, and wholly contradictory; and yet asserted some where or other with such Assurance, and Confidence, that he that shall take a view of the Opinions of Mankind . . . may perhaps have Reason to suspect, That either there is no such thing as Truth at all; or that Mankind hath not sufficient Means to attain a certain Knowledge of it” (*Essay*, 1.1.2).

The danger for the careful and interested observer of the human scene—the one who feels the inner anxiety brought on by that moral and intellectual cacophony—is that he will adopt, in order to cure and be released from that anxiety, a “perfect Scepticism” concerning what might be known (*Essay*, 1.1.7). In practice, of course, this means a “perfect Scepticism” regarding how we are to live, too, for “the ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them” (*Conduct*, § 1). Perfect skepticism concerning knowledge means perfect skepticism concerning moral knowledge, too.

Locke asserts, however, that “perfect Scepticism” is not the condition to which our nature points. Perfect skepticism is somehow a wrong conclusion from the available data. We may have to admit ignorance on many points, but according to Locke we are not at a total loss concerning what we might know. Here is the passage quoted above, which bears repeating: “How short soever [men’s] Knowledge may come of an universal, or perfect Comprehension of whatsoever is, it yet secures their great Concernments, that they have Light enough to lead them to the Knowledge of their Maker, and the sight of their own Duties” (*Essay*, 1.1.5). Again,

Our Business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our Conduct. If we can find out those Measures, whereby a rational Creature put in that State, which Man is in, in this World, may, and ought to govern his Opinions, and Actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled, that some other things escape our Knowledge (*Essay*, 1.1.6).

Enlightenment, then, is for Locke inevitably bound up with the examination of our “Opinions” and our “Actions depending thereon.” A man, Locke says, has “duties.” The danger of skepticism appears to consist, ultimately, in the danger that is the shirking of our duties. “It will be no Excuse to an idle and untoward Servant, who would not attend his Business by Candle-light, to plead that he had not broad Sun-shine,” for “the Candle, that is set up in us, shines bright enough for all our Purposes”—even our most important ones (*Essay*, 1.1.5, 1).

Today, of course, we “know” that many people think many different things concerning what we ought to believe to be true and how we ought to live. Yet, for some reason, we seem rarely to experience this diversity as anything about which to be confused, let alone as something that, properly understood, should cause us any anxiety. Rather, we celebrate diversity, and we consider it our duty to do so. Does our commitment to diversity undermine or strengthen the need for guidance in life?

What Locke and many of his contemporaries viewed as a potentially serious danger for man’s inner life—the cacophonous din that is the marketplace of religious, moral, and intellectual ideas—we tend to look upon with pride, and without fear, as the way things ought to be. This view of the matter, however, makes it difficult for us to conceive of how diversity could have ever given reasonable men cause to fear in the first place. If on account of this posture we are consequently unable to feel the anxiety felt by Locke and his audience at the experience such moral and intellectual diversity, it will be difficult to recover the proper sense of the political and



personal urgency with which Locke took up the question of what it means to know and to understand as well as the extent to which that is possible for us.

One undeniable element of the explanation for this difference in attitude between the 17th and the 21st centuries is the difference in our understanding of the value of tolerating diversity. The diversity with which Locke is concerned was deadly: the diversity we honor, however, at least in the West, is underwritten by a mutual commitment to toleration. In Locke's England, and for the most part in Europe at the time (though not in all places), there was no such underlying commitment. Our diversity takes place, therefore, in more tolerant times. Who is there who, believing that it is bad to be intolerant, believes also that it is good, in Locke's formulation, to "persecute, torment, destroy, and kill other men upon pretence of religion" (*Letter on Toleration*, 23)? This is the classic case—religion—but we also recognize other kinds of intolerance today. Indeed, unlike in 16th and 17th century Europe, for us "there is something sacrosanct about toleration . . . the triumph of liberalism has elevated this category into the ultimate and almost the only generally acceptable litmus test of morality . . . intolerance is more to be feared than all traditional sins."<sup>8</sup> Whereas the idea of toleration was to Locke a policy, required on the part of the ruler by both prudence and "an attitude of humility toward truth,"<sup>9</sup> it has to us become habitual, confining, perhaps even stale—we are known to roll our eyes when we are admonished to be tolerant, like a schoolboy being admonished yet again for something he knows already—and yet, judging by lip service alone one would still think it to be almost the whole of moral virtue. What for Locke required rigorous justification to the reasonable objections of sober and

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<sup>8</sup> Ryszard Legutko, *Society as a Department Store: Critical Reflections on the Liberal State* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

thoughtful men, skeptical that freedom would not undermine social and political order, we look upon as self-evident truth; has it escaped the contempt that familiarity breeds?

Diversity is celebrated today on the proviso that no one kind of diversity take itself too seriously or claim to be the final truth. The disclaimer that one's beliefs are merely one's opinions—or in other words that one is, in truth, a “perfect Sceptic” concerning the most important questions of life—is the pledge one learns to mouth privately and publicly, after the manner of a verbal tic, before one understands it, in exchange for the respectability of being reputed to be “a rational creature.” One who utters profoundly felt reflections and beliefs, and then claims that they are “just his opinion,” does not teach anyone anything by adding the qualification; he merely signals his conformism to the dominant intellectual tendency of the age. In Locke's time, however, to give the appearance of being “lukewarm” in adherence and commitment to a set of moral or religious ideas and their intellectual foundations, especially if one had been to university, was weakness, apostasy, faithlessness; it was vice, not virtue. “The world is apt to cast great blame on those who have an indifferency for opinions, especially in religion. I fear this is the foundation of great error and worse consequences” (*Conduct*, § 12). The non-committed attitude was not respectable then, but it has become—thanks in part to Locke and the idea of toleration—respectable today, for better or worse.

Accordingly, we celebrate a different kind of intellectual virtue, too: not commitment, but “analysis” of the committed and their ideas—or in our language, of those who are “intolerant”—this is our intellectual “virtue.” What Locke and his readers tended to view as a political and psychological danger, the diversity in the marketplace of ideas, including scientific, moral, and religious ideas, we consider a good thing, and for precisely the reasons those in the 17th century

feared it, namely that it undoes the established order in society and in our souls. There is a kind of competition between our need for “law and order,” “stability,” and “predictability,” and the moral imperatives we feel to be “spontaneous,” “sincere,” and “authentic.” Why always color inside the lines? “Perhaps no other problem than that of the changing moral configuration of modern culture has so engaged the interest of sociological theorists”; “no longer the Saint, but the instinctual Everyman, twisting his neck uncomfortably inside the starched collar of culture, is the communal ideal.”<sup>10</sup> If the instinctual “Everyman” feels a moral imperative, it is to twist free from “culture” and its demands, and from whatever “commitments” remain that would inhibit the free and safe play of his instincts.<sup>11</sup> The idea that such a cacophony might result in a perfect skepticism that would undermine the performance of our moral duties or prevent our feeling an obligation to perform them, and therefore bring in its wake chaos in our conduct: is this anything still genuinely feared?<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, but louder voices insist on the promise that liberation from the

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<sup>10</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 6-7, 8.

<sup>11</sup> And yet one might question whether the turn to instinct is as salutary an emancipation from the authority of others and a stifling culture as it might first appear. “Telling us to obey Instinct is like telling us to obey ‘people’. People say different things: so do instincts. Our instincts are at war.” C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Las Vegas: Lits, 2010 [1943]), 25.

<sup>12</sup> In his *Happy Slaves: A Critique of Consent Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 39-40, Don Herzog explains that this was indeed once genuinely feared. “In Tudor and Stuart England . . . the alarms sounded over masterless men were rational through and through.” In other words, the rise of consent theory worried serious and even well-meaning men, precisely because they could not find for themselves a good answer to this question: “how is social order possible among a collection of free individuals?” Arguments for the rights of conscience and religious toleration amplified, rather than quieted, those fears. According to the traditional view, which Herzog describes here, a society combining consent and toleration would, it was thought, be full of “masterless men”—“a collection of free individuals who bridled at traditional discipline”—and would become, sooner or later, a “disorderly, chaotic, anarchic, a pathological mess crying out for the reimposition of order.” But the traditional view is no longer our view: “yesterday’s bold insights have become today’s platitudes.”

old and the traditional is thought to imply. It is the new possibilities we celebrate, however; too strong a commitment to any one of them in particular we experience as distasteful.

Have we really cured ourselves of our need for firm truths and strong ideas by which we might confidently live and make choices, or have we just succeeded in hiding this need from ourselves? To the extent that we feel released from the need for an orderly inner world—from the psychological need to live our lives in accordance with the truth, whatever it is—it is to that extent difficult to encounter the thrust of Locke’s *Essay* and *Conduct* in their proper context and to approach them in the spirit in which they are best understood. For the *Essay* and *Conduct* both assume the existence of that fundamental need.

Men would be intolerable to themselves, and contemptible to others, if they should embrace opinions without any ground, and hold what they could give no manner of reason for. True or false, solid or sandy, the mind must have some foundation to rest itself upon, and . . . it no sooner entertains any proposition, but it presently hastens to some hypothesis to bottom it on; until then it is unquiet and unsettled. So much do our own very tempers dispose us to a right use of our understandings, if we would follow as we should the inclinations of our nature (*Conduct*, § 6).

The inclinations of our nature dispose us against radical skepticism. Here is the insight that convinces Locke that men have a psychological need to live their lives in accordance with the truth, even if it is just the truth as they see it: “the mind must have some foundation to rest itself upon . . . until [the mind finds it] it is unquiet and unsettled.” This, too, is the natural disposition that grounds a part of Locke’s enlightenment hope: yes, we can be indifferent to random facts and abstruse knowledge, but we cannot be indifferent to critiques of those opinions we hold dear and inwardly depend upon, not even if we try. It is natural to crave a fundamental and foundational truth or two, the clarity and simplicity of which can be relied upon to quiet our psychological anxiety in the face of the apparent natural groundlessness of things.

Our interest, too—especially in the well-being of our minds or souls—inclines us to acquire both the knowledge we need for this life and the information available concerning the next one. Thinking through the possibility of “a future state, and [his] concernment in it” is something that “no rational Man can avoid to do,” sooner or later (*Essay*, 4.20.6). A rational man has a concern for his true and proper interests. With regard to religion and faith, our interest counsels us to think through both easy skepticism (“no such thing as an afterlife”) and orthodox dogmatism (“our way to it is the right and only way”). Noting the misfortune of “the greatest part of Men, [who,] having much to do to get the Means of Living, are not in a Condition to look after those of learned and laborious Enquiries,” Locke asks,

Are the greatest part of Mankind, by the necessity of their Condition, subjected to unavoidable Ignorance in those Things, which are of greatest Importance to them? . . . Have the Bulk of Mankind no other Guide, but Accident, and blind Chance, to conduct them to their Happiness, or Misery? Are the current Opinions, and licensed Guides of every Country sufficient Evidence and Security to every Man, to venture his greatest Concernments on; nay, his everlasting Happiness, or Misery (*Essay*, 4.20.4)?

Locke thinks not: the possibility of sound judgment on matters of greatest importance is not the sole privilege of extraordinary minds.<sup>13</sup> No one’s interest lies in blind obedience and submission to authority, not only because ordinary persons with ordinary minds are capable by nature of more than this, but also because the “licensed Guides of every Country” disagree—they teach and preach and advise different things to be believed and rules for living. To swallow whole and unthinkingly the authoritative or common opinions of one’s time and place when one could do

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<sup>13</sup> “This, at least, is worth the consideration of those who call themselves Gentlemen, That however they may think Credit, Respect, Power, and Authority the Concomitants of their Birth and Fortune, yet they will find all these still carried away from them, by Men of lower Condition who surpass them in Knowledge. They who are blind, will always be led by those that see, or else fall into the Ditch: and he is certainly the most subjected, the most enslaved, who is so in his Understanding.” *Essay*, 4.20.6. For the “Ditch,” see Matt. 15:14 and Luke 6:39.

better—when one could think through them and, perhaps, beyond them—is to fall short of that obligation we owe ourselves and thereby to place the care of our own true interests in the hands of others when it properly belongs in our own. Some effort is required to “deal fairly with [our] own minds” and our own “understandings and souls” (*Conduct*, §§ 10, 34-35).

In addition to inclination and interest, Locke also says that thinking and learning, especially about ourselves, are “noble” and “pleasant” activities. “Since it is the *Understanding* that sets Man above the rest of sensible Beings . . . it is certainly a Subject, even for its Nobleness, worth our Labour to enquire into” (*Essay*, 1.1.1). And in the *Essay*’s Epistle to the Reader he writes that this kind of labor, however daunting, will involve a certain pleasure.

Searches after Truth, are a sort of Hawking and Hunting, wherein the very pursuit makes a great part of the Pleasure. . . . [and he who] “not content to live lazily on scraps of begg’d Opinions,” sets his own Thoughts on work, to find and follow Truth, will (whatever he lights on) not miss the Hunter’s Satisfaction; every moment of his Pursuit, will reward his Pains with some Delight; and he will have Reason to think his time not ill spent, even when he cannot much boast of any great Acquisition.

Here, then, in this encomium to the pursuit of truth with which Locke begins the *Essay*, are two reasons to want to be enlightened: the effort to make progress in our understanding is a pursuit that is ennobling, and the required labor is, at the moment of discovery at least, pleasant.

Three sorts of reasons draw us, in Locke’s view, out of the easy laziness that is the thoughtless reliance on the opinions, authoritative or common, that we find around us, and push us towards an active engagement with and pursuit of the truth about things: the inclinations of our nature, the thought of our true interest or good, and the intrinsic worthiness and pleasantness

of the subject matter that is our own selves.<sup>14</sup> Our nature, our interest, and a healthy pride call us to the activity of thinking, whether we live in a tolerant age or not. But today, as I have been suggesting, we both do and do not feel this need as a pressing one: we like tolerance, but being tolerant involves a subtle form of distress; we have to look past and let alone much of what we might feel to be untrue. Our consent to the principle of tolerance amplifies that distress. Sometimes it also makes us forget—at least when we are not made to feel embarrassed for it—that we feel a deep need to investigate and know what is true in the first place. We have, then, a kind of love-hate relationship with the idea of toleration. We bow to it, but we like it better in the public sphere; for ourselves, we would prefer, I think, something more satisfying than that moral imperative. The epistemological skepticism supporting our commitment to tolerance, and the experience of skepticism in general, is second nature to us—but only second nature.

In Locke's time the old Christian order and the Scholasticism on which it was supported were in the process of being undone by the new experimental science of the natural world; the "great chain of being" was in the process of being systematically "unlinked."<sup>15</sup> The order commonly perceived to exist in the nature of things was being questioned and reworked at its most fundamental levels. At stake was man's place in the universe—and the understanding of his ultimate purpose while he was stationed there. In order to mitigate and temper the profound

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<sup>14</sup> With regard to this last reason, Locke conceals the danger that is sometimes involved in emancipating oneself from "the herd" of men. For an example in another time and place, see Plato, *Crito* 44d and 48a. Locke uses the expression "the herd": "I do not remember wherever God delivered his oracles by the multitude or nature her truths by the herd." *Conduct*, § 24.

<sup>15</sup> For a portrait of this "chain of being," at least as it was understood by many in the late 16th century, see E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture: A study of the idea of order in the age of Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton* (New York: Vintage, 1959). Tillyard's goal is "to extract and expound the most ordinary beliefs about the constitution of the world as pictured in the Elizabethan age." *Ibid.*, viii.

cognitive dissonance created by this development,<sup>16</sup> Locke attempts in his *Essay* to bring order—in some respects a new kind of order, partly traditional, partly new—to our inner lives: he tries to carve a path between radical skepticism and dogmatic orthodoxy.

He does this by addressing the question of knowledge and by clarifying what it means to know and to understand, and by showing, or attempting to show, how traditional moral and religious concerns might be made secure within the framework and on the basis of the new scientific worldview. Locke's reorganization of the private, internal world takes place on the conceptual plane, the intellectual plane; by reorganizing the configuration and status of our "ideas," Locke "made the whole internal world his own."<sup>17</sup> By defending our limited capacity for knowledge, he defends morality, too, at least of a sort, for since ideas are the "invisible powers" that govern men when they choose and act, it is "of the highest concernment that great care should be taken of the understanding to conduct it right in the search of knowledge and in the judgments it makes" (*Conduct*, § 1). We cannot make do without moral guidance of one sort or another, however limited.

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<sup>16</sup> Consider the title of Alexander Koyré's *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), a book that explores this development in detail.

<sup>17</sup> This is the 18th century poet James Thomson's pithy summary of Locke's *Essay* in his poem "Summer" (1556-59). *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford, 1981), p. 130.



## Locke and the Knowledge of our Duties<sup>18</sup>

Moral knowledge is, among other kinds, within our reach, according to Locke.

Men have Reason to be well satisfied with what God hath thought fit for them, since he has given them . . . Whatsoever is necessary for the Conveniences of Life, and Information of Vertue; and has put within the reach of their Discovery the comfortable Provision for this Life and the Way that leads to a better (*Essay*, 1.1.5).

The “Conveniences of Life” and the “Information of Vertue” are restated in the latter part of the sentence as “the comfortable Provision for this Life” and “the Way that leads to a better.” The conveniences of life are life’s “comfortable Provisions,” such as they are now or may be discovered and brought about in the future (advances in medicine, for example); the information of virtue is that which teaches us the way to a “better” life, both here and in the hereafter (moral and religious knowledge). The “information of virtue” is the greater, more important sphere, it would seem, because within it is contained the knowledge of what Locke calls in the next sentence men’s “great Concernments”: “the Knowledge of their Maker, and the sight of their own Duties.” For Locke, the proper spheres of our knowledge are not only what is necessary for our comfortable preservation (where technology comes in handy), but also to our duty and our salvation (where “enlightenment” rules the day). The latter two, for Locke, are vitally important not only because serious people generally take them to be important, but also because knowledge of our moral duty to ourselves and others is not innate, but learned and acquired.

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<sup>18</sup> “Who would dare to call himself a philosopher if he had handed down no rules of duty?” Cicero, *On Duties*, eds. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Book I, sec. 5. I take the privilege of quoting Cicero because Locke holds Cicero in especially high esteem regarding ethics. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke places Cicero alongside the Bible as the two texts that a young gentleman should read for the refinement of his grasp of moral principles. “I know not whether he should read any other Discourses of Morality, but what he finds in the Bible; or have any System of *Ethics* put into his Hand, till he can read *Tully’s Offices*, not as a School-Boy to learn *Latin*, but as one that would be informed in the Principles and Precepts of Vertue, for the Conduct of his Life.” § 185.

One will notice that in neither of these spheres is knowledge pursued “for its own sake.” What is “God”? What is “nature”? What is the “soul”? What is “love”? What is “eternity”? Though these topics do come in Locke’s way from time to time, they are never his main questions; the good “Lockean” does not delight in the contemplation of many mysteries. Furthermore, Locke does not consider the purpose of education to be a traditional initiation into any mysteries. A good Lockean education is the taming, if not the solution, of that which is mysterious concerning our existence. Despite his own admission that he is “a bookish man,” he officially eschews the merely contemplative life.<sup>19</sup> “The end of study,” he writes, “is knowledge, and the end of knowledge practice or communication. ‘Tis true delight is commonly joined with all improvements of knowledge; but when we study only for that end, it is to be considered rather as diversion than business, and so is to be reckoned amongst our recreations.”<sup>20</sup> The good “Lockean” is, evidently, quite practical. To the extent that Locke engages the more

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<sup>19</sup> In *Some Thoughts*, Locke places “*Learning*” last, both in order and importance, in a child’s overall development. This is not only because the ability to reason takes time to develop, but also because he considers the cultivation of a child’s “good nature” and moral character to be more important than, to speak casually, “book learnin’.” “You will wonder, perhaps,” Locke writes, “that I put *Learning* last, especially if I tell you I think it the least part. This may seem strange in the mouth of a bookish Man; and this making usually the chief, if not only bustle and stir about Children; this being almost that alone, which is thought on, when People talk of Education, makes it the greater Paradox.” *Some Thoughts*, § 147. Locke had argued earlier (§ 70) that “till you can find a School, wherein it is possible for the Master to look after the Manners of his Scholars, and can shew as great Effects of his Care of forming their Minds to Virtue, and their Carriage to good Breeding, as of forming their Tongues to the learned Languages; you must confess, that you have a strange value for words, when preferring the Languages of the Ancient *Greeks* and *Romans*, to that which made them such brave Men. . . . ’Tis vertue then, direct Vertue, which is the hard and valuable part to be aimed at in Education.” See also *ibid.*, §§ 135, 147, and 177 for similarly forceful statements. Locke cares for character above all because learning changes us: it tends to make good men better, and bad men worse.

<sup>20</sup> Locke, “Of Study,” 406.

contemplative questions, it is in order to secure the knowledge that we do or might have concerning our practical interests in the broad sense: our comfort, our duties, our salvation.

So that we might not be thought to have mischaracterized Locke's general emphasis on practical knowledge, or think that Locke was with much "common sense" merely emphasizing that we ought to be practical, too, however contemplative we may aspire to be in our spare time, here is a quote, again from the first chapter of the *Essay*, that shows Locke's posture towards "the life of contemplation" as it was traditionally conceived.

I thought that the first Step towards satisfying several Enquiries, the Mind of Man was very apt to run into, was, to take a Survey of our own Understandings, examine our own Powers, and see to what Things they were adapted. Till that was done I suspected we began at the wrong end, and in vain sought for Satisfaction in a quiet and secure Possession of Truths, that most concern'd us, whilst we let loose our Thoughts into the vast Ocean of *Being*, as if all that boundless Extent, were the natural, and undoubted Possession of our Understandings, wherein there was nothing exempt from its Decisions, or that escaped its Comprehension (*Essay*, 1.1.7).

According to Locke, our minds have only a finite capacity to know an infinite universe. Unless we are careful to observe these limits, we are apt to find ourselves "extending [our] Enquiries beyond [our] Capacities, and letting [our] Thoughts wander into those depths, where [we] can find no sure Footing." In order not to err in this way Locke insists we must ask ourselves first what it is that we can really know with certainty; we must draw a line separating the certain from the more or less probable, and we must recognize the probable as the probable, as distinguished from the certain. The danger of overextension is, as we have already seen, the "perfect Scepticism" that threatens to undo the order in our souls and make us forget our duties. "Our Business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our Conduct" (*Essay*, 1.1.6).

Locke's emphasis on practicality is undeniable, even if the sphere of knowledge he considers necessarily relevant for practice is much larger than what we might today think it to be.

In that sphere Locke includes theology because the “Knowledge of our Maker” lies at the bottom of, and supports, “the sight of our duties” (or in other words, “the law of nature”).<sup>21</sup> To express Locke’s posture towards the life of contemplation as it appears in the first chapter of the *Essay*, we might say that, for Locke, the knowledge that bears on our conduct in the world is much more important than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Locke never forgets the question “How should I live?” for the question “What can I know?” For him, they are intimately related.

### Locke’s Theory of Knowledge

If Locke is to discourage us from the study of all *Being* and encourage us to the study, instead, of both our comfortable preservation and our duty he needs—does he not?—an understanding of what it means to know that shows us why the one is probably futile and the other profitable and worthwhile. The emphasis on practicality as distinguished from contemplation for its own sake requires such a justification, especially when one considers that “the contemplative life” was a model of human possibility and aspiration powerfully defended in the West since at least the time of Plato, and probably before (though perhaps not so well as Plato did it). In fact, it was defended in both a religious mode (the “priestly”: St. Thomas Aquinas, for example) and a secular one (the “philosophic”: Aristotle, for example). What, then, convinces Locke of the futility of “metaphysics” and of the study of, as he writes, “*Being*”? What is the

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<sup>21</sup> If we have duties, there is a law of nature; if there is a law of nature, we have duties; this is the Lockean position. An even stronger endorsement of the study of theology is provided by Locke in *Conduct*, § 8. There Locke writes, “theology, which, containing the knowledge of God and his creatures, our duty to him and our fellow creatures and a view of our present and future state, is the comprehension of all other knowledge directed to its true end, i.e., the honor and veneration of the Creator and the happiness of mankind. This is that noble study which is every man’s duty and everyone that can be called a rational creature is capable of.”

circumscription of our intellectual capacities that makes our moving in the practical direction so much more sensible than in the contemplative direction? Answering this question requires at least a provisional understanding of Locke's doctrine of what we can know and understand or, in other words, of Locke's "theory of knowledge." We therefore turn, provisionally, to Locke's teaching on knowledge in the *Essay* to see how he accomplishes this.

Here is Locke's understanding of what knowledge is:

Since *the Mind*, in all its Thoughts and Reasonings, hath no other immediate Object but its own *Ideas*, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident, that our Knowledge is only conversant about them. *Knowledge* then seems to me to be nothing but *the perception of the connection and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*. In this alone it consists. Where this Perception is, there is Knowledge, and where it is not, there, though we may fancy, guess, or believe, yet we always come short of Knowledge (*Essay*, 4.1.1-2).

According to Locke: "'Tis evident, the Mind knows not Things immediately, but only by the intervention of the *Ideas* it has of them" (*Essay*, 4.4.1-3). Knowledge, therefore, is knowledge of our ideas and the perception of some relation between our own ideas.

It follows from Locke's doctrine of knowledge that we can lay claim to real knowledge, as distinguished from fanciful images, figments of our imagination, or hearsay, if we can be sure that our ideas and their relations faithfully represent the true natures of things and events as they actually are outside our own thoughts. "*Our Knowledge* therefore is *real*, only so far as there is a conformity between our *Ideas* and the reality of Things" (*Essay*, 4.4.3). It is possible, as this theory of knowledge implies, for the connections in our brain to be faulty—unfaithfully representative, as it were, of the realities they signify—even if they seem to be logical to us.

Ideas can be about nearly anything, of course: we can think about fine French cheeses, the meaning of natural rights, or the great infinite sweep of all being and all time. In order to

defend the privileged focus on the knowledge relevant to practical action and our “great Concernments” over that pertaining to theoretical speculation, Locke found it necessary, if we may judge by the nature of the arguments of the *Essay*, to defend his theory of knowledge both from corrosive metaphysical skepticism (“how do we know anything exists, including ourselves, the world, or God?”) and from pompous metaphysical dogmatism (“there is nothing in principle beyond the reach of human knowledge”). Each of these metaphysical assumptions would in their own way undermine the claim that it is possible to know what we need to know for living well. The first, radical skepticism, leads to despair; and the second, an overconfident dogmatism, also leads to radical skepticism—and thus also to despair—because it cannot make good on its own claims. Let us then sketch and see how Locke carves a path through the thicket of thorny metaphysical assumptions that would undermine the prospects for probable knowledge—and thus also of a person’s allowing himself to be guided by a knowledge that is not certain.

### Radical Skepticism: External Reality Cannot Be Known to Be Real

The first objection is this: how does Locke know that our ideas, through which reality is mediated to us, according to his argument, represent or correspond to something real outside the world of our imagination? To be sure, the tacit assumption we make in expressing thoughts like “the moon is full tonight” is that both the speaker and the hearer understand this statement to refer to a reality beyond the words and ideas involved in its expression. However, is it not contradictory for Locke to restrict knowledge to the perception of relations between ideas, on the one hand, and to assert, on the other, that we can have knowledge of something that is not itself an idea, such as the moon? How, then—and this is the puzzle—can we have any knowledge of

“real existence” at all of anything outside our own thoughts? Locke’s definition of what knowledge is allows for, and requires him to address, this question or objection. And it bears on the main subject of our chapter—Locke’s peculiar defense of the foundations of morality on the grounds of experience—because it is no doubt possible for a radical skeptic to raise the objection that ideas related to our “great Concernments,” such as our preservation in the world, an idea of ourselves and God, justice and injustice, are nothing but fictions of the mind, because “world,” and by implication our own perceiving minds, which are part of it, are just fictions, too.

Locke addresses both the problems of our knowledge of the external world and of the reality of ourselves in the *Essay*. First, for the world outside ourselves. In restricting knowledge to ideas, Locke has created something of a problem for himself concerning our knowledge of the external world. He shows an unmistakably clear sign of being aware of this.

If it be true, that all Knowledge lies only in the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our own *Ideas*, the Visions of an Enthusiast, and the Reasonings of a sober Man, will be equally certain. . . . *of what use is all this fine Knowledge of Men’s own Imaginations*, to a Man that enquires after the reality of Things (*Essay*, 4.4.1)?

Is not the awareness of an image or perception of an idea only the awareness of an image or perception of an idea, however much it might be tacitly assumed to represent a reality beyond itself? “The knowledge which is due to the contemplation of our own abstract ideas,” writes James Gibson, “is by its very nature debarred from asserting existence.”<sup>22</sup> What is Locke’s way out of this conundrum? How can he rest assured that things external to us actually exist?

Locke admits the logical validity of this objection, but he insists on its triviality.

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<sup>22</sup> Gibson, *Locke’s Theory of Knowledge and its Historical Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), 178. Locke says elsewhere, “our *Ideas* are not always Proofs of the Existence of Things.” *Essay*, 2.17.4. Consider *Essay*, 4.10.7, in this light.

That *the certainty of Things existing in rerum Naturâ*, when we have *the testimony of our Senses* for it, is not only *as great* as our frame can attain to, but *as our Condition needs*. For our Faculties being suited . . . to the preservation of us, in whom they are; and accommodated to the use of Life: they serve to our purpose well enough . . . he that sees a Candle burning, and hath experimented the force of its Flame, by putting his Finger in it, will little doubt, that this is something existing without him . . . which is assurance enough, when no Man requires greater certainty to govern his Actions by, than what is as certain as his Actions themselves (*Essay*, 4.11.8).

Knowledge is properly subordinate to life, to the pleasure and pain and the happiness and misery that follow from action. Locke demotes this logical yet trivial objection by recalling us to our senses, both in the literal and figurative meaning of the word: external reality is “real enough” for all our purposes, even though we may continue to doubt its existence if we choose.

The case is different concerning our awareness of the existence of ourselves. This is one part of “the things that are” that does not suffer from the disjointedness between our minds and the objects of our thoughts. Locke writes, “we have the Knowledge of *our own Existence* by Intuition; of the *Existence of GOD* by Demonstration; and of other Things by Sensation.”

As for *our own Existence*, we perceive it so plainly, and so certainly, that it neither needs, nor is capable of any proof. For nothing can be more evident to us, than our own Existence. *I think, I reason, I feel Pleasure and Pain*; Can any of these be more evident to me, than my own Existence? If I doubt of all other Things, that very doubt makes me perceive my own *Existence* . . . *we have an intuitive Knowledge of our own Existence*, and an internal infallible Perception that we are. In every Act of Sensation, Reasoning, or Thinking, we are conscious to our selves of our own Being; and, in this Matter, come not short of the highest degree of *Certainty* (*Essay*, 4.9.2-3).

The intuitive knowledge of ourselves is very, very important for Locke. It is “immediate,” as he says, and immediate is the opposite of mediate; ideas “mediate” all kinds of existence to us—except that of our own existence. In other words, concerning the existence of ourselves we are not at one remove away from the reality of things like we are in our awareness of the external world. The “existence of the conscious subject” is, for Locke, the only “direct apprehension of



real existence” available to us.<sup>23</sup> This is why Locke calls it “intuitive” knowledge. Here, then, is that “candle of the Lord” of which Locke had spoken in the *Essay*’s first chapter; this knowledge is our first light in a dark and apparently groundless morass of uncertainty: we know we exist.

The universe in which we find pleasure and pain, happiness and misery—the world in which we know we are concerned—is real to us in a way that we cannot cease to care about it, even if we cannot demonstrate its existence. And where we can be unconcerned, there we do not really need to know, even though we may wish to know. Locke cannot demonstrate to anyone that the real existence of the external world is on par with the certainty available in the relations between ideas or the existence of ourselves, and he does not try. However, he is confident that he can provide reasons good enough to convince anyone that they are concerned in it. This is the spirit of Locke’s response to this objection. For all our practical purposes, the world is best treated as if it were there. And if thoughts are those things that inform and guide our voluntary action within this world of pleasure and pain, happiness and misery, then what we think about that world and our place within it is important. As for our own existence, Locke is at one with Descartes: “nothing can be more evident to us.”

### Metaphysical Dogmatism: We Can Know What the World Is

If against metaphysical skepticism Locke relied on the sufficiency of our intellectual faculties for life as we are concerned for it, he defends the insufficiency of those same intellectual faculties against the inclination to claim confidently that we can fully know what the world is. Here our question is this: what is character or nature of the world that concerns us?

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<sup>23</sup> Gibson, *Locke’s Theory of Knowledge*, 169.

Can the world we are concerned in be fully understood? Locke's answer to this question is nuanced: he maintains that this sort of knowledge is possible in principle, but not for minds like ours. Nothing illustrates Locke's opinion of the insufficiency of our intellectual faculties for the full and certain understanding of "*Being*" better than his analyses of "substance," on the one hand, and of "infinity," on the other. These analyses, in turn, help us see why knowledge is restricted to perception of the relations between ideas in the first place.<sup>24</sup>

### Substance

Locke has much to say about substance in the *Essay*.<sup>25</sup> But his argument concerning substance can be reduced to a simple contention: on the basis of the foundation of knowledge that is experience, we cannot really know what the substances of things are. We cannot know it because experience, although it furnishes us with an awareness of the multiplicity of "*Being*," on the basis of which we can identify "kinds" of things in the world (apples, horses, gold, water, etc.), only reveals to us this multiplicity insofar as we can sense, observe, and measure their differences one with another according to the knowledge available through our senses. And upon

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<sup>24</sup> "Locke, insisting on the philosophical doctrine that all the objects of our thought are mental . . . is content to assume side by side with these the existence of minds and of material things. But things which at the beginning of the *Essay* are the mysterious causes of our ideas turn out in the end to be merely the limits of our knowledge." S. Alexander, *Locke* (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), 53.

<sup>25</sup> The analysis in this section distills only what I consider to be the nerve of Locke's argument concerning substance. For, in addition to the natural complexity of the idea, there is quite a contrast between the idea of substance as it was known to Aristotle, to the "Schoolmen," and subsequently to Locke and the "new philosophers" of the enlightenment. The concept of substance critiqued by Locke was not the fullness of the idea as it was discussed by Aristotle. "The scholastic notion of substance that Locke confronts . . . is a pared-down version." Michael Edwards, "Substance and Essence," ch. 8 in *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Peter R. Anstey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 209.

reflection, we see that the knowledge our senses show us about the many beings in the world is in fact knowledge of the many different qualities or characteristics that make up each of the kinds of things that we experience. Our experience of the unity of beings is therefore somehow superficial. For although we use a single word to describe a being that exists—a dog, say—in fact the qualities or characteristics of a dog are manifold: four legs, wet nose, two eyes, paws, the power to bark, etc.

We know or recognize a dog when we see that the basic (not all, for there are differences within species, too) qualities or characteristics or powers that must be present for it to be a dog are in fact present. And yet we do not separately identify all the qualities or characteristics of a dog when we identify it; we just call it a dog. Ordinary language reflects the experience of the unity of that being, dog, as we encounter it, but it thereby, and at the same time, tends to conceal conceptually the presence of all the various qualities or characteristics that must be present in order for us to make that identification. We may ask, then—if what a dog is, is only the qualities or characteristics possessed by a dog—what that word refers to; in other words (this is to ask the same question), what is that substance, “dog”? Is it anything above and beyond that collection of qualities, powers, and characteristics, regularly occurring together in ordinary experience, that we call a dog? Or should we dismiss this question on the grounds that ordinary language, which causes us to think of the dog as one unified being, when in fact it is many qualities occurring together, is causing us to chase after airy conceptual will-o’-the-wisps, which do not exist? Just how deeply does the unity of what we call dog actually go: is it in the nature of things, or is it merely a function of utility, a mind-dependent category, created by language and perception?

Locke begins his critique of substance by giving an account of the necessity the mind has for supposing the real existence of substances (of whatever sort).

The Mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of the simple *Ideas*, conveyed in by the *Senses*, as they are found in exterior things, or by *Reflection* on its own Operations, takes notice also, that a certain number of these simple *Ideas* go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing, and Words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called so united in one subject, by one name; which by inadvertency we are apt afterward to talk of and consider as one simple *Idea*, which indeed is a complication of many *Ideas* together; Because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple *Ideas* can subsist by themselves, we accustom our selves, to suppose some *Substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *Substance*. So that if any one will examine himself concerning his *Notion of pure Substance in general*, he will find he has no other *Idea* of it at all, but only a Supposition of he knows not what support of such Qualities, which are capable of producing simple *Ideas* in us, which Qualities are commonly called Accidents (*Essay*, 2.23.1-2).

For Locke, the idea of substance is a “supposition” on which we hang together the “accidents” of a being. It is not an arbitrary supposition, however: “not imagining how these simple *Ideas* can subsist by themselves [in any given being, like a dog], we accustom our selves, to suppose some *Substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *Substance*.” We do not get by in the world, especially the world of ordinary experience, without experiencing the unity of the manifold particular beings within it. And whatever that unity is, we are inclined to think, at least as the result of the logic of language, that it must be more fundamental than its qualities, for all those qualities are qualities *of* the dog.

However more fundamental and necessary it may be as a supposition that makes sense of our experience of the unity of beings, our conception of any substance itself, or the notion in general, is, Locke insists, always quite obscure. In fact, for minds like ours it is practically unknowable. “If any one will examine himself concerning his *Notion of pure Substance in*

*general*, he will find he has no other *Idea* of it at all, but only a Supposition of he knows not what support of such Qualities, which are capable of producing simple *Ideas* in us.”

If any one should be asked, what is the subject wherein Colour or Weight inheres, he would have nothing to say, but the solid extended parts: and if he were demanded, what is it that Solidity and Extension adhere in, he would not be in a much better case than the *Indian* . . . who, saying that the World was supported by a great Elephant, was asked, what the Elephant rested on; to which his answer was, a great Tortoise: But being again pressed to know what gave support to the broad-back'd Tortoise, replied, something, he knew not what. And thus here, as in all other cases, where we use Words without having clear and distinct *Ideas*, we talk like children . . . perfectly ignorant of it, and in the dark. The *Idea* then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist . . . without something to support them, we call that Support *Substantia*; which, according to the true import of the Word, is in plain *English*, *standing under*, or *upholding* (*Essay*, 2.23.2).

Locke poses this challenge in humorous terms. In his view, the Indian's is every bit as good as any of the most sophisticated explanations of substance ever offered by a European philosopher.

According to Locke, we cannot speak about substance in general, or the substance of any being in particular, without speaking of its qualities, characteristics, and powers, which are things we learn from experience and observation. If we cannot speak about substances without speaking of qualities and powers, or in other words of all those things we predicate of a substance, what is the point of trying to talk about them in other terms? In plain English, what is the point of talking about what a thing “is” as distinguished from what it feels like and can do, the knowledge of which we can improve (in the case of bodies at least) by observation and experimentation? Our natural experience of the world points to the existence of substance, but the limited access we have to knowledge of it—through sense experience—prevents our having a clear and distinct idea of it. It is the clarity, and not the necessity of having the idea, which is at issue. Locke does not insist that substances themselves are illusory things, but rather that they

are obscure and unknowable; he immerses us in the world of our senses, insisting on the intimate connection between thought, conception, and sensation.

There is a problem, however, with Locke's argument concerning substance. Although it is now commonly observed, it seems fitting to acknowledge it here. It was raised publicly by Bishop Stillingfleet, "an orthodox man of religion,"<sup>26</sup> with whom Locke carried on an unusually long and interesting correspondence concerning the *Essay* and its implications for traditional religious doctrine shortly after it was published. As we have just seen, in the *Essay* Locke insists that the notion of substance both refers to something above and beyond the collection of qualities and characteristics of a being, in which those qualities "inhere"—the traditional, non-empirical conception of substance—but also that this notion is in every case obscure or unknowable. At this latter assertion, the obscurity of our idea of substance, adherents to the traditional conception generally protested (perhaps in an effort to defend those doctrines, religious and otherwise, that had been built up or defended on the basis of that traditional notion of substance). To Locke, the Bishop of Worcester put the following penetrating objection.

It seems then [according to you, Locke], the Mind hath a Power to form *one Complex Idea* out of many *simple ones*, and this makes a true Idea of a *particular Substance* not coming in by *Sensation or Reflection*. But I am still to seek, how this comes to make an *Idea of Substance*; I understand it very well to be a *Complex Idea of so many Accidents* put together; but I cannot understand, how a *Complex Idea of Accidents* should make an *Idea of Substance*. And till you do this you are as far as ever from a *true Idea of Substance*, notwithstanding your *Complex Ideas*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> John W. Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 117.

<sup>27</sup> Stillingfleet's published critiques of the *Essay*, and Locke's responses, can be found online. This quote is drawn from "The Bishop of Worcester's answer to Mr. Locke's letter concerning some passages relating to his Essay of humane understanding: mention'd in the late discourse in vindication of the Trinity, with a postscript in answer to some reflections made on that treatise in a late Socinian pamphlet." <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3356430;view=1up;seq=32>.

It is a good objection. Just how, on the basis of sensation and reflection—the inlets of all knowledge, according to Locke—do we arrive at any conception of something beyond what can be sensed or reflected on, or supported by appeal to such experience? Or, as the good Bishop puts it later in his reply, “how could a *Complication of Simple Ideas*, which cannot subsist by themselves, make the *Idea* of a *Substance* which doth subsist by it self?”<sup>28</sup>

Even granting the marvelous and wholly natural experience of the unity of an object that is in fact composed of separate qualities and characteristics, where is the empirical basis, on Lockean grounds, for the assumption of a real ontological substance that would support those qualities and characteristics? The force of this critical question would seem to be only partially mitigated by the plea that Locke is not concerned to undermine our ontological notion of substance but only to discuss and evaluate our epistemological access to it; for the question asks how, on Locke’s own epistemological grounds, the mind could ever have arrived at the ontological notion in the first place. Can Locke answer this question, given his premises? It is hard to see how. For according to him, all our complex ideas are abstracted and enlarged from the simple ideas of sense experience. This leaves the traditional notion of substance quite in the lurch. At best, it is merely an “act of the mind,” an abstraction.

One gets the impression that Locke himself might have wondered where and why the ontological notion of substance ever originated, too. Here let us quote again Locke’s account of the origin of our idea of substance: “not imagining how these simple *Ideas* can subsist by themselves, we accustom our selves, to suppose some *Substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *Substance*.” As a description of ordinary

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<sup>28</sup> <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3356430;view=1up;seq=43>.

experience, this is hardly believable: we experience the unity and wholeness of things first; only secondarily does our mind take them apart. (What could the mind recognize as a part, that it did not recognize as a part of some whole?) If this is, on the other hand, Locke's account of substance as it was understood by scholastic philosophers and theologians, it is a rather debunking one. For the meaning to substance given in this sentence, and the meaning of substance as it was understood by scholastic philosophers and theologians, are quite different.

However that may be, in the end Locke does not give an account of how the mind can, on the basis of its working through sense experiences, arrive at an ontologically meaningful understanding of substance. Rather, in the *Essay* he limits our knowledge of substance to the nominal essence: we have knowledge of the names we give things; the experience of their unity, as well as our knowledge of whatever it is that upholds and supports the qualities that compose those things, remain mysterious. Stillingfleet, for his part, might see this mystery as evidence for the existence of God: Locke wishes to emphasize the limits of human understanding. On the basis of sense experience alone, substance in the traditional sense is simply unintelligible; the simple ideas we receive from sense provide no foundation for the knowledge or certainty of substance traditionally understood.

Now, however much Locke decries the intrinsic unintelligibility of the traditional notion he still insists on the necessity of some conception of substance.<sup>29</sup> And he definitely admits the real existence of the "substances" of bodies in a physical, material sense. "The more rational opinion, is of those who look on all natural things to have a real, but unknown constitution of their insensible parts; from which flow those sensible qualities, which serve us to distinguish

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<sup>29</sup> Locke "does not wish to deny that substance has any properties, merely emphasize that we cannot obtain secure knowledge of them." Edwards, "Substance and Essence," 208.



them one from another, according as we have occasion” (*Essay*, 3.3.17). On this understanding of substances, or as Locke sometimes calls them in this respect, the “real essences” of things, the problem is not so much that they are conceptually unintelligible in themselves (as was the notion of “substance”), but rather too small to see. “Our senses failing us,” writes Locke,

in the discovery of the Bulk, Texture, and Figure of the minute parts of Bodies, *on which their real Constitutions and Differences depend*, we are fain to make use of their secondary Qualities, as the characteristical Notes and Marks, whereby to frame *Ideas* of them in our Minds, and distinguish them” (*Essay*, 2.23.8; first emphasis mine).

In other words, since our senses are not designed to see either the very large or the very small parts of things, we are confined to talking about the sorts of things we can see that objects as we distinguish them can do or the changes that they can be made to undergo, “all which *Ideas*, are nothing else, but so many relations to other Substances; and are not really in the [thing], considered barely in itself, though they depend on those real, and primary Qualities of its internal constitution” (*Essay*, 2.23.37). By implication, it is experimentation, and not traditional speculation, that brings us more knowledge of the external world.<sup>30</sup> What are “the ordinary Qualities, observable in Iron, or a Diamond,” “a Smith, or a Jeweller, commonly knows better than a Philosopher” (*Essay*, 2.23.3). The critique of traditional substance, and the replacing of it with “the unknown constitution of . . . insensible parts,” is in the service of the new science.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “The doctrine of substance, then, is not something that Locke is himself constructing, using, and relying upon; rather it is something he found already in use, of which he was both critical and suspicious, anxious that it should not be allowed to restrict scientific inquiry.” J. L. Mackie, *Problems From Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 75.

<sup>31</sup> The “corpuscularian Hypothesis,” Locke writes, “is thought to go farthest in an intelligible Explication of the Qualities of Bodies,” and he fears that “the Weakness of humane Understanding is scarce able to substitute another.” *Essay*, 4.3.16. Michael Edwards speaks of “Locke’s commitment to essentially corpuscularian explanations of the nature and properties of bodies.” “Substance and Essence,” 206.

Despite the ignorance and crudity of the ideas we are able to form of “pure” substance in general, we are nevertheless able to improve our understanding, through experience (and experimentation), of the qualities and powers of things. And according to Locke, this is what we ought to do: we ought to endeavor to be scientists, not metaphysicians. The fact that the sensible qualities of things can easily be changed in some ways but not in others, and that in some cases we can even change the make-up of their substance, forms “no inconsiderable branch of our Knowledge” (*Essay*, 4.3.16). Consider in this respect Locke’s statement in chapter one of the *Essay*, quoted earlier, that we are able to attain knowledge of “Whatsoever is necessary for the Conveniences of life.”<sup>32</sup> In this sphere of knowledge science rules, not philosophy.

Scientific knowledge, on Locke’s view, is not truly certain either. Natural science, to which Locke considers the *Essay* a contribution, after the manner of an “*Under-Labourer in clearing Ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the Way to Knowledge*” (Epistle to the Reader), is inevitably confined to the advancement of useful, as

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Ayers describes the thrust of Locke’s argument this way: “The senses give us knowledge of the existence of things, but not of their substance or essence. Our speculations about their hidden natures are restricted to the ideas we get in experience, and the best available hypothesis, that of atoms and the void, is evidently inadequate and incomplete. Our time would be better spent in careful observation and experiment, equipping ourselves to classify and generalize according to probabilities.” *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2:2.

distinguished from complete, full, or metaphysically true knowledge of the world and the universe in the sense in which our minds most crave it.<sup>33</sup>

I am apt to doubt, that how far soever human Industry may advance useful and *experimental Philosophy in physical things, scientific* will still be out of our reach: because we want perfect and adequate *Ideas* of those very Bodies, which are nearest to us, and most under our Command. Those which we have ranked into Classes under names, and we think ourselves best acquainted with, we have but very imperfect, and incompletion, *Ideas* of. Distinct *Ideas* of the several sorts of Bodies, that fall under the Examination of our Senses, perhaps, we may have: but adequate *Ideas*, I suspect, we have not of any one amongst them. And though the former of these will serve us for common Use and Discourse: yet whilst we want the latter, we are not capable of *scientific Knowledge*; nor shall ever be able to discover general, instructive, unquestionable Truths concerning them. *Certainty* and *Demonstration*, are things we must not, in these Matters, pretend to (*Essay*, 4.3.26).

So, mysteries remain. It bears repeating: “we are not capable of *scientific Knowledge*”—by which Locke means we are not capable, in our investigation of the natural, physical world, of *certain* knowledge, like the certainty available to us in the comparison of ideas.<sup>34</sup> For we are, on the one hand, compelled to suppose that the qualities made known to us by experience inhere in something, or are held together by something, and yet we are unable to fully and completely know the character of just what this “support” or “holding together” is in itself. As a consequence, we are only able to know the secondary qualities or powers of things. “He has the

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<sup>33</sup> “The doctrine of the primary reality of corpuscular or material beings suggests on Locke’s part a significant measure of mistrust of the commonness or the presumptive reliability of the human senses, indicative of his more general doubtfulness concerning the natural correspondence between mind and external world.” Peter C. Myers, *Our Only Star and Compass: Locke and the Struggle for Political Rationality* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 88. He continues, “Locke’s use of the corpuscularian theory brings to light the underpinnings, in the sphere of natural science, of the Machiavellian attempt to construct a political science grounded in the primacy of matter to form or of the faculty of touch to that of sight.” *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>34</sup> James Gibson writes, “while the mathematical sciences furnish us with the typical example of such knowledge, its [that is, the sphere of certain knowledge] most important contents are held to refer to the objects of our moral and religious consciousness.” *Locke’s Theory of Knowledge*, 7.

perfectest *Idea* of any of the particular sorts of *Substance*, who has gathered, and put together, most of those simple *Ideas*, which do exist in it, among which are to be reckoned its active Powers, and passive Capacities” (*Essay*, 2.23.7). Science does not answer the “what” question, let alone the “why” question; it only answers, to the extent it can, the “how” question. Locke defends the traditional idea of substance as necessary in some sense, but also, and in principle, unknowable. This makes it possible for him to straddle both the “old” and the “new” worlds: it permits him to defend the reasonableness of scientific inquiry of the natural world in place of metaphysics; but the necessity we have to admit the existence of traditional substance allows him to deny the possibility of science’s ever taking us all the way to true and complete knowledge.

Now, it is not immediately apparent today that an argument like this should have mattered so much to anyone but those willing to consider speculative niceties. “What does it matter,” we might protest, “whether, say, “man” is just the name we use to denote that collection of properties possessed by human beings in general, or whether it has a meaning above and beyond it?” But this response, so easy to make today, is a sign of great historical change: we are generally comfortable with skepticism concerning the “substances” of things.<sup>35</sup> And regarding ourselves in particular, we are not accustomed to taking the notion of “soul” seriously: like being admonished to be tolerant, we impatiently roll our eyes when we hear this word in conversation. However, the idea of substance—our ideas of what things fundamentally are, and that they are—was crucial to a religious or theistic view of the world, especially in Locke’s day.

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Ayers suggests that a number of “disparate sources” explain “the automatic hostility with which the traditional notion [of substance] is liable to be received by present-day philosophers,” including “the empiricist’s horror of supposed unknowables” and “the feeling that modern physics has undermined the claims to ultimacy inherent in the substance-based ontologies of the past.” *Epistemology and Ontology*, 110.

In particular, the notion of an “immaterial substance,” that is, a substance that was not a kind of body or matter, informed the crucial distinction between mind and matter, or spirit and body. It therefore played a primary role in defense of the doctrine of the immateriality—and thus the immortality—of the human soul. In addition, it served to support a variety of Christian religious doctrines, like the certainty of God’s existence, the belief in the Trinity, the incarnate God (the divinity of Jesus, who is somehow both God and man), and his relationship to the other two persons in the Trinity.<sup>36</sup> So here, in his analysis and critique of the idea of substance, we find Locke treading with questionable motive on (or very close to) traditionally sacred ground.<sup>37</sup>

Having seen, more or less, how Locke understands the mind to come by its idea of substance, let us briefly turn to his account of the substance that is “*an immaterial Spirit*.”

By the simple *Ideas* we have taken from those Operations of our own Minds, which we experiment daily in our selves, as Thinking, Understanding, Willing, Knowing, and

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<sup>36</sup> John Yolton, voicing the complaint of the orthodox men of religion generally in Locke’s time, captures the spirit of their objection in this way: “if we cannot know the real nature of substance, how can we be expected to understand or even find intelligible the doctrine which proclaims that three distinct personalities inhere in the same substance?” *John Locke*, 130. This is to leave alone those difficulties concerning the conception of an immaterial substance as it relates to God and the angels, who must be thought somehow to exist without bodies. Antonia LoLordo writes, “Locke does think we can be certain that there are immaterial substances—namely, God and angels—whether or not we are immaterial substances.” *Locke’s Moral Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25, fn. 1. Locke does indeed say this in the *Essay*. But whether it is possible to arrive at that conclusion on the basis of Locke’s own principles is another question.

<sup>37</sup> The Bishop is stern with Locke: “When new Terms are made use of by ill men to promote *Scepticism* and *Infidelity*, and to overthrow the *Mysteries of our Faith*, we have then Reason to enquire into them, and to examine the Foundation and Tendency of them. And this was the *true and only Reason* of my looking into this way of *Certainty by Ideas*, because I found it *applied* to such Purposes.” <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3356430;view=1up;seq=40>. The Bishop had told Locke earlier in his reply that he had found Locke’s way of ideas applied in just such a manner by John Toland in his *Christianity Not Mystrious* (1696). When Locke insists that he does not himself apply them in such a manner (as he had claimed in a previous letter), the Bishop says to him, charitably, “I have a far greater Opinion of your Sincerity and Integrity than I see reason for.” <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3356430;view=1up;seq=58>.

Power of beginning Motion, *etc.* co-existing in some Substance, we are able to frame *the complex Idea of an immaterial Spirit.*

Notice that it is the same kind of account and description; only the qualities, characteristics, and powers are different. And Locke proceeds to assert that we have as clear—or rather, as unclear—an idea of material substances as we do of immaterial substances.

And thus by putting together the *Ideas* of Thinking, Perceiving, Liberty, and Power of moving themselves and other things, we have as clear a perception, and notion of immaterial Substances, as we have of material. . . . The one is as clear and distinct an *Idea*, as the other: The *Idea* of Thinking, and moving a Body, being as clear and distinct *Ideas*, as the *Ideas* of Extension, Solidity, and being moved. For our *Idea* of Substance, is equally obscure, or none at all, in both; it is but a supposed, I know not what, to support those *Ideas*, we call Accidents.<sup>38</sup>

By “accidents” Locke means the qualities and characteristics and powers of any given thing: in the case of a body, its color, shape, density, height, etc.; in the case of a spirit, its powers, like thinking, perceiving, willing, and the ability to initiate motion. Locke concludes by drawing a counter-intuitive conclusion from the equally obscure notions of “matter” and “spirit.”

It is for want of reflection, that we are apt to think, that our Senses shew us nothing but material things. Every act of sensation, when duly considered, gives us an equal view of both parts of nature, the Corporeal and Spiritual. For whilst I know, by seeing or hearing, *etc.* that there is some Corporeal Being without me, the Object of that sensation, I do more certainly know, that there is some Spiritual Being within me, that sees and hears. This I must be convinced cannot be the action of bare insensible matter; nor ever could be without an immaterial thinking Being (*Essay*, 2.23.15).

Our senses show us—or rather, they make it possible for us to infer, by their own mysterious action with the world of sense experience—the necessity that there be something other than mere

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<sup>38</sup> “He that considers how hardly Sensation is, in our Thoughts, reconcilable to extended Matter; or Existence to any thing that hath no Extension at all, will confess, that he is very far from certainly knowing what his Soul is. . . . ’Tis past controversy, that we have in us something that thinks . . . [but] I would fain know what Substance exists that has not something in it, which manifestly baffles our Understandings.” *Essay*, 4.3.6.

unthinking or “bare insensible” matter in the world. In each case, however, our ideas of matter and spirit are obscure and, for our minds, ultimately unknowable.<sup>39</sup>

A complete discussion of Locke’s doctrine of substance and its implications for traditional metaphysics and religion would involve the writing of a long book. Moreover, I do not wish to overly complicate the main line of my argument by wading into waters in which I have not yet fully learned how to swim. But on the basis of the limited analysis of Locke’s doctrine of substance presented so far, I do wish to stress, and think that I can stress now, without going into more detail on why substance is unknowable in Locke’s view, the most striking use to which Locke tentatively, yet undeniably, puts his metaphysically neutral argument for the unknowability of both substance and spirit in the *Essay*. And that is to raise the theoretical possibility that matter might think. “We have,” Locke says,

the *Ideas* of *Matter* and *Thinking*, but possibly shall never be able to know, whether any mere material Being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own *Ideas*, without revelation, to discover, whether Omnipotency has not given to some Systems of Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think [in which case we would not have a soul, as traditionally conceived], or else joined and fixed to Matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial Substance [in which case we would]: It being, in respect of our Notions, not much more remote from our Comprehension to conceive, that GOD can, if he pleases, superadd to Matter a Faculty of Thinking [in which case, again, we would not have a soul as traditionally conceived], than that he should superadd to it another Substance, with a Faculty of Thinking [in which case, again, we would]; since we know not wherein Thinking consists, nor to what sort of Substances the Almighty has

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<sup>39</sup> “The clergy found the *Essay* objectionable primarily for its reduction of knowledge to ideas, for its doctrine of real and nominal essences, its doctrine of substance as unknowable, and the suggestion that God could annex to matter a power of thinking. . . . The inevitable consequence of accepting any of these doctrines was, in the minds of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century orthodox men of religion, religious scepticism and disbelief.” Yolton, *Way of Ideas*, 117.

been pleased to give that Power, which cannot be in any created Being, but merely by the good pleasure and Bounty of the Creator (*Essay*, 4.3.6).<sup>40</sup>

The two possibilities opposed to one another in this paragraph are striking. But Locke wishes his readers to understand that this controversy poses actually no serious threat to traditional religion. As we quoted before, so we quote again: “All the great Ends of Morality and Religion, are well enough secured, without philosophical Proofs of the Soul’s Immateriality” (*Essay*, 4.3.6). Our next order of business is to sketch the reasons why Locke is confident that this is so.

Locke insists that our awareness of the theoretical possibility of thinking matter, which is tantamount to the suggestion that, perhaps, we do not have immaterial souls separable from the body, is not harmful to “the great ends of Morality and Religion.” In other words, the suggestion is neither harmful, on the one hand, to sincere faith in the God of the Bible (which, in one form or another, was preponderant Europe in Locke’s age), nor, on the other, to those basic notions of ethics, justice, and moral responsibility that make political community possible and desirable. I briefly point out the direction Locke takes by dealing first with faith and then with morality.

Our faith is secure, on Locke’s grounds, “since it is evident,

that he who made us first begin to subsist here, sensible intelligent Beings, and for several years continued us in such a state, can and will restore us to the like state of Sensibility in another World, and make us capable there to receive the Retribution he has designed to Men, according to their doings in this Life. And therefore ’tis not of such mighty necessity to determine one way or t’other, as some over zealous for, or against the Immateriality of the Soul, have been forward to make the World believe” (*Essay*, 4.3.6).

In other words, God can resurrect the soul just as well as he can resurrect the body. Our immortality depends on His power, not our human understanding of the relationship between

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<sup>40</sup> I highlight with brackets the two alternatives Locke wishes to contrast in this section. On Locke’s understanding of substance, they are equally plausible. In other words, on the basis of Locke’s “way of ideas,” it is not certain that human beings have immaterial souls, even though our ability to perceive and think is as plain and natural a fact as anything could possibly be.



body and soul or matter and spirit. The argument concerning the immateriality of the soul is not so important, therefore, because it is not essential to the faith that God asks us to have in Him, the faith that God, who is full of grace, imputes to us for righteousness.<sup>41</sup>

As for moral responsibility generally, Locke provides in the *Essay* a concept of “person” whose capacity for responsibility does not depend on whether or not he is composed of one substance (body) or two (body and soul). We can have, Locke positively asserts, a notion of responsible persons without settling the matter of whether or not we have immaterial souls. The following quotes, in which this argument is sketched, are drawn from the *Essay*, 2.27.

*Self* is that conscious thinking thing, (whatever Substance, made up of whether Spiritual, or Material, Simple, or Compounded, it matters not) which is sensible, or conscious of Pleasure and Pain, capable of Happiness or Misery, and so is concern’d for it *self*, as far as that consciousness extends (17).

In this *personal Identity* is founded all the Right and Justice of Reward and Punishment; Happiness and Misery, being that, for which every one is concerned for *himself*, not mattering what becomes of any Substance, not joined to, or affected with that consciousness (18).

*Personal identity* consists . . . in the Identity of *consciousness* (19).<sup>42</sup>

*Person*, as I take it, is the name for this *self*. Where-ever a Man finds, what he calls *himself*, there I think another may say is the same *Person*. It is a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery.<sup>43</sup> This personality extends it *self* beyond present Existence to what is past, only by consciousness, whereby it becomes concerned and

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<sup>41</sup> In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, in one of his own footnotes, Locke insists that by “soul,” “the New Testament ordinarily signifies life, *Luke* XII. 20. *Mat.* X. 39. XVI. 25, 26: Hammond I *Thess.* V. 23.” Ibid., 16, fn. †.

<sup>42</sup> “I agree the more probable Opinion is,” Locke confesses, “that this consciousness is annexed to, and the Affection of one individual immaterial Substance. But let Men according their divers Hypotheses resolve that as they please.” *Essay*, 2.27.25.

<sup>43</sup> Understanding “Lockean persons . . . as modes . . . enables us to understand how persons can enter into the demonstrative science of morality.” LoLordo, *Locke’s Moral Man*, 102.

accountable, owns and imputes to it *self* past Actions, just upon the same ground, and for the same reason, that it does the present. All which is founded in a concern for Happiness the unavoidable concomitant of consciousness (26).

This idea of person is perfectly compatible with the notion of a Judgment Day, in Locke's view:

The Apostle tells us, that at the Great Day, when every one shall *receive according to his doings, the secrets of all Hearts shall be laid open*. The Sentence shall be justified by the consciousness all Persons shall have, that they *themselves* in what Bodies soever they appear, or what Substances soever that consciousness adheres to, are the *same*, that committed those Actions, and deserve that Punishment for them (ibid.).

God does not mete out damnation to anyone for what they did not do. And finally, in conclusion,

I am apt enough to think I have in treating of this Subject made some Suppositions that will look strange to some Readers, and possibly they are so in themselves. But yet I think, they are such, as are pardonable in this ignorance we are in of the Nature of that thinking thing, that is in us, and which we look on as our *selves* (27).

Though it has an intuitive appeal to skeptical minds today, agnosticism on the question of the soul is not new. Locke sets himself about the task of securing the idea of moral responsibility in light of this agnosticism. The new metaphysically neutral foundation of knowledge, experience, is a foundation upon which we are unable to determine finally one way or another the question of the immateriality—and thus also the immortality—of the soul. Locke tries to show us how moral responsibility and metaphysical neutrality on that question can go together.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> “In late scholastic thought, the soul was always a special kind of substantial form, since the separability of the rational soul from the body was a theological and philosophical given. Thus from a theological perspective, any revision of notions of essence and substance needed to take the soul's special status into account, as Hobbes found to his cost.” Edwards, “Substance and Essence,” 206. The *Essay's* inquiry into the origins and limits of knowledge is undertaken by Locke in full awareness of the implications of this inquiry for our “great Concernments,” which, as we saw, he conceives as the “conveniences” of life and knowledge of our “duties.” Nevertheless, “critics in Locke's own time brought [a] . . . serious charge against him. They accused him of undermining religion.” Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (London: Longmans, 1966), 276. This criticism, Cranston insists, was “valid,” for while “Locke did not himself . . . eliminate the doctrine of substance from philosophy,” his account of it “could only prepare the way for [its] elimination.” Ibid.

In conclusion, we see that Locke has made the following kind of argument regarding substance. Our idea of substance reflects our supposition of some real existence in things, but inadequately. Our notions of “mind” and “body” really are obscure, as is our understanding of how they manage to interact; they reflect reality—the immaterial soul is theoretically possible—but not enough wholly to grasp it. While in our conceptions of things we are led, then, logically enough, to suppose the real existence of substances, we are limited by the origin of knowledge and our finite intellectual capacity to conceive of them only according to what their qualities are “like” in comparison with other qualities and what they “do,” or can be made to do. Locke reduces our knowledge of “soul” to the powers and capacities of the human mind. This is hardly the perfection of knowledge, but with minds embedded in experience, we could hardly do better.

### Infinity

It is from the perception of the powers of our own minds that Locke says we derive our idea of infinity. More precisely, the idea derives from our awareness of the way in which our minds can think about “modes of quantity.” The idea of number, like that of person, is a mode; it is, as we say today, “mind-dependent.” And yet, “amongst all the *Ideas* we have, as there is none suggested to the Mind by more ways, so there is none more simple, than that *of Unity*, or One . . . every Thought of our Minds brings this *Idea* along with it . . . Number applies it self to Men, Angels, Actions, Thoughts, every thing” (*Essay*, 2.16.1). Our experience of unity is, of course, dependent on the supposition, discussed above, that some collection of regularly occurring sense data constitute a whole single thing. Our idea of “one” depends for its origin, Locke implies, on just this experience—the experience of things *as* things. We could hardly have an intelligible

idea of a single unit wherever we were unable to distinguish one kind of thing from another. In this way, our idea of “one” arises from, and depends on, experience, even though it is a mode. In Locke’s classification of ideas, modes, while mind-dependent, are not wholly arbitrary.

We have, then, an idea of “one.” What follows; how do we get to “two,” or “ten,” or “infinity”? Having abstracted the idea of a unit from ordinary experience, the mind finds in itself a power to add the units together conceptually ( $1 + 1 = 2$ ) in order to make a new unit or whole (“2”). Here it needs not also have the idea of two things actually existing in order to conceive of “two.” And there is, of course, no end to the possibility of this addition; it is infinite. The mind needs experience in order to derive a unit, but it does not need actual experience to add units together conceptually. This is one of the mind’s “powers,” which it can observe in itself.

Locke suggests that our first inklings of the idea of infinity arise from considerations of space and time, which are, naturally enough, measured using numbers.<sup>45</sup> “*Finite*, and *Infinite*, seem to me to be looked upon by the Mind, as the *Modes of Quantity*, and to be attributed primarily in their first designation only to those things, which have parts, and are capable of increase or diminution . . . and such are the *Ideas* of Space, Duration, and Number” (*Essay*, 2.17.1). Space and time cannot in themselves be added or divided, Locke observes, but our units of length (a foot, for example) and duration (a day, for example) can be, and infinitely so.

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<sup>45</sup> For example, Locke writes that “every one, that has any *Idea* of any stated lengths of Space, as a Foot, finds, that he can repeat that *Idea*; and joining it to the former, make the *Idea* of two Foot; and by the addition of a third, three Foot; and so on, without ever coming to an end.” *Essay*, 2.17.3. “Space, Duration, and Number, being capable of increase by repetition, leave in the Mind an *Idea* of endless room for more . . . so those *Ideas alone* lead our Minds towards the Thought of Infinity.” *Essay*, 2.17.6 (the emphasis on “alone” is mine).

Now, although “our *Ideas* are not always Proofs of the Existence of Things,” it is Locke’s considered view that we must conceive of the universe as infinite in both space and time.<sup>46</sup> But there is a problem. While it is thinkable that space and time never end, we cannot imagine never-ending space or time. Though we can reason ourselves, as it were, to the existence of the idea of infinity, and even into believing that it must be an attribute of the cosmos as it actually exists, we are unable to form any definite conception of infinite space or time, or even quantity.

When we would frame in our Minds the *Idea* of an infinite Space or Duration, that *Idea* is very obscure, and confused, because it is made up of two Parts, very different, if not inconsistent. For let a Man frame in his mind an *Idea* of any Space or Number, as great as he will; ’tis plain, the mind rests and terminates in that *Idea*, which is contrary to the *Idea of Infinity*, which consists in a supposed endless Progression (*Essay*, 2.17.8).

Or, as Locke expresses it earlier in the chapter, the difficulty in forming an idea of infinity is the same as that of having “to adjust a standing measure to a growing bulk” (*Essay*, 2.17.7). The idea of infinity is, therefore, a “negative” idea, says Locke, of which we can have no positive conception. Infinity is not “given” to experience like the feel of heat from a candle; it is as it were an inference made possible and necessary by the consideration of our own ideas. And those ideas, Locke insists, arise from experience in the manner indicated.

In the words of James Gibson, Locke reveals “a serious discrepancy . . . between our idea of this infinity and that which we seek to cognise by means of it. . . . Here, again, Locke merely draws attention to the contrast, between the ideas of which we are capable and a reality for the comprehension of which they announce their own insufficiency.”<sup>47</sup> In Locke’s words, in the

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Essay*, 2.17.4-5. Richard Aaron argues that Locke’s account of infinity is “solely an attempt to demonstrate that the concept . . . contains in it nothing not ultimately derived from sensation and reflection. To prove this Locke first endeavours to show that the only conception of infinity which can seriously be considered by us is the quantitative.” *John Locke*, 167.

<sup>47</sup> Gibson, *Locke’s Theory of Knowledge*, 86.

contemplation of all *Being* our “Minds be overlaid by an Object too large and mighty, to be surveyed and managed by them” (*Essay*, 2.17.21). To point out this discrepancy between our intellectual cravings and abilities is, it seems, precisely the point.<sup>48</sup> We find ourselves unable to fully comprehend the world, both regarding its substantial nature and its infinite extent.

Just as the idea of “substance” was related to our “great Concernments”—concernments that it was Locke’s ostensible purpose to defend from skeptical erosion and dissolution—by being that category of idea to which we refer the human “soul,” so “infinity” is related to those concernments by being that idea without which we cannot properly conceive God.

’Tis true, that we cannot but be assured, That the Great GOD, of whom, and from whom are all things, is incomprehensibly Infinite: but yet, when we apply to that first and supreme Being, our *Idea* of Infinite, in our weak and narrow Thoughts, we do it primarily in respect of his Duration and Ubiquity; and, I think, more figuratively to his Power, Wisdom, and Goodness . . . I do not pretend to say how these Attributes are in GOD, who is infinitely beyond the reach of our narrow Capacities . . . but this, I say, is our way of conceiving them, and these our *Ideas* of their Infinity (*Essay*, 2.17.1).

That God exists, we may know, Locke says (*Essay*, 4.10); beyond that, when we use our words and ideas in order to speak of the nature and attributes of God, we do not fully comprehend what it is we wish to say, and we as much as confess our ignorance about them. Full knowledge of

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<sup>48</sup> Once Locke reaches the point in the argument at which he can confidently assert this discrepancy, his interest in the subject seems to wane. According to Richard Aaron, Locke sets out to show that “infinity is essentially a mode of a simple idea. And when Locke has proved this he is content.” *John Locke*, 169. Locke himself writes, “I pretend not to treat of [duration, space, and number] in their full Latitude: it suffices to my Design, to shew, how the Mind receives them, such as they are, from *Sensation* and *Reflection*; And how even the *Idea* we have of *Infinity* . . . has . . . its Original there.” *Essay*, 2.17.22.

God—like that of the cosmos itself, or of substance and the mind and body connection—remains an eternal mystery to us on the basis of reason working through sense experience alone.<sup>49</sup>

The idea of infinity in particular is a perfect illustration of Locke's general theory of knowledge or his "way of ideas." When we account for the idea of infinity, we are led to see that the elements of the idea—duration, space, and number—are derived from ordinary experience, that the mind can pick apart, abstract, and put together those elements into others, and, most importantly, that such abstracted ideas only insufficiently allow us to grasp the reality from which they are derived. This is the kind of point that Locke in the *Essay* wishes to drive home concerning the mind and its limited ability, embedded as it is in experience, to understand the reality of things: human understanding has a proper sphere and extent; it has limits.

The ideas of substance and infinity illustrate the difficulties the mind has in adequately understanding the reality in which it is embedded. We are, then, justified in turning away from metaphysical speculation to the arts of living and living well, which for Locke includes the scientific investigation of things; such pursuits are commensurate with the nature of our intellectual abilities. With minds such as ours, we are able to pry into and manipulate the physical world around us, but what it is we manipulate when we do so is somehow beyond our ken. We give names to the things we find, most of the time, but real knowledge is not knowledge of names. Science we can do: "*Being*" eludes us; with respect to *Being*, we "can find no sure Footing" (*Essay*, 1.1.7). Nevertheless, God is God, and we ought not to let our ignorance

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<sup>49</sup> The motive of Locke's argument concerning infinity and substance "is not obscure:" writes Michael Ayers, "he wished to deny that in intellect we have a faculty by which we can penetrate to a reality beyond appearances, or to a conception of reality different in kind from our experience of it. . . . Locke's ["imagism," or his "way of ideas"] was motivated above all by his scepticism or agnosticism about the essences of things." *Epistemology and Ontology*, 48.

on this point invalidate his promises. Nor does doubting the immateriality of the soul eliminate moral responsibility from the world. This is Locke's version of intellectual moderation.

### Conclusion

Locke's account of human knowledge and its limits is equal parts hope and promise ("science"), but it is also deflating and unsettling. We have a place in the cosmos, but that place is rather indeterminate; we have in science a power to change a world we cannot hope to fully know. Additionally, the natural understanding of ordinary experience is deficient, provisional, and open to revision. As one scholar puts it, "ordinary perceptual experience, while useful in all the concerns of life, does not for Locke reveal the nature of material objects as they are in themselves."<sup>50</sup> How could the recognition of the provisional character of our understanding of ordinary experience—including that of ourselves, since the idea of a "person," as distinguished from a "man," is a "mixed mode"—not fail to unsettle that experience itself?

Must we now always place asterisks beside everything we claim to ordinarily know, as a sign that we might later change our minds? And, if this is the frame of mind called "scientific," how is the cultivation of such a frame of mind truly and in the final analysis compatible with the security of those "great Concernments" that it was Locke's ostensible purpose to show us how to defend against radical skepticism? What now of the order of the soul? On the basis of Locke's "way of ideas," the world as it really is remains mysterious for us, and our interpretation of it would seem to be open to nearly infinite revision. Locke's theory of knowledge—his critique of the old-fashioned conceptual organization of our ordinary experience (the "great chain of being,"

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<sup>50</sup> Maurice Mandelbaum, *Philosophy, Science, and Sense Perception* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), 44.



in which we human beings are special because we have souls and are made in the image of God), and the defense of advances in probable knowledge of the natural world to which he encourages us to aspire—would seem to unsettle ordinary experience profoundly.

But Locke's intellectual modesty is not the same as radical skepticism. While he may look like a stone cold skeptic to, say, Bishop Stillingfleet—and he did—he looks like much less of a skeptic when compared with, say, Descartes, who builds up his doctrine of knowledge on the basis of radical doubt. Locke does not go so far. He speaks, on the contrary—in the chapter of the *Essay* that immediately follows his “demonstration” of the existence of God—of

how foolish and vain a thing it is, for a Man of a narrow Knowledge, who having Reason given him to judge of the different evidence and probability of Things, and to be sway'd accordingly; how *vain*, I say, it is *to expect Demonstration and Certainty in things not capable of it*; and refuse Assent to very rational Propositions, and act contrary to very plain and clear Truths, because they cannot be made out so evident, as to surmount every the least (I will not say Reason, but) pretence of doubting. He that in the ordinary Affairs of Life, would admit of nothing but direct plain Demonstration, would be sure of nothing, in this World, but of perishing quickly. The wholesomeness of his Meat or Drink would not give him reason to venture on it: And I would fain know, what 'tis he could do upon such grounds, as were capable of no Doubt, no Objection (*Essay*, 4.11.10).

It is a striking sentence: “He that in the ordinary Affairs of Life, would admit of nothing but direct plain Demonstration, would be sure of nothing, in this World, but of perishing quickly.”

This is vintage Locke: probable knowledge is enough to guide us.<sup>51</sup>

The effect of the unreasonable demand for certainty is pernicious: it unfairly undermines the knowledge—moral and otherwise—that we need to guide us, and which we can have on the

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<sup>51</sup> Experience shows that the capacity to be guided by faith in things not seen, to use the religious formula, is good enough to determine a man's assent and guide his actions in religious matters. Why should the matter be so different regarding morality and living according to moral principles generally? William Chillingworth, an author Locke speaks of with great respect—“if you would have your son reason well, let him read Chillingworth” (*Some Thoughts*, § 188)—makes such an argument in his *The Religion of Protestants: A Safe Way to Salvation* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1870), 412-419. “A most certain and infallible faith,” he writes there, “is not so necessary, but that without such a high degree of it, it is possible to please God.” *Ibid.*, 415.

basis of experience alone.<sup>52</sup> Certain it is that we exist, feel pleasure and pain, and desire happiness; and certain it is that some things, as distinguished from others, make us more rather than less happy. An argument definitively demonstrating the immateriality of the soul, or one that proves the existence of God in such a way as to “surmount every the least . . . pretence of doubting,” is not required to know these basic stubborn and “brute facts” about our lives.

Locke provides and defends an theory of knowledge that not only undermines dogmatism, but also shows itself to be immune from radical skepticism. In so doing, his defense of our knowledge of the foundations of morality in the *Essay* helps to make possible a more reasonable—that is, for Locke, a more “liberal”—kind of moral understanding, both of ourselves and our duties. In his critique of substance, infinity, and the limits of our knowledge in general, Locke emphasizes the “workmanship of the Understanding” in our intellectual grasp of the world—and of ourselves. This workmanship is not totally arbitrary, however; we know we exist, and we also know that our workmanship concerning the rest may drawn from, and improved by, careful and thoughtful attentiveness to experience.

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<sup>52</sup> Not even Locke’s argument for the existence of God surmounts “every the least pretence of doubting”; see *Essay*, 4.10.7. We have, Locke says, a powerful and undeniable awareness of our own existence. Thinking through this experience of ourselves means acknowledging the possibility—one that cannot be denied outright, he insists—that we have “immaterial spirits.” For on the assumption that our ability to think is a kind of perfection superior to the mere existence of unthinking matter, it needs to be explained how that superiority could have come about in the universe at all. Locke thinks we need to have recourse to something other than mere unthinking matter to explain the fact that we can think. The need for such an argument is more or less necessary, however, depending on how more or less sharply the difference between the substances of matter and spirit is drawn. In the *Essay*, as we have seen, Locke argues that our ideas of substances are obscure, even unknowable, unintelligible. This means that, given the limits of our knowledge, we cannot draw the line here too sharply. It is on the basis of this metaphysical neutrality that Locke tries to preserve the integrity of our moral lives.

In relation to the tradition, however, Locke's theory of knowledge and his defense of probability take place on what the tradition could not help but consider, and consider rightly, grounds more skeptical than its own. In fact, to the extent that Locke's theory of knowledge deviates from that middle path, it leans towards skepticism, not dogmatism—towards our inability to know what we would like to know rather than our probably already knowing it. One may read as evidence for this the quotes he provides on the title pages of both the *Essay* and the *Conduct*. On the *Essay's* title page we have, first, a quote from one of the wisdom books of the Bible, Ecclesiastes 11:5: “As thou knowest not what is the way of the Spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the Womb of her that is with Child: even so thou knowest not the works of God, who maketh all things.” Locke's elaborate arguments concerning the substances of matter and spirit, as well as his critique of our idea of infinity, shed light on how he intends for such a verse as this to support his argument in the *Essay*: the Bible itself points to the limits of human understanding, not only concerning the world of flesh and bone (our material world), but also the spiritual world and the ways of God, which are ultimately mysterious for us, however real.

After this quote, we have one other, this time from the first book of Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*: “How beautiful it is to want to confess to not know whatever you are ignorant of, [Velleius,] rather than to be sick with this foolish chatter of yours that displeases even yourself!”<sup>53</sup> This quote, too, privileges skepticism over dogmatism; compared to dogmatism, skepticism cuts the nicer figure. And whereas the first quote was about what we can perceive or know, this quote is about what we say and express; together they reflect the *Essay's* main themes,

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<sup>53</sup> My translation. The Latin on the *Essay's* title page is this: “Quam bellum est velle confiteri potius nescire quod nescias, quam ista effutientem nauseare, atque ipsum sibi displicere!” Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.84.

namely words and ideas, and their relationship to the reality of things. Finally, the quote on the title page of the *Conduct*, also drawn from Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, is a rhetorical question with much the same purpose. "What could be more rash and unbecoming of the gravity and constancy of a wise man, than either to think something false, or to defend without any hesitation whatever has not been adequately investigated or perceived?"<sup>54</sup> The quotes on these title pages show that Locke plans to err, if necessary, on the side of skepticism.

The theoretical understanding of the origins of our ideas presented in the *Essay* may be read then, for better or worse, as a gradual unfolding of the profound moral and intellectual inventiveness of man and of his dependence on his powers of natural human reason—and therefore also of the dangers to which man's intellectual faculties make him eternally prone. In Locke's view, as we will discuss later, dangers emanate from both the keepers of established intellectual tradition as well as from those who boldly innovate. By drawing out the element of human willfulness in our classification of the various kinds of beings in the world—by declaring the "workmanship of the Understanding" in matters both epistemological and moral—Locke slowly but surely reveals the mind-dependent elements involved in our conception of ourselves. Here, then, and on the basis of the premises consonant with the new experimental science, is a concept that was to Locke ripe for revision: namely, the kinds of beings that we are. Locke preserves the idea of "human nature," but radically reworks it; under his pen the traditional idea is further begins to lose its scholastic and Christian flavor in the name of revealing its true

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<sup>54</sup> My translation. The Latin on the *Conduct's* title page is this: "Quid tam temerarium tamque indignum sapientis gravitate atque constantia, quam aut falsum sentire, aut quod non satis explore perceptum sit et cognitum sine ulla dubitatione defendere?" Ibid., 1.1.

character. These changes reveal Locke's ambivalent posture towards the past and his hopeful idealism for the future. To that attempted revision we now turn.

## Chapter Two: Locke and the Revision of “Moral Man”

Locke’s teaching on the simultaneous necessity for, and limited power of, our own ideas, which we discussed in the last chapter, is meant to undergird his proposition that the only reliable path to knowledge is one that steers a middle course between radical skepticism and dogmatic orthodoxy. Locke pits his own more moderate skepticism and its limited, careful inferences, against a more radical one that would, carried to its logical conclusions, leave us adrift and despairing in the world of experience by demanding certain knowledge where it cannot be had. In this way we can make sense of Locke’s caution against radical skepticism in the *Essay*’s first chapter (“Men, extending their Enquiries beyond their Capacities . . . ’tis no Wonder, that they raise Questions, and multiply Disputes, which . . . confirm them at last in perfect Scepticism”). By making logical and reasonable concessions to the radical skeptics, Locke defends the possibility of probable knowledge, especially in those areas that most concern us. This probable knowledge is meant to be immune both from the dogmatist’s grand claims (it is only “probable”) and the skeptic’s cold derision alike (it is still a kind of “knowledge”).

In the last chapter we examined the nature of the foundation on which Locke builds his teaching on human knowledge (“experience”), as well as a few of its implications for important metaphysical ideas (“existence,” “substance,” “infinity”), ideas which played a central role in undergirding the scholastic theology and philosophy that once dominated European universities. We turn now to assess some of the implications of Locke’s “way of ideas” for his understanding of our moral life. Specifically, we examine Locke’s understanding of three important and related ideas that touch the heart of our moral understanding of ourselves; these are the ideas of conscience, freedom of the will, and the relationship between action, especially moral action, and

understanding. In each case, Locke sets forth what could only have been considered by the tradition in question a newfangled and questionable approach to understanding of the meaning of these ideas and their relationship to each other.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I sketch the traditional Christian natural law teaching, which so much shaped the framework within which Locke both lived and wrote, in order that his own deviations from that tradition might be more clearly seen by comparison. We then work through what I argue are three specific changes that Locke tries to effect or defend in relation to that great tradition: he argues that there is no such thing as innate ideas; he reduces the traditional idea of conscience to mere opinion; and he insists that the old question of whether the will is free is confused and absurd. In Locke's view, voluntary action ultimately depends on the understanding instead of the will, such that a man cannot will otherwise than he thinks.

Our themes for this chapter, then, are these: innate ideas, conscience, and the free will. This selection is not arbitrary; it will become apparent in the discussion of the Christian natural law teaching why these three ideas were so important for that tradition and how they can serve as valuable points of comparison for a discussion of Locke's posture towards the past. The thread connecting each of Locke's revisions is the emphasis on the role of reason and understanding in our moral lives. I read Locke's deviations from the tradition as an effort to carve out as large as possible a space within our conception of the moral life for the uninhibited role of reason. Locke argues elsewhere that such a role is necessary for individuals to develop the capacity for self-rule (*Some Thoughts*) and that without this development the idea of consent, so central to his politics, will have little meaning (*Second Treatise*). In the last part of the chapter, I conclude by discussing the dangers against which Locke understands his "innovations" to be a safeguard.

### Aquinas and the Christian Natural Law Teaching

The idea of a Christian natural law teaching is complex. The brief summary offered here is therefore not meant to be exhaustive. It will not do justice to the variance among kinds of thinkers that exist within that tradition itself (for example, Protestants and Catholics). The comparison will still be useful, however, because it will help us understand Locke's teaching on human freedom by contrast. To that end, I highlight those elements of the tradition that might most usefully be compared with Locke's own teaching in the *Essay* and *Conduct*. As I hope to show, Locke deliberately places his teaching at some distance from the ideas of man and moral right as those were conceived and understood by the Christian natural law tradition in an effort to make the teaching at the heart of that tradition more compatible with his understanding of political and individual freedom. Locke, I claim, attempts to moderate and soften the tradition without wholly supplanting its characteristic faith. And I suggest that Locke wishes to modify the tradition in such a way as to make it less prone to being abused and bandied about by ambitious and morally questionable men for ulterior motives.

In elaborating some of the finer points of this tradition, I most of all appeal to the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. Richard Hooker and Robert Filmer, or even St. Augustine, are examples of others to whom an appeal might be made. And Hooker and Filmer Locke mentions explicitly by name on more than one occasion. But I discuss Aquinas most of all in order to show that Locke's arguments concerning the will, liberty, and the mechanics of moral action touch upon, and go to the root of, that powerful tradition of which Aquinas remains in the minds of many the foremost representative. While here and there I point out similar arguments in Hooker, Aquinas



is the thinker who more than any other most represents the juggernaut of the Christian/Aristotelian tradition that came to be called “scholasticism,” the rhetoric and teachings of which early modern philosophers like Locke (and Descartes) sought in some respects to displace. He is *the* thinker before Locke who did most to try to harmonize the combination of Christian and classical traditions at the heart of “scholasticism.” Locke partly accepts and revises, but also partly discards, foundational elements of this scholastic view.

Before we begin we must note that Locke mentions Aquinas rarely. In fact, as far as I can tell, he only mentions him once.<sup>55</sup> I do not mean to suggest, then, that Locke wrote in order to refute Thomas Aquinas; that is far from my point. What I assert is that the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas is in many respects the ideal intellectual backdrop against which to see Locke’s relationship to the traditional Christian natural law teaching in its proper light. There is also another reason for this procedure. Locke is considered by many to be a first-rate thinker: but so is Aquinas. If we wish to examine both sides of an argument, it is most fair—in fact, it is our duty—to select the most able and sophisticated representatives of either side, rather than to make things easy on ourselves by pitting a master against an apprentice. In the realm of reason and argument, Locke and Aquinas are both masters, not apprentices; so the match is fair.

In the Christian natural law tradition we encounter a quite powerful and sophisticated theoretical understanding of what it means for human beings to be responsible moral agents. This tradition defends an idea of human freedom that is meant to be compatible with both the

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<sup>55</sup> The reference occurs in Question I of Locke’s *Questions concerning the Law of Nature*, trans. Robert Horwitz, Jenny Strauss Clay, and Diskin Clay (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 113. ““Everything which occurs in things created, is the matter of eternal law,” Aquinas says.” Locke cites Aquinas in the context of a summary of the arguments that had been put forward for the existence of a law of nature.

sovereignty of the Biblical God as well as the justice of divine punishment and the mercy of, and necessity for, divine grace. To describe this tradition, we must briefly discuss the various ideas that combined to make it up. Those ideas included the following: “God,” and in particular God as the source of law and supreme legislator, “law,” and in particular the “moral law.” This tradition also distinguishes how human beings do act from how they ought to act, and so we must also speak of the ideas of “knowledge” and “natural inclination,” by which the laws are known and deduced, as well as “freedom” and “free will,” without which the idea of personal responsibility—of having a moral law that we might break, but are obliged to follow—would be absurd. Further, the tradition recognizes “Scripture” as containing the moral law. And since there are some cases in which we ourselves are the only human beings who know whether or not we have followed some part of that law, the tradition also speaks of “conscience” and “soul”; it even speaks of “immortal soul.” These are some of the classic elements and ideas at the heart of the Christian natural law tradition, and without them it would not exist. Now let us give an overview of how these ideas are put together by that tradition.

The first point to be made is that God is the foundation and source of the legitimacy of all law—of all that is properly called law, anyway—whether human or divine (for there can be bad human laws made by erring or sinful human beings). In the thought of Aquinas there are various kinds of law: eternal law, natural law, human law, divine law, and the “law” of concupiscence. The eternal law is the law according to which God governs the universe; this law neither changes nor can change, though its particular manifestations may indeed be different, for it is part of

God's eternal law that there be different kinds of laws for different kinds of beings.<sup>56</sup> In Aquinas' view, it is according to God's eternal law that animals do not have as much reason as human beings do, that human beings have a moderate amount of reason, and that higher beings, like angels, have even more reason than human beings do.

From this variance in reasonableness arises the fact that while we do not attribute moral responsibility to animals, we do attribute it to human beings, and even more so to angels. Generally speaking, however, angels are, on account of lacking bodies, less tempted to act against their reason than are human beings; animals are, on the other hand, on account of their lacking the full powers of reason, less capable of crossing or postponing the satisfaction of their various natural desires. So, because the lower animals are less intellectual or spiritual, so to speak, it is not appropriate to speak of their sinning against their natures or acting in a way that reflects less than it might the image of God imprinted on them; and because the higher spirits are free from the desires that arise from bodies, they are much less tempted by what are sometimes called the desires of the flesh. In other words: animals are incapable of sin; angels are capable, but little inclined (though they are not immune to more spiritual sins, like pride and envy).<sup>57</sup> Human beings have both minds and bodies: they are less "determined" by nature. Man is the indeterminate kind of being who exists in the middle of this schema between brutes and angels.

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<sup>56</sup> "The book of this law we are neither able nor worthy to open and look into"; "only thus much is discerned, that the natural generation and process of all things receiveth order of proceeding from the settled stability of divine understanding." Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989 [1593]), Book 1, chs. 2, 3 (from now on, "1.2, 1.3").

<sup>57</sup> "The fall of Angels . . . was pride." Ibid., 1.4.

Man is, accordingly, the one for whom there is a moral law—what Aquinas calls the “natural law”—a law man is inclined from time to time (or more or less often, depending on the kind of nature dispensed to him) by his natural inclinations to violate and transgress. The natural law calls human beings upward, as it were, to a holier kind of life.<sup>58</sup> However, man also feels from time to time an urge to violate and transgress that law when it is discovered or made plain to him. In other words, man has a divided soul: he is drawn in two directions at once. Since there is a natural law—and because it would be absurd to propose a moral law to beings who were not free to violate or transgress it, and because God always punishes justly—man was created with a free will. In living up to the law, he lives “by the spirit”; in not living up to it he lives after the manner “of the flesh.”<sup>59</sup> According to the tradition, man is torn between the desires of living according to the spirit and the flesh; he often does things he ought not to do.

St. Paul says, “I do not understand my own actions.” Why? He explains:

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. . . . the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. . . . For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “All things in the world are said in some sort to seek the highest, and to covet more or less the participation of God himself. Yet this doth nowhere so much appear as it doth in man. . . . By proceeding in the knowledge of truth and by growing in the exercise of virtue, man amongst the creatures of this inferior world, aspireth to the greatest conformity with God.” Ibid., 1.5.

<sup>59</sup> Though the word “flesh” may bring to mind sexual desire, to live “according to the flesh” does not mean merely habitually violating that part of the moral or natural law that pertains to sexual appetite. On the contrary, to live “according to the flesh” means, broadly speaking, to allow any good “of this world,” however justly acquired and soberly enjoyed—honors, powers, riches, pleasures—to interfere with one’s relationship with God by preventing love for His Being and obedience to His moral law. See Galatians 5:16-26 for examples of “works of the flesh.”

<sup>60</sup> Romans 7:15-23 (ESV).

St. Paul's description of a human being at war with himself memorably captures the internal struggle that from time to time appears to be the heart of the moral life. At any rate, in the view of both St. Paul and Aquinas, this conflictual division between the desire to do good and the desires of our sensual nature (the "sense appetites") characterizes all men.<sup>61</sup> Aquinas says explicitly, moreover, that this struggle is willed and sanctioned by God—not directly, of course, but in the sense that He allows it to happen: the struggle is part of man's (Adam's) just punishment for his original disobedience. Accordingly, this struggle is part of God's "eternal law," or the reason and plan by which God governs the entire universe.

It is important to understand that, for Aquinas, doing the thing that one does not want to do is still a voluntary action; the one who does it is still morally responsible. "Every will that wills contrary to reason, whether reason be correct or erroneous, is always evil."<sup>62</sup> In doing that which we do not want to do, Aquinas understands that we will that action; we freely choose, in such cases, to do the evil that we do not want to do. The conflict or struggle takes place between reason and the will, not just between desire and reason. In traditional theological language, our wills are "depraved" because we are capable of acting out of accordance with our reason. Aquinas seems to conceive of the will as a separate power within us that is capable of following

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<sup>61</sup> "All do acknowledge, that . . . every man's heart and conscience doth in good or evil, even secretly committed and known to none but itself, either like or disallow itself, and accordingly either rejoice, very nature exulting (as it were) in certain hope of reward, or else grieve (as it were) in a sense of future punishment." Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1.9.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, ques. 19, art. 5. I draw the quote from *Aquinas: On Law, Morality, and Politics*, 2nd. ed., trans. Richard Regan, eds. Baumgarth and Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 7.

reason or following the sense appetites.<sup>63</sup> The will, then, and not reason, is that in us which leads us; it leads us according—or not—to reason.

Aquinas explains that the original condition into which God placed man (“adam”) was one where the desires of his nature were perfectly subject to “the full force of reason.” However, Adam’s sin—“when Adam withdrew from God, he fell subject to the impulses of his sense appetites . . . this happens in particular to each human being the more the individual has withdrawn from reason”—required divine punishment. That punishment consisted in God’s allowing this moral struggle between reason and desire to take place in human beings, and to take place in such a way that his own grace or mercy was now required in order for a man to be victorious in his attempt to will what is right and good. For even though man always wills the good he is incapable, without divine help, of always doing it. The “sense appetites that impel human beings have the nature of law, since such impulses are a punishment and the result of divine law depriving human beings of their dignity.”<sup>64</sup> In this account of our good and bad behavior, Aquinas here runs together the ideas of living “according to reason” and “according to

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<sup>63</sup> There are some cases of ignorance, however, which do excuse the will, provided that the willing is still done in accordance with reason. Aquinas says that a man is excused when his will, willing in accordance with his reason, acts on the basis of incorrect knowledge even though due diligence was performed in seeking to obtain correct information. He gives a humorous example. “If erroneous reason should tell a man that he ought to have intercourse with someone else’s wife, the will in accord with such an erroneous reason is evil, since the error springs from ignorance of God’s law, which he is obliged to know. But if his reason should err in thinking that the woman lying with him is his wife . . . his will is excused and so is not evil. This is because the error springs from ignorance of the circumstance . . . [which] causes the evil deed to be involuntary.” *Ibid.*, ques. 19, art. 6, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 9. The proposition I wish to highlight is that, for Aquinas, the free will can choose contrary to what reason advises. And thus Hooker: there is no “just excuse for iniquity,” for “there was never a sin committed, wherein a less good was not preferred before a greater, and that willfully.” *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1.9.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, ques. 91, art. 6, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 25.

the spirit,” which are drawn from Aristotle and the Bible, respectively. In Aquinas’ hands, human reason points more or less to the same human nature and the same end goal for human beings described by the Bible—willful obedience to the natural law and the glorification of God.

The conflict so memorably described by St. Paul, which Aquinas explains with the ideas of reason, will, and desire (thus giving it a slightly Grecian flavor) would not exist in man if he had neither the disposition to do good in the first place and, in the second, the knowledge of that law he is supposed to follow. Who could be said with reason to be under an obligation of a law that he was unable to know, or of a law that was unable to be known? Laws, “in order to oblige persons, as is proper to law, need to be applied to those who are to be ruled by the laws . . . promulgation leading [men] to knowledge achieves such application . . . and so promulgation is necessary for laws to be in force.”<sup>65</sup> From this consideration arises the necessity for an argument showing how it is, first, that human beings are inclined to the good and away from evil, and second, how it is that we come to know the natural law that ought to be our moral compass. To explain this, Aquinas insists that a basic moral compass is universally shared by human beings.

How, then, is the natural law “promulgated”? Aquinas says that the natural law is “inscribed on our hearts.” “There belong to the natural law . . . very general precepts, precepts that everyone knows . . . [and] regarding [these] general principles, the natural law in general can

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., ques. 90, art. 4, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 15.

in no way be excised from the hearts of human beings.”<sup>66</sup> When a man violates this law—this “imprint of God’s light” in him<sup>67</sup>—he can be justly said to have acted “unnaturally,” that is, against or out of accordance with his own nature.<sup>68</sup> For Aquinas there is a basic and universally shared human nature dispensed to all human beings, which have imprinted upon them some basic and universal moral principles providing the foundation for all legitimate obedience and authority as well as for the development of a complex moral code.

When we are old and ripe enough for moral awareness, we come by nature to see these basic precepts. Knowledge of the basic moral rules that pertain to living together develop

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., ques. 94, art. 6, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 50. There are, of course, Biblical grounds for this argument. See St. Paul’s argument in support of God’s just displeasure with the idolatry of those who were not familiar with the Torah in Romans 1:18-23; cf. also Romans 2:14-16 and then 2:1 (“Therefore you have no excuse, O man . . .”). The basic moral rules pertaining to our living together in the world are, for Aquinas, not derived from reason working through sense experience (as they are in Locke); they are, on the contrary, the God-given starting points or premises from which reason goes on to deduce and derive other less fundamental laws and to figure out whether a given human law is truly just (and therefore also genuinely obliging). The natural law recognized by Aquinas (and many other Christian law theorists) has, then, both authoritarian and anti-authoritarian potential: for itself it claims an absolute authority rooted in God’s sovereign will; but in relation to earthly government, it provides the possibility of appeal to a higher authority, by which appellants may claim with justice to disobey certain human laws.

<sup>67</sup> Having quoted Psalm 4:6, Aquinas’ writes, “The Psalmist thus signifies that the light of natural reason whereby we discern good and evil is simply the imprint of God’s light in us. And so it is clear that the natural law is simply rational creatures’ sharing in the eternal law.” *Summa Theologica* I-II, ques. 91, art. 2, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 18. Compare Locke, *Essay*, 1.2.1.

<sup>68</sup> Aquinas describes that basic and universally shared human nature as follows. “The precepts of the natural law are self-evident principles. . . . the first principle is that good is what all things seek. Therefore, the first precept of the natural law is that we should do and seek good, and shun evil.” He continues, “the order of our natural inclinations ordains the precepts of the natural law. First . . . [to] preserve our human life and prevent the contrary belong to the natural law. Second . . . the sexual union of male and female, and the upbringing of children, and the like, belong to the natural law. Third . . . human beings by nature have inclinations to know truths about God and to live in society with other human beings.” Finally, “All the precepts of the natural law, insofar as they relate to one first precept, have the nature of one natural law.” Ibid., ques. 94, art. 2, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 42-44.



naturally on the basis of our disposition to do good, which is given by nature and, in all human beings, both “incites to good and complains about evil” and provides us with the first principles of morality. Aquinas calls this natural disposition “synderesis.”

The first principles about theoretical matters, principles implanted in us by nature, do not belong to any special power but to a special characteristic disposition . . . [and] the principles about practical matters, principles implanted in us by nature, likewise do not belong to a special power but to a characteristic disposition from nature, and we call this disposition *synderesis* . . . [which] incites to good and complains about evil.<sup>69</sup>

Though this natural disposition can be malformed by bad habits, upbringing, and education, the natural light of this imprint of God’s eternal law in us can never be wholly extinguished.<sup>70</sup>

Concerning both theoretical understanding and practical action, nature—which is, on this view, God’s work—is beneficent: she gives us our starting points; we do not have to reason our way to the knowledge of their existence and to an awareness of their obligation by reason alone.<sup>71</sup>

Aquinas, then, does not assert that all the basic rules of morality can be “deduced” or “discovered” by human reason alone from our natural experience of the world. On the contrary, the basic moral rules are reason’s “self-evident” starting points; in fact, reason would hardly know what to do without them. “The precepts of the natural law are related to practical reason as the first principles of scientific demonstration are related to theoretical reason. For both . . . are

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., ques. 79, art. 12, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., ques. 94, art. 6, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 50.

<sup>71</sup> For other places in the Bible where the idea of a law written on our hearts by God, see the following passages: Ecclesiastes 3:11; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10, 10:16; 1 Timothy 4:1-2; and, of course, Romans 2 and 7.

self-evident principles.”<sup>72</sup> Moreover, there is a match between God’s laws and the basic inclinations of our nature, such that in following God’s laws we acquire the sorts of true and substantial goods towards which our natural inclinations point.<sup>73</sup> When human beings are ripe for moral awareness they are able to distinguish between good and evil; this ability then forms the starting point of all subsequent moral reflection. And they are able to build their habits and characters—with God’s help, of course—on that foundation. The imprint of the natural law on our nature is the mark by which we recognize God’s eternal law in us.

Now, it may seem to some that Aquinas’ appeal to the self-evident character of basic moral principles, or in other words his answer to the question, “How do we know there are any natural (or to use Locke’s word, for the sake of comparison, “innate”) moral principles?” is unsatisfactory. But Aquinas does not leave evidence for this view at the level of bare assertion. He supports it by an appeal to the existence and action of conscience. If *synderesis* is the natural disposition forming the foundation of the moral law in us, conscience is the internal motion or action in us by which that disposition manifests itself and makes itself known.

Conscience . . . signifies the relation of knowledge to something else, since we define *con-science* as knowledge with something else. But acts connect knowledge to things. And so it is clear from the meaning of the word that conscience is an act. . . . conscience

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<sup>72</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 42. Thus Hooker: “God being the author of nature, her voice is but his instrument. . . . to make nothing evident of itself unto man’s understanding were to take away all possibility of knowing anything.” *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1.8. And further, “Axioms less general, yet so manifest that they need no further proof, are such as these, *God to be worshipped, Parents to be honoured, Others to be used by us as we ourselves would by them*. Such things, as soon as they are alleged, all men acknowledge to be good; they require no proof or further discourse to be assured of their goodness.” Ibid. Compare Locke: “*there cannot any one moral Rule be propos’d, whereof a Man may not justly demand a Reason.*” *Essay*, 1.3.4.

<sup>73</sup> See my fn. 68 on page 75, above.

bears witness, morally obliges or stirs to action, and accuses or disquiets or reproves. And all of these things result from connecting some knowledge of ours to what we do.<sup>74</sup>

The action of conscience provides evidence for the existence of the natural disposition in us that incites us to do good and leads us to complain about evil. For without that natural disposition the voice of conscience would speak in vain; it would speak to us about as reasonably as one who delivered a moral homily to squirrels on why they should share their nuts. (Squirrels have instincts, but not free will; accordingly, they do not have a “moral law.”) If conscience has the power to move us, supposing we do not make a successful effort to ignore or “lay it aside”—which is possible, for here we are free—is it not reasonable to suppose that we have the kind of nature that conscience can move? Aquinas’ “natural disposition” is that supposition; it explains how it is that moral opinions are able to gain a foothold in us and move us to this or that endeavor. The fact that we can be so moved is also an argument for our internal freedom.<sup>75</sup>

Let us sum up this portrait of the Christian natural law teaching. While our natures point to communion with and obedience to God as the highest goods for human beings, we are drawn—thanks to the wages of original sin—away from this good into carnal and spiritual sin. We can will contrary to our best reason: in theological language, our wills are “depraved.” Nevertheless, though we are imperfect, we are also free: we are free to endeavor to cultivate in ourselves a holier way of life. Our lives are mixtures of good and evil in God’s eyes, mixtures of meritorious

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<sup>74</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 3-4. Aquinas also mentions, significantly, that conscience, unlike our natural disposition, “can be laid aside” (which is why he insists conscience is an act, and not a power or natural disposition, which cannot be “laid aside”).

<sup>75</sup> Hooker writes, “Every man’s heart and conscience doth in good or evil, *even secretly committed and known to none but itself*, either like or disallow itself, and accordingly either rejoice, very nature exulting (as it were) in certain hope of reward, or else grieve (as it were) in a sense of future punishment.” *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1.9 (my emphasis).

effort and accomplishment as well as discreditable failing and falling short. The orderly wholeness that once characterized us (man, Adam) prior to the Fall (reason ruling and desire willfully obeying) no longer does; it is only achievable by us—to the extent that it is now achievable in this life—with the help of God’s divine grace.

The grace of God manifests itself to us in many ways, according to Aquinas, not least of which are these: (a) our natural inclination to good, (b) our ability to know and reason, which is applied in moral matters through the action of conscience, (c) our free will, and above all, (d) God’s revealed word, Scripture, whose teachings cultivate our minds and hearts beyond their basic awareness of right and wrong and into a fuller understanding of, and willingness to perform, the moral requirements of the good life. The good life is lived with our ultimate “happiness or blessedness”<sup>76</sup> in mind, which for Aquinas is being with God in heaven.

In this way, the Christian natural law teaching puts together the parts of our moral experience into an orderly whole. In doing so it accounted for both the reality of our divided natures, torn as they are between “flesh” and “spirit,” and the goal or purpose of our lives —“happiness or blessedness”—which Aquinas, for his part, understands as having an undivided inner wholeness and being in communion with God. To be sure, the teaching makes a few assumptions about the nature of the world and of ourselves. Most importantly, it assumes that there is a God who is interested in how we think and act in this world, that there is a natural (moral) law “written on our hearts” for us to follow (and that we can deduce with reason other laws in accordance with this one), that we possess some measure of free will with which to

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<sup>76</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II, ques. 90, art. 2, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 13. Hooker: “Felicity . . . being the object and accomplishment of our desire, we cannot choose but wish and covet it”; “all men desire to lead in this world an happy life.” *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1.8, 1.10.

follow that law (such that punishment for voluntary breaches of it would be just), that we have both bodies and souls, even immortal souls, and finally, that we will one day, for better or worse, meet in another life the God who manifested his grace to us in these ways. The world according to the traditional Christian natural law teaching is, in short, alive with divine significance. While we are torn between desires of the flesh and desires of the spirit, there is much at stake in the way we engage this struggle; the flesh and its desires tend to draw away the unwary and careless, but natural reason, which can be cultivated and improved, points to Scripture, and Scripture lights the path for reason to see and the will, with divine help, to follow.

#### Locke and the Christian Natural Law Tradition

It would be an enormous task to show comprehensively the manifold ways in which Locke is in and out of harmony with this tradition when that tradition is comprehensively laid out in all its detail and variation. It will be enough for our purposes, however, to indicate the ways Locke makes a beginning, especially in relation to the finer points of the tradition just sketched. Beginnings, as Aristotle says, make half the difference; they lay the foundation for all of what follows. So, having sketched this basic outline of the Christian natural law teaching, it is time to compare Locke's explicit teaching as it relates to this basic outline. Here we will see Locke doing the following things: first, he argues that there is no such thing as synderesis, for there are no such things, Locke says, as "innate principles," whether practical or theoretical. Second, conscience cannot support the notion of synderesis, as it does in Aquinas, because men's consciences differ in their content; "some Men, with the same bent of Conscience, prosecute what others avoid" (*Essay*, 1.3.8). If conscience will be urged in support of the principles we are

said to naturally possess through synderesis, we must conclude that the principles provided by synderesis differ by nature; but this means, strictly speaking, that there is no synderesis as Aquinas wants to understand it. And finally, Locke will argue that the will is neither free nor unfree, because it is just another name for the ability to choose and act upon one option among others. In other words, there is no struggle between a man's "will" and his "reason"; Locke reduces the idea of "free will" to the idea of the "informed (or misinformed) understanding."

### Innate Moral Principles

To start, we need only peruse to the chapter headings of the first book of Locke's *Essay*. There we find a Locke in profound disagreement with the very idea of "innate" principles and, regarding moral principles, asserting that there are no self-evident moral starting points. The three chapter headings of Book I of the *Essay* (other than the first and short "Introduction") are these: "No innate speculative Principles," "No innate practical Principles," and "Other Proofs against innate Principles." This polemic wears its thesis on its sleeve. Its thesis, stated in terms of the Christian natural law tradition, is this: there is no such thing as synderesis.

Locke deploys a number of arguments to support this claim in his polemic. Here we examine three. His first is somewhat rhetorical: God's gift of reason to us—the "candle of the Lord"—is sufficient for our moral guidance because with that natural reason or touchstone we can both think for ourselves and read our own sacred texts. It is "impertinent," Locke says,

to suppose, the *Ideas* of Colours innate in a Creature, to whom God hath given Sight, and a Power to receive them by the Eyes from external Objects: and no less unreasonable would it be to attribute several Truths, to the Impressions of Nature, and innate Characters, when we may observe in our selves Faculties, fit to attain as easie and certain Knowledge of them, as if they were Originally imprinted on the Mind (*Essay*, 1.2.1).

Locke's rhetorical flourish here—he does not call the “impertinent” supposition a contradiction—points to the fundamental proposition advances here and elsewhere, namely that natural reason, properly cultivated, is enough for our guidance, moral and otherwise. Why would God imprint moral rules on our hearts and then give us reason to discover those same moral rules? Can we believe with reason that God does superfluous or redundant things? This is the spirit of this suggestion; for Locke, God calls us to use the gift he gave us, which is reason.

The second argument Locke makes concerns the extent to which human beings do agree on certain moral principles. Locke observes that one of the main arguments for the existence of innate principles begins with the fact, evident to experience, that many men do agree in some moral principles. This is a fact, evident to experience, even today. But the argument in support of innatism does not stop here; it asserts the universal agreement of all human beings on some fundamental moral principles. Locke questions this. But first, Locke responds that this argument, which is “drawn from *Universal Consent*, has this Misfortune in it, That if it were true in matter of Fact, that there were certain Truths, wherein all Mankind agreed, it would not prove them innate, if there can be any other way shewn, how Men may come to that Universal Agreement.” And this, Locke presumes—making it the burden of Book 2 of the *Essay* to show—“may be done,” at least regarding those things men “do consent in” (*Essay*, 1.2.3). This first response to the argument from universal consent is an echo of his fundamental proposition that the mind acquires the materials for thinking—ideas—from experience.

In addition to showing how this agreement might be reached, however, Locke also insists that “there are none to which all Mankind give an Universal Assent” (*Essay*, 1.2.4). In other words, not only is the agreement that many men evidently do have properly explained by

something other than “innate” principles, but this agreement is not universal. If the principles were truly innate, Locke insists, they would be universally shared and acknowledged—at least until men are corrupted or led astray by custom, education, learning, fashion, and the like. This second response to the argument from universal consent has, then, two prongs: Locke differentiates between mature, fully grown human beings who have, in the process of that maturation, absorbed the moral principles of their respective societies, and now reflect them, and young children who are at the beginning of that process in whatever society they may be.

Regarding the adults, it is in the first place evident that neither all human beings nor all whole societies share the same moral principles. Locke appeals to a wide variety of travel literature, popular at the time, to cite examples not only of individuals but also of whole peoples or nations that believe and act differently, morally speaking, than Englishmen.<sup>77</sup> They have different notions of what is shameful and noble, good and bad, and just and unjust. “If we look abroad, to take a view of Men, as they are, we shall find, that they have remorse in one Place, for doing or omitting that, which others, in another Place, think they merit by” (*Essay*, 1.3.9). At times, such as in the very next section, Locke tells his reader, basically, “go read some history, and you will see.”<sup>78</sup> Even a cursory investigation of history reveals the great variety, the great heterogeneity, of moral life as human beings actually live or have lived it. “As nothing teaches,

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<sup>77</sup> Some of the examples are bawdy; Locke seems to enjoy himself. See especially *Essay*, 1.3.9.

<sup>78</sup> He had said the same earlier in the chapter: “Whether there be any such moral Principles, wherein all Men do agree, I appeal to any, who have been but moderately conversant in the History of Mankind, and look’d abroad beyond the Smoak of their own Chimneys.” *Ibid.*, 1.3.2.



so nothing delights, more than History” (*Some Thoughts*, § 184). The societies we live in shape us profoundly—morally, politically, intellectually, and in other ways, too.<sup>79</sup>

Regarding the children, and those who, because of age, ability, or provincialism, have not yet been so formed by their societies, Locke suggests that here—here!—would be the obvious place to look for a manifestation of innate moral principles. Is it not the case that grass grows as nature—and only nature—wants it to, precisely where it has been left uncultivated, uninstructed, and untouched by the transforming hands of man? Should it not be the same regarding what is natural in man? Should we not see innate moral principles shine forth most clearly in children, untutored in any sophisticated, and perhaps false, understanding of moral right and wrong? If the defenders of innatism were correct, Locke observes, somewhat humorously, children ought to be among the most moral human beings on the planet, and the younger the more so.

But in fact, Locke insists, the case stands otherwise. Not because children are naturally bad, but because it takes time and learning for them to acquire their moral understanding. In support of this point, namely that moral principles—not just what appear to be moral impulses—are not present in children, Locke takes for his example the one idea that, above all others, ought naturally to be the first innate idea in anyone if any were present, and that is the idea of God.

I grant, That *if* there were *any Ideas* to be found *imprinted* on the Minds of Men, we have reason to expect, *it should be the Notion of his Maker*, as a mark GOD set on his own Workmanship, to mind Man of his dependance and Duty; and that herein should appear the first instances of humane Knowledge. But how late is it before any such notion is

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<sup>79</sup> This fact allows Locke to score another rhetorical point later in the chapter: “the supposition of such first Principles, will serve us to very little purpose; and we shall be as much at a loss with, as without them, if they may by any humane Power, such as is the Will of our Teachers, or Opinions of our Companions, be altered or lost in us: and notwithstanding all this boast of first Principles, and innate Light, we shall be as much in the dark and uncertainty, as if there were no such thing at all: It being all one to have no Rule, and one that will warp any way; or amongst various and contrary Rules, not to know which is the right.” *Essay*, 1.3.20.

discoverable in Children? And when we find it there, How much more does it resemble the Opinion, and Notion of the Teacher, than represent the True God (*Essay*, 1.4.13)?

Locke brings in two pieces of evidence: the first is that it takes a good while before children develop the desire to want to know about God; the second is that, the notion of God that they do develop resembles “the Opinion, and Notion of the Teacher.” But, Locke asks, why should this be, if the knowledge of God were innate in us?

There are no “innate” moral or theoretical principles, according to Locke. But he is evidently not so bold as to rule out wholly the idea of a basic and universal human nature. Like Aquinas, Locke teaches that men do have natures; but unlike Aquinas, he denies that this nature provides us with clear starting points or principles for moral and theoretical reflection.

Nature, I confess, has put into man a desire of happiness, and an aversion to misery: these indeed are innate practical principles, which (as practical principles ought) do continue constantly to operate and influence all our actions, without ceasing: these may be observed in all persons and all ages, steady and universal; but these are inclinations of the appetite to good, not impressions of truth on the understanding.

Locke distinguishes sharply what Aquinas had somewhat pushed together, namely innate tendencies to desire happiness and what is good for us, and innate knowledge. “I deny not,” Locke continues, “that there are natural tendencies imprinted on the minds of men . . . but this makes nothing for innate characters on the mind, which are to be the principles of knowledge, regulating our practice (*Essay*, 1.3.3).<sup>80</sup> There is a difference between a tendency or inclination, and knowledge or principles; the one is present to us, Locke suggests, but not the other.

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<sup>80</sup> “One should not fail to observe how far Locke is from the other allegedly Lockean extreme of asserting a total human malleability and equality . . . the tabula rasa applies absolutely only to knowledge, not to abilities, temperaments, or desires. As always, Locke is sensible.” Nathan Tarcov, *Locke’s Education for Liberty* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999), 109.

Locke's polemic against innatism is still often described as the wholesale denial of human nature.<sup>81</sup> On this understanding, only nurture—and not nature—accounts for who we are and become. As an interpretation of Locke, this is surely an exaggeration; a wholesale denial of the idea of a human nature is not contained within Locke's doctrine of *tabula rasa* or "blank slate," nor does he anywhere make such a broad claim. Locke makes it clear that in his view there are indeed innate practical principles, if what one means by them are "tendencies to desire happiness and avoid misery." For Locke, as for Aristotle—and Aquinas—these tendencies are neither socially constructed nor learned. Beyond this, however, Locke tries to draw a sharp line between "impressions of truth on the understanding" and "principles of knowledge," and our desires and aversions. The former—the principles of knowledge and impressions of moral truth on the understanding—are the real subjects of Locke's discussion. "Principles of actions indeed there are lodged in men's appetites," Locke writes, "but these are so far from being innate moral principles, that if they were left to their full swing, they would carry men to the over-turning of all morality" (*Essay*, 1.3.13). According to Locke, truths of the intellectual or moral kind are available to us, but they are not innate: we need natural reason to discover, interpret, and apply

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<sup>81</sup> Steven Pinker, a distinguished Harvard psychologist, writes in his bestseller, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 6, as follows. "During the past century the doctrine of the Blank Slate has set the agenda for much of the social sciences and humanities. . . . psychology has sought to explain all thought, feeling, and behavior with a few simple mechanisms of learning. The social sciences have sought to explain all customs and social arrangements as a product of the socialization of children by the surrounding culture . . . a long and growing list of concepts that would seem natural to the human way of thinking (emotions, kinship, the sexes, illness, nature, the world) are now said to have been "invented" or "socially constructed." The doctrine of the blank slate is, as Pinker makes clear, "commonly attributed to the philosopher John Locke." Ibid., 5. Pinker seems to admit to using Locke's reputation for having denied human nature as merely a device to set up his own argument when he writes, "The actual writings of philosophers are always more complex than the theories they come to symbolize in the textbooks." Ibid., 8. The fact that Locke's reputation can be put to this use, however, is enough to show how his doctrine of the blank slate is often generally regarded.

them. For Locke, natural reason does the foundational work that, in Aquinas' view, is accomplished by synderesis and conscience.

Aquinas did not rest his argument for synderesis on the universal agreement of men on any specific moral principles—as if the existence of this natural disposition were shown in all everyone's consenting to or agreeing in this or that moral proposition.<sup>82</sup> He had appealed directly to nature and to the experience of conscience. As Locke frames the argument, however, universal consent is integral to the case for innate morality. But if there were any natural moral principles, most men—and especially those who have not been genuinely changed by education, culture, discipline, and custom (or who have not thereby learned, at least, how to dissimulate their true selves)—should be found agreeing in them, and living by them: therefore, there are no such things as innate moral principles. This argument does not supplant the idea that we have a nature at all, of course, but it does open up the question of just what that nature is really like. For Aquinas, nature points to moral rules that are in accordance with both our good and a Biblical

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<sup>82</sup> “For Aquinas, the first principle of practical reasoning is that the good should be done and pursued, and the bad should be avoided. Insofar as we grasp this, we grasp through the intellect part of God's eternal law. Any substantive content, however, would have to be established independently; the principle itself yields no substantive content, since it begs the question: what is the good?” Robert Pasnau and Christopher Shields, *The Philosophy of Aquinas* (Boulder: Westview, 2004), 220. I think it is fair to wonder whether in making the case against innate principles Locke from time to time exaggerates the claims made on behalf of innate principles. Against the most sophisticated version of innatism the outcome of Locke's polemic is merely to have placed the burden of proof on the defenders of that idea, rather than on those who deny it. That is a significant accomplishment because it makes those who deny innate principles look more reasonable or probably right than those who do, but it also means that Locke's argument is not a slam dunk, so to speak. Locke's “concern about the seeming pointlessness of God's providing humans with latent principles (especially considering the fact that God might have made these principles occurrent instead) successfully shifts the burden of proof onto the shoulders of dispositional nativists.” Samuel C. Rickless, “Locke's Polemic against Nativism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's “Essay Concerning Human Understanding”* ed. Lex Newman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 66.

interpretation of our ordinary experience. For Locke, who appeals to the variety and heterogeneity of human experience, nature—insofar as unaided human reason is able to understand it—does not point unambiguously to a Biblical interpretation of experience.<sup>83</sup>

The third of Locke's arguments against innatism that we will examine here is that, in order for us to have inscribed on our natures an innate law, we have to know what the law says and that it is enforced. No intellectual or moral principle can be innate, Locke insists, unless all the ideas contained in the principle are also innate. For example, Locke gives as an instance of a moral principle: "Men ought to repent of their sins"; in the *Essay* he says this is "a very true proposition." He suggests, however, that this principle is very little instructive among those who do not know which sorts of things are sins. "What great principle of morality can that be," he asks, "to tell us we should be sorry, and cease to do that [sin], which will bring mischief upon us, without knowing what those particular actions are, that will do so?" (*Essay*, 1.3.19). This is the problem of promulgation, which Aquinas had addressed by an appeal to the synderesis that manifests itself clearly by the action of conscience.

In order for such moral principles to be a true law for us, however, we would not only have to know by nature what sorts of actions are sins, and understand the names by which they are known, but we also need to know that punishment follows the breach of the moral law. We have to know, for example, not only that taking things that do not belong to you is what is meant by "stealing," and that "stealing" is a sin, but also that the sin of "stealing" is always punished. Otherwise, even a clear and well promulgated collection of rules—like "thou shalt not steal" and

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<sup>83</sup> Locke understands God's laws to be positive laws, and positive laws are distinguished by him from laws of nature on account of their source: the one is discovered by human reason, the other is given to human reason by God. See Locke's *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*, Question 2, p. 133, and Question 8, p. 211.

“thou shalt not covet,” each of which are communicated with words—would be useless to us.

We would be unaware of what they meant and that they were truly obligatory. Without the knowledge that breaches of the law are punished, the law would have no real force. The rules contained within the law would not operate as true rules, but merely as suggestions.

For his part, Locke clearly thinks no such proposition exists that meets all these criteria:

“I would gladly have any one name that proposition,” he writes, “whose terms or ideas were either of them innate”; only “by degrees,” Locke claims, do we “get ideas and names, and learn their . . . connection one with another” (*Essay*, 1.2.23). And regarding the certain knowledge that breaches of the law will be punished, Locke insists here in Book I that

If therefore any thing be imprinted on the Mind of all Men as a Law, all Men must have a certain and unavoidable knowledge, that certain and unavoidable punishment will attend the breach of it. . . . evident indubitable knowledge of unavoidable punishment, great enough to make the transgression very ineligible, must accompany an innate Law: Unless with an innate Law, [one] can suppose an innate Gospel too. . . . There is a great deal of difference between an innate Law, and a Law of Nature; between something imprinted on our Minds in their very original, and something that we being ignorant of may attain to the knowledge of, by the use and due application of our natural Faculties (*Essay*, 1.3.13).

If the moral law understood by Aquinas is to be genuinely innate, we must have innate knowledge not only of the existence of God, but also of the fact that he punishes lawbreakers. Is our knowledge that God punished wrongdoing innate in us, or is it learned? If it is innate, why do so many have such absurd conceptions of God, and some none at all?<sup>84</sup> Moreover, why are so many willing to disregard in their private lives the bare possibility of an afterlife and its implications for how we conduct ourselves in this one? And why would the simple, profound, and central moral teaching contained within the “good news”—“do as you would be done by”—

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<sup>84</sup> On this, see *Essay*, 1.4.7-17.

ever need to be spread and carried to the far ends of the earth, if it already exists in all men by nature? These and the like questions are spawned from this third kind of argument.

While Locke denies the existence of a law that is innate, he strongly asserts the possibility and even the probability of our coming to know what he calls “the law of nature.” “I think they equally forsake the Truth,” he writes, “who running into the contrary extreams, either affirm an innate Law, or deny that there is a Law, knowable by the light of Nature; *i.e.* without the help of positive Revelation” (*Essay*, 1.3.13).<sup>85</sup> It is the law of nature that Locke defends here, and the basis of our knowledge of this law of nature is the light of nature—natural reason, the ability to think and understand common to men—as that light of reason is able to organize the sense experiences through which all knowledge, according to Locke, is ultimately derived.

Although there are others, these are the main strategies and arguments by which Locke advances his polemic against innate principles. And so the reader will not doubt that Locke’s argument here in Book I is a polemic—a kind of spiritual warfare, as it were—we have this:

Since the Arguments which are against [innate Principles], do, some of them, rise from common received Opinions, I have been forced to take several things for granted, which is hardly avoidable to any one, whose Task it is to shew the falshood, or improbability, of any Tenet; it happening in Controversial Discourses, as it does in assaulting of Towns; where, if the ground be but firm, whereon the Batteries are erected, there is no farther enquiry of whom it is borrowed, nor whom it belongs to, so it affords but a fit rise for the present purpose (*Essay*, 1.4.25).

What, then, is the “present purpose” of Locke’s assault? To eliminate the notion of innate principles, surely, but to what end? Though I will develop later in the chapter an interpretation of this purpose—one that I will argue is central to Locke’s whole political philosophy—for now it

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<sup>85</sup> “When we say that something is known by the light of nature, we would signify nothing but the kind of truth whose knowledge man can, by the right use of those faculties with which he is provided by nature, attain by himself and without the help of another.” Locke, *Questions*, 119.

will be sufficient to observe that there is, according to Locke, real power involved in persuading men what their natures are, and even more power in doing so in a way that presents itself as rooted in an authority that it would be sinful and heretical to question. It is not so much God's authority or communication that Locke seeks to moderate, but the established earthly power and influence of those who consider or insert themselves as God's authorized interpreters. "Nor is it a small power," Locke observes, "it gives one Man over another, to have the Authority to be the Dictator of Principles" (*Essay*, 1.4.24). To have it means to be able to tell others how to live.

Locke's polemic against innate ideas is a famous one. As I have tried to show in this section, it is not purely theoretical; it has important implications for how we understand the inclinations of our own nature. Our own natures do not provide us with the moral principles from which we could begin moral reflection and deduce a science of morality. While we do have natures, they do not include any knowledge or principles of right and wrong, or justice and injustice, that we do not have to learn elsewhere and from experience. Compared to the traditional view, Locke's understanding of the nature of man is very much trimmed down; from it alone we could hardly deduce a science of morality, and there is no *synderesis*. While on Locke's view the sphere of nature's work or beneficence to us is smaller, the opportunity or requirement for reason to make up for nature's stinginess is greatly enhanced. The attempt to refute the doctrine of innatism redounds unequivocally to the empowerment of natural reason.

### Conscience

We turn now to conscience. For Aquinas, as we have seen, conscience is an act—the act of applying moral knowledge to what we do, have done, or might do. Conscience, he says, "bears witness, morally obliges or stirs to action, and accuses or disquiets or reproves."



Conscience performs the work of an auditor in our moral life; it leads us to seek and defend the good, the right, and the true. It draws its power from the natural disposition that, serving as its foundation, supplies us with the basic moral principles (Aquinas uses the plural) and the disposition to want to abide by them. But Locke, as we have seen, denies the existence of innate moral or theoretical principles. What, then, can be made, on his grounds, of conscience?

Locke's explicit discussion of the conscience forms a part of his broader critique of innate practical or moral principles in Book I. Alluding to those who appeal to conscience as evidence from experience for the universality of our natural disposition to do good, he writes as follows.

I doubt not, but without being written on their Hearts, many Men, may, by the same way that they come to the Knowledge of other things, come to assent to several Moral Rules, and be convinced of their Obligation. Others also may come to be of the same Mind, from their Education, Company, and Customs of their Country; which, *Perswasion however got, will serve to set Conscience on work*, which is nothing else, but our own Opinion or Judgment of the Moral Rectitude or Pravity of our own Actions. And if Conscience be a Proof of innate Principles, contraries may be innate Principles: Since some Men, with the same bent of Conscience, prosecute what others avoid (*Essay*, 1.3.8).

What is conscience, according to Locke? It is “our own Opinion or Judgment of the Moral Rectitude or Pravity of our own Actions.” In other words, Locke—just as Hobbes had done before him—reduces conscience to “private opinion.” Here we see that conscience is “private,” in the sense that it is a man's “own” opinion of what he does or what it is important for him to do. On Lockean grounds, the conscience has no more moral grandeur than an opinion.

We must also notice another consequence in this passage of Locke's having eroded the foundation on which conscience was said to rest, and for which its action was interpreted as evidence. And that is, according to Locke, that men's consciences do not always tell them to do the same things. The action of conscience is the application, not of knowledge, but of moral opinion; and in their moral opinions, men differ. Locke cites the example of a duel. “Murders in

Duels, when Fashion has made them honourable, are committed without remorse of Conscience: Nay, in many Places, Innocence in this Case is the greatest Ignominy.” He continues, speaking now more generally, “If we look abroad, to take a view of Men, as they are, we shall find, that they have remorse in one Place, for doing or omitting that, which others, in another Place, think they merit by” (*Essay*, 1.3.9). So here we find that, in Locke’s view, “private opinion” is not only one’s own, and an opinion (as distinguished from knowledge), but also malleable. From time to time and place to place, men have different moral opinions. And within the same place, one man can from time to time experience the change of a moral opinion or two.

Locke’s teaching on the conscience somewhat undermines an individual’s ability to rely on his conscience as a moral guide or an internal check on his actions in the world; it erodes his easy confidence that the guidance of his conscience is correct. If consciences differ in the advice they give in accordance with understanding, education, custom, fashion, necessity, etc., they cannot be understood to be reliable guides in our endeavor to understand and follow the law of nature, which binds all men. In place of conscience, Locke erects reason as a guide. Reason enables us to do two things that are essential for our conduct: it allows us to reasonably interpret our experience, and it allows us to reasonably interpret Scripture. The knowledge we gain in these ways may indeed move our conscience, but the direct appeal from “powerful moral feeling” to the inner judgment “my feeling indicates what is morally right” is not available on Lockean grounds; instead, the ideas of reason and reasonableness interpose and judge.<sup>86</sup>

We must add to this account of Locke’s teaching on conscience that, however much Locke may seem to have reduced it to something superfluous, something like mere self-

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<sup>86</sup> Consider Locke’s critique of “enthusiasm” in *Essay*, 4.19, in this light.

awareness, and thus made it indistinguishable from one's own opinion of what one does, the idea of conscience remains important for him. Like Aquinas, Locke is sure that our consciences can deeply unsettle us and lead us to risk acting for what is in our view morally right in the face of opposition, even violent opposition. Locke seems to have no objection to the mechanics of conscience as an inner moral auditor: people really do sometimes feel guilty or morally satisfied about what they do. So, while Locke himself may provide us with a somewhat debunking account of what conscience amounts to, we see him in various places recognizing that men do not simply and ordinarily equate their consciences with their opinions. It may very well be, as Locke says, that in most men the idea of conscience is "obscure and confused," and that "many who talk very much of *Religion* and *Conscience*, of *Church* and *Faith*, of *Power* and *Right*," and other such notions, would "have little left in their Thoughts and Meditations, if one should desire them to think only of the Things themselves, and lay by those Words, with which they so often confound others, and not seldom themselves also" (*Essay*, 4.5.4). But men do appeal to their consciences, and this appeal deserves, even in Locke's view, respect. For while to an "enlightened" man it may seem a rhetorical flourish, the appeal to conscience made by an individual touches on and reveals his deepest and most powerfully felt moral opinions. Given the problem of the variety of opinions or consciences that Locke describes, however, the respect that Locke pays the notion is, as we have seen, not so much based on its ability to correctly

determine the moral right in a given case—not on its reliability in rightly informing and guiding our willful conduct—but on prudence.<sup>87</sup>

We have noted previously the potentially anti-authoritarian implications Aquinas' idea of a natural law to which the conscience has access. Locke is often and undoubtedly concerned with the idea of conscience in just this aspect—namely its power to shape our sense of justice and our felt obligation to obey authority.

If the law of toleration were once so settled, that all churches were obliged to lay down toleration as the foundation of their own liberty; and teach that liberty of conscience is every man's natural right, equally belonging to dissenters as to themselves; and that nobody ought to be compelled in matters of religion either by law or force . . . the establishment of this one thing would take away all ground of complaints and tumults upon account of conscience (*Letter*, 246).

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<sup>87</sup> For example, Locke's *First Treatise* abounds in references to the conscience, and they are nearly all of them references to the "inner court" wherein a man privately judges whether or not he owes obedience to his government. One of two things settles the conscience in this regard, Locke suggests: either a slavery so absolute, in which, because a man has no hope of emancipating himself, he convinces himself—in order to quiet the restless voice of his conscience, which cries out against the injustice of his plight—that submission is necessary, and must be endured; or, on the other hand, a limited freedom he consents to, in the opinion that the laws, and their makers—his rulers—hold and exercise their power over him legitimately. In other words, a man's conscience is not quiet unless and until he reconciles himself to necessity of submission or is convinced of the justice of obedience; see *First Treatise*, §§ 10, 81. In the *Second Treatise*, conscience always appears in connection with the idea of justice: in § 8, it appears alongside "calm reason" as one of the forces that might serve to moderate our desire for revenge; in § 21 and 209, it appears as that which knows how circumspectly and carefully we determined whether some other—including our ruler—put himself in a state of war with us; and in § 122, it appears as providing the knowledge of our being internally bound to obey just laws. There is, of course, no guarantee that we will judge rightly in all these cases: God will judge that, and we, in turn, will answer to Him "at the great day" (that is, Judgement Day); see *Second Treatise*, § 21. The idea of conscience figures prominently, as one might expect, in the *Letter on Toleration*, too. There Locke's presentation of conscience is more traditional and obliging: conscience distinguishes the inward from the outer man, the heart and inward feeling from the exterior presentation of a man's self. In the *Letter* a man's conscience is roughly equivalent to his soul—to the part of him that civil government ought to leave alone and unmolested. It is also what God looks to, Locke there says, in judging the sincerity of a christian's faith.

Locke speaks of “complaints and tumults upon account of conscience,” as if those sorts of thing commonly occurred. In fact, they still do. In any case, the idea of a settled, peaceful conscience in individuals is explicitly linked with the idea of a peaceful civil society whose members live together under “established” and “settled” laws.

There is, then, a two-fold tendency noticeable in Locke’s understanding of the role of conscience in our moral life. On the one hand, conscience is no better than our private opinion of our own actions; on the other, conscience is exactly what needs to be quiet and settled in men for a politics of freedom to avoid dissolution into a state of chaos. It is therefore not prudent to make little of the consciences of men, who for the most part consider it their sacred right to approach the gods of their various faiths after their own manner. But to return from these political considerations and conclude this section: for Aquinas, the conscience testifies to the existence of our natural disposition to do good as well as the power of self-reproof, but it can be laid aside. For Locke, it points to no such natural disposition: not only can it be laid aside, but also it can be downright mistaken; it is, in the end, only as sound as a man’s understanding.

### Free Will

The argument Locke makes in “Of Power” concerning the freedom of man was foreshadowed in Book I of the *Essay*, where Locke had written of those who, “making Men no other than bare Machins . . . take away not only innate, but all Moral Rules whatsoever.” These “must necessarily reject all Principles of Vertue,” Locke continues, “who cannot *put Morality and Mechanism together*; which are not very easy to be reconciled, or made consistent” (*Essay*, 1.3.14). If human beings are machines, whose every action is determined by some antecedent cause beyond their power, then not just free will, but choice and responsibility too, are illusions.

For with our choices, we navigate our freedom, both personal and political; but if we are bare machines, however much we may experience the feeling of being free, our freedom is a mirage. If men are bare machines, it makes little sense to speak of responsibility, moral or otherwise.

If we thought Locke did a number, so to speak, on the idea of conscience, we will be no less surprised to find Locke asserting that the notion of the will, understood as the true agent in us—distinct from the knowledge and understanding (or lack thereof) that informs it—is not just “obscure,” but so deeply confused as to merit being discarded. The question of whether or not the will is free, Locke asserts, is absurd. The will is merely our power to make a choice concerning some future action, and choosing is always informed by reasons, good or bad. Unlike the representative of the tradition in question, Locke asserts that the will is always bound—by necessity—to choose in accordance with one’s understanding, however limited.

About this issue of the will, Locke is rather straightforward. To set up the contrast clearly, we need only recall that for Aquinas, notwithstanding the great emphasis he places on the role of reason and knowledge in moral matters, it is possible for a man to will an action contrary to what he understands to be good and right. In so willing, a man’s will, Aquinas informs us, is “evil.” “By tending toward something that reason proposes as evil, the will takes on the character of evil.” Here is a stronger statement (which we have quoted before): “we need to say without qualification that every will that wills contrary to reason, whether reason be correct or erroneous, is always evil.”<sup>88</sup> Even though in some cases an involuntary ignorance of some particular fact related to the case, for which a man cannot be thought to be responsible, excuses the man who wills an action contrary to his own view of what is right and good, it is clear that

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<sup>88</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, ques. 19, art. 5, in *Law, Morality, and Politics*, 6-7. The title of Question 19 is this: “On the Goodness and Malice of Interior Acts of the Will.”

Aquinas conceives of the will, not merely as a power or ability, but as the agent within the man that determines him, sometimes in accordance with his knowledge and conscience and sometimes out of accordance with these. This phenomenon of willing or choosing in a manner contrary to one's understanding of what he should do is made possible, in Aquinas's view, because the will itself—due to original sin—is, in theological language, “depraved.”

With this conception of the will, we compare Locke in the *Conduct*. Locke finds himself in rather stark contrast to the tradition, as the following quote demonstrates.

The last resort a man has recourse to in the conduct of himself is his understanding. For though we distinguish the faculties of the mind and give the supreme command to the will as to an agent, yet the truth is, the man which is the agent determines himself to this or that voluntary action upon some precedent knowledge or appearance of knowledge in the understanding. . . . whatsoever faculties he employs, the understanding, with such light as it has, well or ill informed, constantly leads . . . the ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them, and to these they all universally pay a ready submission (*Conduct*, § 1).

Two important contrasts with the traditional view are apparent here: first, it is the man, and not the will, which is the agent; and second, the “will,” which Locke conceives as one of the powers or faculties of the man or agent, can in no case choose differently than the understanding that informs it. “Whatsoever faculties he employs, the understanding . . . constantly leads. . . . the ideas and images in men's minds . . . govern them, and to these they all universally pay a ready submission.” Here, then, is a piece of that human nature that survives Locke's polemic against the tradition's more broad and robust conception of that nature: the wills of men are governed necessarily by “the ideas and images in men's minds.” If men act contrary to their best understanding of what they ought to do, then, according to Locke, something other than the “depravity” of the will must explain this deviation.

In the *Essay's* lengthy chapter "Of Power," Locke addresses specifically the relationship between the ideas "understanding" and "will." The "ordinary way of Speaking," says Locke, is

That the *Understanding* and *Will* are two *Faculties* of the mind; a word proper enough, if it be used as all Words should be, so as not to breed any confusion in Mens Thoughts, by being supposed (as I suspect it has been) to stand for some real Beings in the Soul, that performed those Actions of Understanding and Volition. For when we say the *Will* is the commanding and superior Faculty of the Soul; that it is, or is not free; that it determines the inferior Faculties; that it follows the Dictates of the *Understanding*, etc. though these, and the like Expressions, by those that carefully attend to their own *Ideas*, and conduct their Thoughts more by the evidence of Things, than the sound of Words, may be understood in a clear and distinct sense: Yet I suspect, I say, that this way of Speaking of *Faculties*, has misled many into a confused Notion of so many distinct Agents in us, which had their several Provinces and Authorities, and did command, obey, and perform several Actions, as so many distinct Beings; which has been no small occasion of wrangling, obscurity, and uncertainty in Questions relating to them (*Essay*, 2.21.6).

Locke concludes, "so far as a Man has a power to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a Man *Free*" (*Essay*, 2.21.7).

The will for Locke, "signifies nothing but a Power, or Ability, to prefer or chuse: And when the *Will*, under the name of a *Faculty*, is considered, as it is, barely as an ability to do something, the absurdity, in saying it is free, or not free, will easily discover itself" (*Essay*, 2.21.17). The will is just our power to choose and initiate action on the basis of that choice. Men are "free" insofar as they are not inhibited by anything internal or external in carrying out that choice.

What, then, of freedom and "free will"? What explains our own deviations from what we know, or think we know, concerning what we know is best or right for us to do? According to Locke, this failure is mainly one of the understanding, although a properly developed strength of habit also plays a role. Either the understanding such a person has is not really their own, or the man himself, who is the "agent," lacks the internal fortitude or properly developed strength of habit to carry out what his own reason recommends. The failure of habit, however, is not



properly speaking a weakness of the will; it is a lack of liberty. “In all proposals of present Action, *a Man is not at liberty to will, or not to will, because he cannot forbear willing*: Liberty consisting in a power to act, or to forbear acting, and in that only” (*Essay*, 2.21.24). It is not the case that free men choose badly—inconsistently with “the true intrinsick good or ill, that is in things”—because they have depraved wills. Men are only more or less free, according to the extent to which their nature and moral education has made them free: weakness of the will is a failure of understanding and, by implication, habit (insofar as past misunderstandings led us to develop unsound habits, which are then difficult to change). Generally men underestimate their own freedom, too, “for what [a man] can do before a Prince, or a great Man, he can do alone, or in the presence of God, if he will” (*Essay*, 2.21.53). A statement like this would seem to almost entirely eliminate those deviations from the course advised by reason insofar as they are rooted in any lack of power. However that may be, if one lacks the internal fortitude or properly cultivated strength of habit to carry out what his own reason recommends, this is not a lack of willpower, but of a liberty that can, with help and practice, be augmented or diminished.

Locke simply refuses to recognize officially the depravity of the will. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke writes, “when ever any one runs into Danger, we may say, ’tis under the Conduct of Ignorance, or the Command of some more imperious Passion; No body being so much an Enemy to himself, as to come within the reach of Evil out of free choice, and court Danger for Danger’s sake” (§ 115). No one, Locke thinks, chooses voluntarily what he genuinely understands to be evil for himself, unless some greater good outweighs the bad in his understanding of “the true intrinsick good or ill” contained a given case.

Our real and only freedom, Locke insists, is the power to think through a proposed course of action before we act on it. “As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature

lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness; so the care of our selves, that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our *liberty*. The stronger ties, we have, to an unalterable pursuit of happiness in general, which is our greatest good, and which as such our desires always follow, the more are we free from any necessary determination of our *will* to any particular action, and from a necessary compliance with our desire, set upon any particular, and then appearing preferable good, till we have duly examin’d, whether it has a tendency to, or be inconsistent with our real happiness; and therefore till we are as much inform’d upon this enquiry, as the weight of the matter, and the nature of the case demands, we are by the necessity of preferring and pursuing true happiness as our greatest good, obliged to suspend the satisfaction of our desire in particular cases. This is the hinge on which turns the *liberty* of intellectual Beings . . . [namely] that they can *suspend* this prosecution in particular cases, till they have looked before them, and informed themselves, whether that particular thing, which is then proposed, or desired, lie in the way to their main end, and make a real part of that which is their greatest good (*Essay*, 2.21.51-52).

Here is that small sphere of real freedom, the only freedom we genuinely possess, according to Locke. Thanks to this freedom we have the power—and the obligation, insofar as we desire to be happy and not miserable—to think through what we are about to do before we do it. This is the “hinge on which turns the *liberty* of intellectual Beings,” beings like us, who can think.

Locke’s view of human freedom is intimately connected to his politics, which is bound up with the idea of enlightenment—the propagation of knowledge and cultivation of our intellectual faculties: without understanding, there is no real freedom in Locke’s view, personal or political; there is only license. The difference between freedom and license is analogous in Locke to the distinction between order and chaos; as in politics there is no freedom without some kind of law, so in matters of mind there is no freedom without reason (*Second Treatise*, §§ 22, 57).

There are times, however, that a passion is so strong that a man is not at liberty to follow the reasonable course of action.<sup>89</sup> This is why the freedom to act or not act in accordance with one's reason must be understood as variable, as capable of being augmented or diminished according to circumstance. In cases where a man feels a strong passion, it is "fortitude" or "courage," developed by practice and habit, that allows him to do his duty and stay the reasonable course even though some passion inclines him otherwise. For Locke duty and reason are almost synonyms: in following reason, we do our duty; in doing our duty, we follow reason.<sup>90</sup> We cannot do our duty unless we can withstand and regulate our own passions from time to time, and that ability for self-regulation takes training and practice (*Some Thoughts*).

However that may be, the moral puzzle of the depraved will—or, in St. Paul's expression, the problem of why we do the evil we do not want to do—is reduced by Locke to a problem or failure primarily of understanding. It is not the case that a man somehow has the power and freedom to do what reason recommends, and yet does not do it, because of a depraved will; in Locke's view, the will is just a power, and so the explanation made possible by appeal to the depravity of the will would be equivalent to saying that man both has the power, and does not have the power, at the same time. But the fact of the matter stands otherwise: either he does not

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<sup>89</sup> See *Essay*, 2.21.12.

<sup>90</sup> A word about courage: Locke recognizes the courage of soldiers on the battlefield as the first and finest example of genuine courage, but he chooses to emphasize and to praise as admirable a milder kind of courage, too, one more broadly applicable to the whole of a man's life, whether or not he becomes a soldier. "Courage in the Field, and a Contempt of Life in the face of an Enemy," Locke writes, "is not the least part of [courage], nor can be denied the Laurels and Honours always justly due to the Valour of those who venture their Lives for their Country. But yet this is not all. Dangers attack us in other places, besides the Fields of Battle; and though Death be the King of Terrors, yet Pain, Disgrace, and Poverty have frightful looks, able to discompose most Men, whom they seem ready to seize on." *Some Thoughts*, § 115.

understand what he thinks he does, or he does not have, for whatever reason, either the opportunity or the properly cultivated strength rooted in good habits. In other words, either he is ignorant of what it is good for him to do, or he lacks the freedom, internal or external, to do it. The will finds its place in Locke's conception of moral action as an intellectual or spiritual "power"—a power "to order the consideration of any *Idea*, or the forbearing to consider it; or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, and *vice versa* in any particular instance" (*Essay*, 2.21.5). Will is the act of mind by which we choose to do or not do the things that are up to us to do. That is all.

It is interesting to note in this context that Locke does not simply discard the traditional way of speaking about the will. The danger of the traditional moral rhetoric, however—which is greatest in those that fail to "carefully attend to their own *Ideas*"—is that the notion of free will populates the world with an imaginary being that does not exist: "free will." As much as possible, Locke seems to want to eliminate the notion of the free and depraved will from his conception of moral man, and he seems to leave it open whether the tradition errs conceptually or only rhetorically. At any rate, for Locke men are free insofar as they are able to do what they want to do, and willing or volition is the act of choosing what to do with the freedom they have.

In his conception of what it means to will, Locke represents in some respects a return to the ancient Aristotelian understanding of choice. In Aristotle, for example, there is no doctrine of *synderesis*, and moreover there is no such thing as the "will"; instead, we have a teaching about what it means to choose to do something, and a relatively high bar is set for when an action can truly be said to be voluntary. Just as Locke echoes Aristotle in asserting that the senses are the origin of knowledge, so he would side with Aristotle—and against Aquinas—on the issue of

synderesis and innate moral knowledge or principles, even though he speaks of will.<sup>91</sup> For Locke, willing is a direct result of one's cognitive state: as we have seen, he thinks that "the ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them." For Aquinas, the will is depraved; its proper home is the flesh, but depravity has infected the spirit, too. For Locke, the will is not depraved, it just is what it is, a judgment, and a man is either free to follow that judgment or not. To will "erroneously" only means, in Locke's view, to have misunderstood something. It is simply impossible in Locke's view for the will to will something contrary to reason, whether well- or ill-informed.

There are differences, however, between Locke's conception of the will and the notion of choice and voluntariness in the ancients mentioned. To mention briefly two of those: for Locke it is not the case, first, that willing is merely "a desire of reason," for this is to conflate reason and desire. "*Desiring* and *willing* are two distinct Acts of the mind" (*Essay*, 2.21.30).<sup>92</sup> Nor is it simply the case that "once one sees something to be good, one wills it." To the question of what it is that determines the will, Locke answers that it "is not, as is generally supposed, the greater good in view: But some (and for the most part the most pressing) *uneasiness* a Man is at present under" (*Essay*, 2.21.31). There is an additional step, then, between our attraction to some good

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<sup>91</sup> Michael Frede writes, "Plato and Aristotle do not have a notion of a will, since for them a willing, a desire of reason, is a direct result of one's cognitive state: once one sees something to be good, one wills it. And, of course, it is also true that, according to Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, one naturally wills or wants to have cognition or knowledge. So our life seems to turn around, and depend on, our cognitive state." *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, ed. A. A. Long (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 157.

<sup>92</sup> Locke writes, "I find the Will often confounded with several of the Affections, especially *Desire*; and one put for the other, and that by Men, who would not willingly be thought, not to have had very distinct notions of things, and not to have writ very clearly about them. This, I imagine, has been no small occasion of obscurity and mistake in this matter; and therefore is, as much as may be, to be avoided." *Essay*, 2.21.30.

and our doing of it, and that is uneasiness. Pain more powerfully determines the will than does the thought of the good. “We being capable but of one determination of the will to one action at once, the present *uneasiness*, that we are under, does naturally determine the will, in order to that happiness which we all aim at in all our actions” (*Essay*, 2.21.36). Where Aquinas’ spoke of our having synderesis and a natural disposition to pursue the good and avoid evil, Locke speaks of our natural tendency to desire pleasure and to avoid pain.<sup>93</sup>

In a conversation with his friend Molyneux, from whom he requested a review and critique of the *Essay*, Locke defended—or sort of defended, rather—his conception of our liberty against a most telling criticism. In a letter to Locke, Molyneux wrote the following.

The next place I take notice of, as requiring some farther explication, is your discourse about man’s liberty and necessity. This thread seems so wonderfully fine spun in your book, that, at last, the great question of liberty and necessity seems to vanish. And herein you seem to make all sins to proceed from our understandings, or to be against conscience, and not at all from the depravity of our wills. Now it seems harsh to you, that a man will be damned, because he understands no better than he does.<sup>94</sup>

The criticism is telling because it reminds us of the theological dimension of Locke’s argument about the freedom of the will. Molyneux had discerned in Locke an effort to moderate or even wholly eliminate the concept of the depravity of the will. Locke responded in a letter of his own that he, too, wondered whether his argument “bore a little too hard upon man’s liberty.”

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<sup>93</sup> “Things . . . are Good or Evil, only in reference to Pleasure or Pain.” *Essay*, 2.20.2. Locke understands pleasure and pain broadly; it includes even the pleasure of imagination. His argument does not reduce the motives of “a rational creature” to sensual delight in the ordinary understanding of the word. “By Pleasure and Pain, I must be understood to mean of Body or Mind.” *Ibid.* Locke speaks elsewhere—and consistently with his own grounds—of “Pain from captious uninstrusive wrangling, and the pleasure of rational conversation with a Friend, or of well directed study in the search and discovery of Truth.” *Essay*, 2.20.18.

<sup>94</sup> Mr. Molyneux to Mr. Locke, Dublin, Dec. 22, 1692, in Locke, *The Works of John Locke in Nine Volumes*, 12th ed. (London: Thomas Davison, 1824), 8:297-98.

I own freely to you the weakness of my understanding, that though it be unquestionable, that there is omnipotence and omniscience in God, our maker, and I cannot have a clearer perception of any thing, than that I am free; yet I cannot make freedom in man consistent with omnipotence and omniscience in God, though I am as fully as persuaded of both, as of any truths I most firmly assent to. And, therefore, I have long since given off the consideration of that question, resolving all into this short conclusion, that if it be possible for God to make a free agent, then man is free, though I see not the way of it.<sup>95</sup>

Locke, for his part, must have thought it did not bear “a little too hard,” for he decided to leave the argument in “Of Power” as it was in light of this critique. The sins of man do not proceed, in Locke’s view, from the depravity of the will, but from ignorance.

In his analysis of human freedom and his critique of the idea of “free will,” Locke faced two alternatives: on the one hand was the idea, firmly rooted in the tradition, of the depraved will; this idea explained how it could be that free man used his freedom sinfully and shamefully. On the other, quickly gaining ground in accordance with the rise of the new science, was the view that men might be like fancy clocks not yet fully understood—complicated enough, but nevertheless programmed: men no more choose to do or not do something than they choose who their mother will be. Locke tries to steer a reasonable and plausible middle course between these two alternatives. He wishes to preserve the freedom necessary for moral responsibility, but to acknowledge that it is fairly small and rooted in our ability to think and examine before we act. Undermining the traditional conception of the free and depraved will, but preserving the freedom necessary for the perception of and voluntary adherence to moral rules distilled by reason working through sense experience, is, I suggest, what Locke tries to do in “Of Power.” Molyneux had called the thread of Locke’s argument in this chapter “so wonderfully fine spun” that “the great question of liberty and necessity seems to vanish.” Indeed, in “Of Power,” Locke

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<sup>95</sup> Mr. Locke to Mr. Molyneux, Oates, Jan. 20, 1692-3, in Locke, *Works*, 8:305.

attempts to artfully reconcile “morality” with “mechanism.” It must be admitted, however, that this reconciliation takes place on the grounds more amenable to the new mechanical philosophy rather than those defended by the traditional adherents of Christian natural law.

Though the sphere in which man exercises his freedom is, for Locke, on the whole rather small, it nevertheless preserves the possibility for morality. In his final expression in “Of Power” of what the liberty of man is, we find that the foundation of this freedom is the same as the foundation that supports the origin and acquisition of our ideas: experience.

For the mind having in most cases, as is evident in Experience, a power to *suspend* the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires, and so all, one after another, is at liberty to consider the objects of them; examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others. In this lies the liberty Man has; and from the not using of it right comes all that variety of mistakes, errors, and faults which we run into, in the conduct of our lives, and our endeavours after happiness; whilst we precipitate the determination of our *wills*, and engage too soon before due *Examination* (*Essay*, 2.21.47).

Lockean liberty at the level of the individual (as distinguished from political liberty) is the freedom to think—and think something through as much as we can—before we act. The freedom to think on this or that, and to act or not act accordingly, is all the more freedom that is necessary to think through and act upon the moral rules that preserve our lives and liberties. Though it sounds trite, this freedom is even enough, Locke insists, for “all that we can, or ought to do, in pursuit of our happiness,” for it is “not a fault, but a perfection of our nature to desire, will, and act according to the last result of a fair *Examination* (*Essay*, 2.21.47).

### Conclusion: The Political Bearing of Locke’s Revisions of “Moral Man”

Locke’s polemic against innate principles and his attempted revisions of our moral understanding of ourselves are powerful; but what is their purpose? What is at stake in the



appeal to innate or natural principles of moral and political right that makes it so important for Locke to mount an attack on these ideas, which were so foundational to the Christian natural law teaching and especially to Aquinas? To this question we now turn. The tradition had appealed to nature, to the nature of things, in order to advance its claims. It has now become apparent that in Locke's view nature herself, including human nature—understood from within, on the basis of experience alone—does not and cannot support many of the moral, political, and theological claims that had been raised on the traditional understanding of nature. For Locke, nature points in directions not always consistent with a Biblical view.

The three main instances of this addressed in this chapter were the ideas of innate moral principles, conscience, and free will. In each of these cases, Locke finds little actual basis in nature to support what is claimed about them by the tradition. Concerning the will, we found a Locke who is no longer concerned with the goodness or depravity of the will, still less with its quality of being “free,” but who is concerned with the soundness of a man's understanding. The question of the freedom of the will and its relationship to the omniscience and omnipotence of God is replaced with the question of what a man understands, including what he understands of God. Such a move could not have failed to prepare the arguments Locke makes on other occasions for the desirability of universal enlightenment. If ignorance, and not the depraved will, is the root of our collective moral failings, then the propagation of knowledge, and not salvation, ought to be our prime political concern. This is so even though the acquisition of knowledge includes, as it does for Locke (as we will see in chapter five), the study of theology.

While it is true that Locke relies in part on religion in order to make his case for the politically sound or healthy regime that he calls limited government, which we have come to call

liberalism, the first priority, as Locke's puts it in his *Second Treatise*, is to know the law of nature. Access to knowledge of the law of nature, as Locke understands it, does not require that one first be a religious man. There is a law in the nature of things, as it were, which concerns, and obligates a man—and contains “the principles and precepts of virtue for the conduct of his life” (*Some Thoughts*, § 185)—insofar as he is a man, and not a follower of this or that particular religion or faith. In the *Second Treatise*, these laws are encapsulated in the phrase “law of nature”; and the prerequisite for access to that law is reason. The law of nature “teaches all mankind, *who will but consult it,*” and “it is certain there is such a law, and that too as intelligible and plain *to a rational creature, and a studier of that law,* as the positive laws of commonwealths” (§§ 6, 12; my emphases). Consulting, studying, examining, weighing, deliberating, judging: here are those activities in and through which we find, and contemplate for our benefit, that law. The law of nature is derived, first, from reason; nay, more than this: the law of nature, for all practical purposes, “*is reason*” (*Second Treatise*, § 6; my emphasis). So, our prime political concern ought to be, Locke suggests, the concern for enlightenment.

Locke reduces conscience to opinion, to a kind of opining. No longer a sign of an innate disposition to be and do good, for Locke the conscience as opinion is set against the idea of probable knowledge as guide, which reason acquires by working through experience; the conscience loses its traditional moral grandeur. And finally, concerning the idea of innate moral (and theoretical) principles as the starting points for moral and philosophic reflection, Locke asserts that those who deny the possibility of reason's finding a moral law by working through experience are mistaken. There is no inwardly inscribed set of moral laws for men to follow, but they may indeed be there, in the nature of things, to be discovered. These arguments highlight

the necessity, as Locke sees it, for reason to rule in both the private lives of individuals as well as the collective life of the political community.

We must be careful as we describe Locke's argument here, however. Locke, like the tradition before him and especially like Aquinas, does appeal to nature in order to advance his own principles of moral and political right. His attempted refutation of innatism is not, therefore, an admonition to quit the appeal to nature for the support of moral and political principles. Jeremy Waldron writes, "An awful lot of the *Second Treatise* just *is* a presentation of natural law; it adds up to a natural law argument, roughly demonstrative in form, on issues such as property, punishment, and politics."<sup>96</sup> Locke, too, is a natural law thinker, even though he indicates his distance from the traditional understanding of that law by substituting the phrase "law of nature" for "natural law." For Locke, the law of nature functions as more than a rhetorical device. If we are to shed light on the political and theoretical aims of the polemic against innatism and the revisions Locke defends in our ideas of human freedom and free will, we must conclude that it is not the appeal to nature in itself that Locke finds objectionable.

What Locke finds so objectionable in the tradition, I suggest, is the manner in which the appeal to nature is made. The appeal to nature as advanced by the tradition takes for granted the reality and correctness of certain of its fundamental assumptions, assumptions that cannot be made on the basis of human reason alone. Locke had written, "I think they equally forsake the Truth, who running into the contrary extreams, either affirm an innate Law, or deny that there is a Law, knowable by the light of Nature; i.e. without the help of positive Revelation" (*Essay*, 1.3.13). The appeal to nature advanced by the tradition turns into political and religious

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<sup>96</sup> Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 95.

orthodoxy that, upon consideration, is undermined by the indefensibility of its own claim to be natural. The method by which Locke suggests the law of nature might be known—reason working through sense experience—cannot proceed by taking for granted any theological or philosophical assumptions that are not rooted in, and made known by, experience. In an echo of Romans 1:19-20, Locke insists that God, too—whose existence and providence is necessary for traditional natural law to possess binding force—can in some manner be discovered by reason working through experience, even if His full nature and all His attributes cannot be.

In light of Locke's flirtation with the sufficiency of reason for the discovery and propagation of moral principles, the claims of the tradition and the manner of their defense—which bolsters its appeal to nature by the appeal to the authority, and vice versa—are, I suggest, what concerned Locke most. The appeal to authority prevents the appeal to reason. "If it be the privilege of innate Principles, to be received upon their own Authority, without examination, I know not what may not be believed, or how any one's *Principles* can be questioned" (*Essay*, 1.3.27). It is not that principles in general, moral and otherwise, ought to be questioned for questioning's sake—that is absurd—but that, as Locke puts it, "we should not judge of things by men's opinions, but of opinions by things" (*Conduct*, § 24). We open our minds—we question things—not in order to open our minds indefinitely, as if it were possible to make our way through life without having any real opinions—but to find the truth about things. The appeal to the authority made by the tradition displaces the appeal to reason and thus, by implication, the appeal of each man to his right to use and be guided by his own reason. And without this right, there is no defending the principle of consent at the heart of Lockean politics.

According to Locke, if we are to learn from nature we must learn from it carefully. To speak of what nature shows or teaches by appealing to those principles on which all men agree is to craft an argument for natural right that is not only not true to the evidence available from experience—because not all men agree in their principles—but also susceptible to being abused by the following kind of warped logic. “The Principles which all mankind allow for true, are innate; those that Men of right Reason admit, are the Principles allowed by all mankind; we and those of our mind, are Men of reason; therefore we agreeing, our Principles are innate.” Locke immediately comments that this kind of logic, awfully tempting to the vain, is “a very pretty way of arguing, and a short cut to Infallibility” (*Essay*, 1.3.20). One cheats by cherry picking what reasonable men do, and do not, think: the study of the law of nature is a long one.

When Men have found some general Propositions that could not be doubted of, as soon as understood, it was, I know, *a short and easy way to conclude them innate*. This being once received, it eased the lazy from the pains of search, and stopp’d the enquiry of the doubtful, concerning all that was once stiled innate: And it was of no small advantage to those who affected to be Masters and Teachers, to make this the Principle of *Principles*, That Principles must not be questioned: For having once established this Tenet, That there are innate Principles, it put their Followers upon a necessity of receiving some Doctrines as such; which was to take them off from the use of their own Reason and Judgment, and put them upon believing and taking them upon trust, without farther examination: In which posture of blind Credulity, they might be more easily governed by, and made useful to some sort of Men, who had the skill and office to principle and guide them (*Essay*, 1.4.24).

In this passage, the anti-authoritarian side of Locke is on full display. Here is the real problem with the appeal to “what all men think” concerning what is naturally right. There is not only a contrast but also an opposition between the appeal to reason and the appeal to orthodoxy. But the anti-authoritarian Locke is never anarchistic, never a fan of license, and ever a proponent of freedom, which is not possible without a law. Ordinary individuals possess the intellectual

resources that would allow them, with time and practice, to discern for themselves the principles by which they think they might best govern their lives and live with others.

In Locke's view, the truth, James Gibson writes, must "make good its claim by an appeal to the intellectual faculties of the individual."<sup>97</sup> While there is, then, in Locke's philosophy proper no room for moral principles "written on the heart of man,"<sup>98</sup> there is room for the reason of almost every individual to grasp the basic rules of living well and living together. Locke is the champion of individuality not so much in the sense of diversity and eccentricity (though in great measure these also can be defended on his grounds) as in the right all men have and must exercise to "deal fairly with their own understandings and their own souls" (*Conduct*, § 35). The appeal to nature and authority made by the tradition prevents the independence of mind that is both necessary for enlightenment and the birthright of all persons who are not born radically intellectually deformed. As we shall see in the next chapter, Locke is certain that ordinary minds

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<sup>97</sup> "By seeking to rest the certainty of its first principles upon the extraneous support of an incomprehensible matter of fact, and by its acceptance of universal consent as the ultimate criterion of truth, it violated his fundamental conviction, that truth must make good its claim by an appeal to the intellectual faculties of the individual. Too often, especially in its application to theological and practical questions, it only replaced the appeal to the authority of Aristotle and the formulated dogmas of the Church by an appeal to a general agreement, which was in practice equivalent to the authority of current opinions and ecclesiastical prejudices. It not only gave a false account of the nature and source of certainty, but it served as an encouragement to the greatest of all hindrances to knowledge, viz. the lazy acquiescence in the opinions of others, by which men avoid the trouble and exertion involved in the right use of their intellectual powers. Throughout the discussion Locke opposes to the theory of innateness the view that knowledge is only to be won by the active employment of our faculties, in 'the consideration of things.' It is only by this means that we can distinguish the evidence of truth from the mere influence of irrational custom. Without this labour the characteristics of genuine knowledge are wanting, even though our assent may be given to that which is in itself true. . . . In this insistence upon the necessity for an active appropriation of truth by the individual, we have, I believe, the deepest motive of Locke's polemic." Gibson, *Locke's Theory of Knowledge*, 36-37.

<sup>98</sup> Consider *Second Treatise*, § 11, in this light.

no less than extraordinary ones have the capacity for this independence. And this capacity for independence—for making progress in our understanding, especially of the law of nature—lies at the foundation of our right to freedom and therefore also of Locke's view of natural right.

### Chapter Three: Locke's Defense of "Native Rustic Reason"<sup>99</sup>

Locke is the first great modern philosopher of "freedom."<sup>100</sup> For Locke freedom is not only a political ideal, but also an intellectual one.

When a man once perceives how far [his ideas] agree or disagree one with another, he will be able to judge of what other people say and will not need to be led by the arguments of others . . . and thus he will stand upon his own legs and know by his own understanding (*Conduct*, § 15).

And he also says, in the *Essay*, "liberty, without understanding (if it could be) would signify nothing" (2.21.67). For Locke, knowledge and freedom are intimately linked. He would have men cultivate independence of mind in order that they might stand upon their "own legs," know by their "own understanding, and not be led "by the arguments of others." Machiavelli had spoken of the virtue of relying on "one's own arms" in the acquisition of "new principalities";<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> This phrase is Locke's, and it comes from the *Essay*. "I am apt to think," writes Locke, "that he who shall employ all the force of his reason only in brandishing of syllogisms, will discover very little of that mass of knowledge, which lies yet concealed in the secret recesses of nature; and which, I am apt to think, *native rustic reason* (as it formerly has done) is likelier to open a way to, and add to the common stock of mankind, rather than any scholastic proceeding by the strict rule of mode and figure." *Essay*, 4.27.6; my emphasis.

<sup>100</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, too, is a great modern philosopher of freedom, but temporally he follows Locke. While in certain respects Rousseau is one of Locke's—and liberalism's—most formidable critics, he also borrows, reworks, and builds on many of the premises of Lockean political philosophy; he especially builds on that of the importance, both for politics and for individuals, of freedom. In *Emile*, Rousseau calls freedom "the first of all goods." *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 84.

<sup>101</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 2nd ed., trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University Press, 1998), 21.



Locke, who according to some is a true disciple of Machiavelli, speaks of a man's standing upon "his own legs" and "knowing by his own understanding."<sup>102</sup>

Being "led by the arguments of others" carries its own risks for Locke, much like those that Machiavelli thought attended a prince whose principality is acquired "by others' arms and fortune." "These persons," Machiavelli writes, "rest simply on the will and fortune of whoever has given a state to them, which are two very inconstant and unstable things."<sup>103</sup> Neither men's wills nor fortune are to be relied upon. The same is true for Locke in matters of the mind: "We should not judge of things by men's opinions, but of opinions by things" (*Conduct*, § 24). Both authors prefer self-reliance, where and insofar as possible, to trust in other human beings: it would be best if we could rely on our own arms and virtue both in the pursuit of new states (Machiavelli) and on our own understanding in the pursuit of the truth (Locke). The kind of independence of mind that Locke would have men develop for themselves would prevent their being led astray by others—others who may have reasons for imposing themselves as teachers, or contesting the truth about important matters, that have little to do with a simple love of the truth and a desire that it be correctly understood.

Locke does not understand independence of mind to come naturally to human beings; rather, what he thinks comes naturally is a kind of self-assimilation to the dominant opinions of

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<sup>102</sup> In his *Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), ix, Peter Schouls suggests that the cultivation of this inner freedom and independence of mind would be in fundamental harmony with Locke's view that human beings are by their natures "rational and free." We must add that Locke did not, as did Rousseau, desire in the name of freedom to prevent all and every kind of dependence on others. Nathan Tarcov suggests that Locke was more concerned "to prevent a desire for mastery over others . . . than to prevent all awareness of dependence on others' wills." *Locke's Education*, 93.

<sup>103</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 26.

one's family, one's friends, one's country, one's age—in other words, and in short, to other people's opinions. Some of this assimilation is inevitable, especially when we are young: “We are all a sort of camelions,” Locke writes, that “take a tincture from things near us” (*Thoughts*, § 67). Some of that assimilation, however, is pressed upon us throughout our whole lives: “We are taught to clothe our minds as we do our bodies after the fashion in vogue, and it is accounted fantasticalness or something worse not to do so” (*Conduct*, § 34). Social pressures to conform our thoughts and beliefs to those of others are strong: we find shelter in the opinions of others, and there is safety in numbers. It takes a kind of courage to deviate from the received opinions.

Locke, however, would teach men who have reached the “age of reason” to counteract this subtle and powerfully magnetic felt need to conform and agree, a need that, when met, might easily be mistaken for the possession of truth. “I do not remember,” Locke writes, “wherever God delivered his oracles by the multitude, or nature her truths by the herd” (*Conduct*, § 24). According to Locke, a man ought instead, and for his own sake, to “examine [his tenets] with a perfect indifference.” Locke continues, in this same passage, “This I own is no easy thing to do, but I am not enquiring the easy way to opinion, but the right way to truth, which they must follow who will deal fairly with their own understandings and their own souls” (*Conduct*, § 35). We treat ourselves best, Locke thinks, if we inquire for ourselves into the truth of things, especially into our own principal beliefs and opinions.

While Locke's philosophy inspires and encourages independence of mind, his liberal politics requires, and therefore defends, the doctrine of majority rule. How, then, are these related? Many questions arise. To what degree should those who in intellectual matters stand upon their “own legs” concern themselves with politics? Should those who understand also rule?

If they do not, should governors of states concern themselves with those who seek to know by their “own understanding,” or leave them alone? Is an enlightened citizenry necessary for the preservation of political freedom? Is political freedom a prerequisite for intellectual freedom? And how, after all, does one go about “standing upon one’s own legs” in matters of the mind?

Just as Machiavelli’s vigorous call for the rebirth of ancient Italian virtue is meant to initiate the moral and political overcoming of corrupt Italian politics and impotent Italian lords, so through a new “way of ideas,” as some called it,<sup>104</sup> Locke hopes to further, and in some ways to begin anew, the overcoming of a kind of darkness or prejudice in the minds of Europe’s elite. That prejudice, I will argue in this chapter, consists in the powerful belief that the ordinary intellect possessed by ordinary men is by nature deficient, and deficient in such a way as to blind them to what is true and good and to make their acquisition of the moral and political capacities for citizenship in a self-governing community unlikely; as a consequence, ordinary men must be led morally, politically, and spiritually by other, wiser men. But Locke advances exactly the opposite in his major philosophical and educational writings. “What then, can grown men never be improved or enlarged in their understandings? I say not so” (*Conduct*, § 6); “God has not been so sparing to Men to make [men] barely two-legged Creatures, and left it to *Aristotle* to make them Rational” (*Essay*, 4.17.4). For Locke, ordinary men possess the requisite capacities and intelligence for the privilege of freedom and of governing their own lives.

Whether one looked to the divine politics of Sir Robert Filmer or the politics of sovereignty set forth and defended by Hobbes, the most needful thing for ordinary citizens to know and to believe was that they ought to obey their rulers. Only in believing this, it was

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<sup>104</sup> The phrase is Bishop Stillingfleet’s, who used it to describe Locke’s theory of knowledge.

argued, would the political community be well-ordered and remain peaceful and safe; only in believing this, therefore, did individuals have a chance of being happy in this world. Locke's political philosophy, however, embodies and represents a quite different, and also a riskier, moral and political ideal: self-ownership and the individual right to self-rule. This ideal required Locke to stake out a position almost wholly different than Filmer's, and from time to time Locke felt the need to defend this position against powerful Hobbesian arguments as well.

The natural right to freedom in the hands of ordinary people with ordinary intellects is, in a nutshell, the (ongoing) modern experiment. We owe the most powerful theoretical defense of this questionable blessing in favor of the common man and his "native rustic reason"—a blessing that includes the idea of a private sphere, in which we permit ourselves, if we have the requisite fortitude, to live and believe differently than others or the majority do—to Locke.<sup>105</sup> Here, it is

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<sup>105</sup> Andrzej Rapaczynski, in his *Nature and Politics: Liberalism in the Philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 14, 120-21, who finds Locke to be, of the three, "the only unqualified liberal," understands "Locke's defense of the liberal point of view to be one of the most sophisticated theories in the history of political thought." "The philosophical foundations upon which [Locke's "political views"] rest," however, are apt to be misunderstood because "very little of these foundations has found its way into Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*." Rapaczynski explains that, unless readers "dig deeper by going to the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and to some other writings," they will not find Locke's examination of "the presuppositions of his individualistic philosophy." He explains the most important of those as follows. "The most controversial point of Locke's theory of man is that in which he tries to show that neither man's rationality nor his moral agency implies a constitutive reference to the human community. The relation of man to his *natural* environment, be it in the context of his acquisition of knowledge or of his transformation of the environment through the process of production (appropriation), replaces to a large extent the relation of man to man. It is precisely at this point that the foundations of Locke's political individualism are established because the absence of a truly constitutive [human community] means that whatever dignity a man has or acquires is largely independent of his interaction with others, and the community loses one important source of its claims on his allegiance: unlike the Aristotelian citizen, the Lockean man always has exit from society as an at least theoretically available alternative, and it cannot be argued that such an exit is a moral suicide or puts him outside the class of beings to whom others have moral obligations."

thought, men of ordinary intellect and their interests can thrive and flourish. Locke's "unpolitical politics" creates the stage on which "great men" and their grand political visions, as well as the city itself as an object of worship and devotion, are no longer the main focus; Locke's politics have a "leveling" effect. Insofar as our modern world is the product of a modern kind of philosophizing, an evaluation of Locke's argument for freedom and "enlightenment" helps us to take stock of the value of freedom for us.

For Locke, freedom and reason go together. Reason allows us to perceive the rules or laws according to which we, being free men, guide the actions and choices that are ours to do and make. Accordingly, students of Locke are led to consider the relation of reason and freedom within his thought. Locke bequeathes a political philosophy in which freedom, both personal and political, is the most prized and honored good. Yet Locke insists, as we have seen, that "without understanding, liberty (if it could be) would signify nothing" (*Essay*, 2.21.67). The key thought here seems to be that without understanding we are not truly free and that without understanding our liberty would become a meaningless farce. In fact, to be free, but without understanding, is equivalent to the "liberty to ramble in perfect darkness." Locke writes,

If a man sees what would do him good or harm, what would make him happy or miserable, without being able to move himself one step towards or from it, what is he the better for seeing? And he that is at liberty to ramble in perfect darkness, what is his liberty better, than if he were driven up and down as a bubble by the force of the wind?

A certain kind of understanding is required for freedom, if that freedom is to distinguish our actions in the world from the movements of the bubble blown this way and that, willy-nilly, by mechanistic forces beyond its control. What makes a free man different from a machine whose actions are all compulsory—like a fancy clock, say—is "the power to act or forbear according to the direction of Thought" (*Essay*, 2.21.13). Freedom and goal-oriented choice belong together.

This capacity for this kind of understanding and the power to follow it, which make real freedom possible and worthwhile, ordinarily have a natural beginning and growth. Notice, in the following passage, what Locke must understand by “the ordinary course of nature.”

If, through defects that may happen out of the ordinary course of nature, any one comes not to such a degree of reason, wherein he might be supposed capable of knowing the law, and so living within the rules of it, he is never capable of being a free man, he is never let loose to the disposal of his own will (because he knows no bounds to it, has not understanding, its proper guide) (*Second Treatise*, § 60).

Here, the ordinary course of nature is one in which a boy arrives to a state of maturity “wherein he might be supposed capable of knowing the law.” This is the usual and typical development; without much effort and as a result of the mere passage of time the capacity to understand grows and develops. But this merely natural development is not yet enough, in Locke’s view, to justify genuine freedom; for the capacity for knowledge, and knowing, are two quite different things.

Locke begins the *Conduct* by calling attention to this distinction between the capacity to know on the one hand, and knowledge on the other, by distinguishing between a false or “ill-informed” and a true or “well-informed” understanding. An ill-informed understanding, which is deficient not in capacity, but in content, leads the one who possesses it by a false light. To be led by a false light—an illusion, say, or a deceptive appearance or misconception about something important—is only possible for those who already possess the capacity to understand.

The man which is the agent determines himself to this or that voluntary action upon some precedent knowledge or appearance of knowledge in the understanding. No man ever sets himself about anything but upon some view or other, which serves him for a reason for what he does. And whatsoever faculties he employs, the understanding, with such light as it has, well or ill-informed, constantly leads. . . . the ideas and images in men’s minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them . . . it is therefore of the highest concernment that great care should be taken of the understanding to conduct it right in the search for knowledge and in the judgments it makes (*Conduct*, § 1).

The beginning of the *Conduct* shows us, then, that for Locke the prerequisite for real freedom is more than the merely natural growth in which the capacity for thought and understanding develop. The two passages quoted above nicely juxtapose the “ordinary course of nature” that produces a capacity for thought with the “great care” that brings about the “well-informed”—as distinguished from an “ill-informed”—understanding. Nature gives the capacity, but not the knowledge or sound judgment; those we must acquire or be helped to acquire ourselves.

We are also shown something more by Locke’s opening in the *Conduct*. If it is true that “the ideas and images in men’s minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them,” it really is “of the highest concernment” that those ideas be reasonable and true. If in whatever we “set ourselves about” we are led by some understanding of the rightness and goodness of our goal and our means to it, it really is important that our understanding be correct. Peter Anstey comments, “It is the governing of both opinions and actions that are Locke’s overriding concerns in the *Essay* and the *Conduct*. And these two enterprises are intimately related; for it is only by governing opinions that one is able correctly to employ the will in right conduct.”<sup>106</sup> For Locke, opinions concerning our conduct are to voluntary action what causes are to effects. We may distinguish, then, between the ordinary capacity for understanding and the lack of that capacity;

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<sup>106</sup> Peter R. Anstey, “John Locke on the Understanding,” in *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Peter R. Anstey (Oxford: University Press, 2013), 315. Anstey goes on to note that “Once we are apprised of these normative aims for Locke’s study of the understanding, the epistemological content of the *Essay* can be set in a clearer light . . . as part of a project of ‘epistemic hygiene’ that will facilitate the correct conduct of the understanding. . . . which, in turn, will facilitate right conduct of the person. . . . [These] normative aims . . . also help explain a number of features of the positive part of his project. For example, his doctrine of sagacity, his repeated emphasis on the love of truth and, more generally, the pervasive nature of the deontological language in Locke’s exploration of the regulation of our assent and opinions. . . . And yet,” Anstey complains, “neither the motivations behind Locke’s prescriptions and proscriptions for the conduct of the understanding and for our lives . . . have excited Locke’s commentators down the centuries.” Ibid., 315-16.

on this distinction hangs the right to freedom. But we must also immediately distinguish between the “well-informed” understanding and an “ill-informed” one; on this distinction hangs the use—and therefore the preservation—of that freedom.

In Locke’s world, everyone who is not radically deformed by nature inherits freedom as a fundamental political right—including, contra Aristotle, “the illiterate and condemned mechanick (a name of disgrace)” (*Essay*, 3.10.9). Locke’s concern with the progress of understanding available to the ordinary intellect (“enlightenment”) makes, therefore, a good deal, in fact a great deal, of sense. The natural development of the capacity to understand is not quite enough to make freedom a truly reasonable privilege; the lowly mechanic of which Locke speaks has the natural capacity to read, but he lacks that skill. It is not that those who cannot read cannot think—on the contrary; but reading allows and teaches a man to think so far beyond those who cannot that the illiterate are put at great intellectual and political disadvantage. The improvement in understanding of which Locke speaks would eliminate the mechanic’s illiteracy, which is a great obstacle to learning for him. It is not that Locke envisions a world where there are no mechanics, but one in which there are no illiterate mechanics, and thus where there is no more contempt for men who are illiterate, mechanics or not. Locke aims at a new world, a new kind of principality as it were, where, illiteracy having been eliminated, it is not so easy to hold another class of men in contempt or to say that they require a “leader.”

One of the contributing factors to poor rule or leadership is the need for that rule or leadership at all. The improvement of the understanding will help men rule themselves to a much greater degree. “The first . . . and great use of liberty,” Locke writes, “is to hinder blind precipitancy; the principal exercise of freedom is to stand still, open the eyes, look about, and



take a view of the consequence of what we are going to do, as much as the weight of the matter requires” (*Essay*, 2.21.67). This is the analysis that is crucial to ordinary free men in free societies; this is the first and most important use of one’s freedom, and the one to which the ability to read can so greatly contribute. Men who read well can be more than pawns: they can be their own men, stand on their “own legs,” and know by their “own understanding.”

Still, given Locke’s great emphasis on the progress of the understanding in knowledge and its relationship to the use of freedom, and given, too, his awareness that men make this progress with such varying degrees of success—the “contemned mechanick,” even having acquired basic literacy, is in matters of understanding still far from the “country gentleman” who gets “Latin and learning in the university”—is it not strange that Locke speaks of freedom as a natural right, as a right that belongs equally to all men by nature? From the sweating day-laborer to the leisured aristocrat, in Locke everyone inherits freedom as a matter of course. Why should this be, especially if the understanding plays so crucial a role in guiding and directing freedom, and if different men make such different progress in their understanding?

If Locke were truly consistent in his liberalism, would he not provide the intellectual grounds for a defense of rule by an intellectual elite—of philosophers, priests, and scientists, for example, who, being most knowledgable, would know best how ordinary men ought to use their freedom? Would it not follow, precisely if Locke is right about the necessity of sound understanding for the value of freedom, that those who understand more be of greater worth to a regime devoted to freedom, and that they ought to merit rule more than those who understand less? Yet we know that Locke defended freedom as the natural right of all men, both gifted and ordinary. This, then, is the puzzle: why, according to Locke, do all men have the same natural

right to a freedom that they may use very differently and more or less reasonably? Why did Locke think his liberalism—his politics of individual freedom—was politically sensible?

The remarkable fact about the presentation of Locke's politics in the *Second Treatise*, at least from what one might call his own perspective—that of the philosopher—is that wise men, and hence wisdom itself, seem to matter so little for the creation and the longevity of a stable political freedom. One can see the diminished political importance of this category of human types from the discussion of the natural state from which political institutions, according to Locke, ought to remove all men, the “state of nature.” Locke's teaching on the state of nature provides the foundation for his politics of limited government. Let us turn to this “state of nature,” then, and see what for Locke was the most urgent problem of politics and its relation to the traditional category “wise man” or “philosopher.”

#### The Law of Nature in the State of Nature

Here is Locke's famous formulation of the law of nature and its most fundamental teaching: “The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.” In this presentation of the law of nature in the *Second Treatise* his teaching rests in part on a religious foundation. He continues: “for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker . . . they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not another's pleasure” (*Second Treatise*, § 6). Our question here is: what is the power of the law of nature—that is, “reason”—in a state without a government that enforces the basic rules? Can we

be reasonable in such a state? As Locke understands it, the answer is “probably not”—or at least “not for long”—for two reasons. The first and primary has to do with our self-love and interest; the second, with the fact that we must labor in order to know the dictates of natural law.

The purpose of politics, according to Locke, is to remove—and to keep—individuals from the state of nature. It is the purpose of politics to remove men from the state of nature because the first and most profound problem of politics according to Locke in the *Second Treatise* is the inability of men in the state of nature—the state of affairs that obtains whenever there is no deliberate and systematic enforcement of the law—to follow what he calls the “law of nature.” Why are men unable to follow the law of nature in the state of nature? Is it because the law of nature is a made-up fiction, like a fairy tale? Influential interpreters of Locke’s thought have claimed something like this.<sup>107</sup> Or is it because the law of nature is real, but somehow ineffective as a measure or guide, like a map we possess but cannot read? And if we do possess such an “unreadable” map, are we unable to decipher its guidance because it is too hard in principle to read? Or because we lack the skill? Or because we do not, owing to some reason or other, bring ourselves even to make the effort? Why is it so difficult for men who are so radically free, as men are in the state of nature, to follow the law of nature?

There are two main statements of the law of nature in Locke’s discussion of the state of nature; let us examine them both. The first we have just seen: “reason,” Locke says, is the law of nature: the law of nature is the voice of reason. And reason “teaches all mankind, who will but

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<sup>107</sup> Leo Strauss, in *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 202-251, for example, makes the argument that for Locke himself the law of nature is, strictly speaking, a kind of salutary fiction. There Strauss argues that Locke only recognized a “partial law of nature,” which is “limited to what “political happiness”—a “good of mankind in this world”—evidently requires.” Ibid., 214.

consult it.” It appears from this statement that any man who would know the law of nature—to learn thereby the rule(s) according to which he may guide his conduct toward himself and others—need only “consult” that law inwardly. Apparently no one is condemned to ignorance of the moral rules that might usefully and advantageously guide his conduct in this life. On the contrary, not only are such rules available, but understanding them is so far from being a matter of whether one is intellectually gifted that one need only “consult” the law of nature to grasp its truth. It is not complicated, Locke implies: seek, and you shall find.

One might object, however, that it is more complicated. One might object that if each consults the law of nature inwardly a great many “laws” will be perceived, that this will lead men to live according to different rules, and that chaos will result. True, in this state the only laws that individuals have available to them are the ones they might access through their own private reason; as of yet there has been no public and official promulgation of the law. But Locke does not think so little of reason, nor does he use it as a code word for the prejudices, passions, and misperceptions that so often attend individual and idiosyncratic judgments. The law of nature, which is reason, “obliges every one” and “teaches all mankind.” If you and I are similar, and if we are in a similar situation, then reason will advise us in similar ways. Moreover, reason teaches us that we are fundamentally similar outside the law: we are all “equal and independent”; we have no right to harm others where we can help it; we are all the “workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker”; we are “furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature.” On these foundations reason teaches that no man is by nature subordinate to another in the way that, say, a horse or dog is naturally subordinate to its human rider or master (in Locke’s view there is no such thing as a natural slave). At any rate, the reasonable

course of action is not a function of shifting and idiosyncratic perception. If it is not perceived the problem is not in the nature of things, or in our stars, but in ourselves.

Even so, there is a problem concerning the promulgation and enforcement of the law. A law which is perceived is not necessarily a law that is obeyed; a law that is merely perceived, but not obeyed or enforced, is highly ineffective. “The law of nature,” Locke writes in the *Second Treatise* (§ 7), “would, as all other laws that concern men in this world, be in vain, if there were nobody that in the state of nature had a power to execute that law, and thereby preserve the innocent, and restrain offenders.” Accordingly, in order that “the law of nature be observed, which willeth the peace and preservation of all mankind, the execution of the law of nature is, in that state, put into every man’s hands, whereby every one has a right to punish the transgressors of that law to such a degree as may hinder its violation.” Now, if men have a right, a genuine right, to punish violators of the law of nature, this right implies that the law of nature has been duly promulgated. For it would hardly be fair to punish a man for a law of which he was ignorant. How do we know, then, that men perceive the law of nature or listen to the voice of reason, which, Locke claims, would speak to them if they listened? And moreover, how do we know that the law of nature has been enforced against violators correctly? To say that men have a right to enforce the law of nature themselves when no government exists to enforce the laws for them is not to say, of course, that men will enforce it appropriately or efficiently. Indeed, in the activity of punishment it is possible as much as in any other activity that men may deviate from the law of nature or ignore the voice of reason. The problem in Locke’s state of nature is that interest and self-love distort our understanding of the law of nature, especially insofar as they lead us to enforce the prescriptions of the law of nature contrary to that law itself.

Let us focus for a moment on the problem of punishment. Locke's second statement of the law of nature occurs in the context of such a discussion. Self-love and interest play their part in distorting what men think of as a just punishment and affect the spirit in which punishment is (or is not) carried out. For example, weaker men may be afraid to try to punish the stronger men who have violated their rights; in abstaining from seeking to punish, the law of nature is not enforced. Or suppose the victims succeed in subduing the stronger; it is still not easy, where our own rights have been violated, to seek reparation from an aggressor without overdoing it somewhat. A little revenge brings a certain pleasure, and can feel an awful lot like justice. Aggressors do not wish to be caught, and attempting to punish them in order to repair one's loss can be a dangerous affair. These and the like are the problems associated with the enforcement of the law of nature in the state of nature.

Here is Locke's second statement concerning the existence and character of the law of nature. And here, in contrast to the first, it operates to a slightly different effect. Locke writes,

Every offence, that can be committed in the state of nature, may in the state of nature be also punished equally, and as far forth, as it may in a commonwealth: for though it would be beside my present purpose to enter here into the particulars of the law of nature, or its measures of punishment, yet it is certain there is such a law, and that too as intelligible and plain to a rational creature, and a studier of that law, as the positive laws of commonwealths; nay, possibly plainer, as much as reason is easier to be understood, than the fancies and intricate contrivances of men, following contrary and hidden interests put into words (*Second Treatise*, § 12).

Although here again we encounter the claim that the law of nature exists, and again the implication of its usefulness to those "who will but consult it," notice that Locke adds something new, which previously he had not mentioned: the law is "intelligible and plain to a rational creature, and a studier of that law, as the positive laws of commonwealths." This statement puts the law of nature's guidance, which according to the previous statement only requires simple

consultation in order to access, at a little greater distance from mankind. Now it appears that the intelligibility of the law of nature is conditional, first, on being a “rational” creature, and second, also being a “studier” of that law.<sup>108</sup>

The problems associated with the promulgation and enforcement of the law of nature are for Locke an argument for the necessity of enlightenment—and for government. To consult and to study are, of course, different activities: “studying” implies a “thinking through” and hence a greater effort than “consulting,” which implies a less onerous “looking at.” Moreover, consulting implies the existence of what is to be consulted as something already possessed in plain and intelligible form. It may be the case that the more onerous requirements for knowledge of the law of nature in this statement are a reflection of the difficulties that attend the activity of punishing violators of the law of nature; it is not always a simple matter to determine how, exactly, one was harmed and what, exactly, ought to serve as reparation for the loss and restraint for the offender. This activity becomes more difficult, obviously, when those who are punishing are the same ones who suffered the loss: victims are likely to overestimate the harm done them. But it is difficult, too, when those who are punishing are not the victims of the crime; aggressors are likely, not having felt the personal sting of the violation, to underestimate the true harm done. In both cases, it is difficult for the seekers of justice to dispense retributive punishment in accordance with what “calm reason and conscience” advise (*Second Treatise*, § 8).

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<sup>108</sup> Locke’s comparison of the plainness of the law of nature with that of the municipal laws of countries anticipates his critique of the ambition of intellectual and political elites who use language to disguise and advance their own ends (“the fancies and intricate contrivances of men, following contrary and hidden interests put into words”) contrary to the law of nature. We take up this theme in its relation to intellectual vanity and self-love in the last part of this chapter.

Locke's second statement therefore raises, in a way his first statement had not, the question of the relationship of knowledge to morality, of whether and to what extent one needs knowledge in order to be morally good and to do the morally appropriate thing. What is clear from each of these statements, however, is that for Locke the law of nature is available to all men who will take the opportunity, if opportunity there is, to consult and study it. Locke argues here that it is real and, when properly approached and investigated, can provide real guidance. The law of nature is not innate, but requires study; however, it is easier to study and learn the law of nature than it is to ferret out the contrived interests that men hide behind misleading words.

We may shed some further light on our view of Locke's claim concerning the reality and character of the law of nature by briefly comparing Locke to Hobbes. This comparison lends support to the argument so far that Locke seriously intends his teaching on the law of nature to be something more than mere rhetoric. The state of nature "has a law of nature to govern it" (*Second Treatise*, § 6). This famous assertion distinguishes Locke from his predecessor, Hobbes, in an important way. Here is a statement from Hobbes concerning the law of nature in the state of nature that permits a clear contrast of what is at issue here.

To this war of every man against every man [i.e., the state of nature], this also is consequent: that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body, nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses and passions. They are qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude. It is consequent also to the same condition that there be no propriety, no dominion, no *mine* and *thine* distinct, but only that to be every man's that he can get, and for so long as he can keep it. And thus much for the ill condition which man by mere nature is actually placed in, though with a possibility to come out of it, consisting partly in the passions, partly in his reason.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 78.



For Hobbes, the state of nature is a state of total war: for Locke, it need not always be. At any rate, it does not start out that way. The state of nature is, properly speaking, a peaceful place. That experience of peace would be threatened inevitably, however, by a man's worry—his uncertain and tentative confidence—that others with whom he deals will live up to and keep the promises they make. For liberty is “to be free from restraint and violence from others; which cannot be, where there is no law” (*Second Treatise*, § 57). Locke seems to think that, absent the threat of a punishment that would outweigh the good procured by the breach of promise, one may with reason doubt that all men will keep and live up to their promises.

On at least two points we can see a difference between Hobbes and Locke here. In contrast to Locke, Hobbes asserts, first, that the state of nature does not have a law of nature to govern it: sometimes it is utterly rational to ignore the counsel that is the Golden Rule, break our promises, and make war. And second, Hobbes asserts that private property does not exist prior to a government that protects it. In other words, Hobbes presents justice and private property as conditional on, and derivative from, the agreement that forms the social contract; and we are driven, according to Hobbes, by necessity—for self-preservation—and by reason to agree to form the social contract. The rules of justice are for Hobbes the rules of convenience.<sup>110</sup>

Now, if justice and property were conditional on sovereign fiat, it may be doubted whether any rule of right or wrong (except, perhaps, that found in supernatural revelation) could apply to the sovereign, setting a measure to the propriety of his actions. True, the sovereign's

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<sup>110</sup> There is some question as to whether Hobbes means that a right to private property is purely conditional on the sovereign's fiat, or whether he is saying that in a state of total war, a war of all against all, acquiring and maintaining one's own property is nearly impossible. Is there no property or is there no right to property, prior to government? Thus Curley, in a footnote to this passage in Hobbes: “Here the absence of exclusive property rights in the state of nature is presented as a consequence of the fact that the state of nature is a war of all against all.” Ibid.

own desire for self-preservation might prevent him from exasperating his subjects; or, if he is the naturally benevolent type, he might truly rule for the good of the ruled. But still, nothing a Hobbesian sovereign of any character might do can be said by his subjects to be a crime (it might be a sin, but that is for God, and not the people, to say). Does the license possessed by this sovereign authority have anything to do with Locke's assertion that a perceivable rule of right and wrong in the nature of things—a law of nature, a rule that sanctions, among other things, a natural right to property and is not dependent on the magistrate's fiat—properly binds us in the state of nature, too? Perhaps Locke's assertion to this effect is laid down with a view to limiting and checking the magistrate's power in civil society and providing a right to resistance and even rebellion, should the magistrate begin to work against the public good. However that may be, Locke seems to have seen certain dangers with Hobbes's argument, dangers that may have led him to invert Hobbes's teaching on both counts.<sup>111</sup>

When Locke writes, in the *Second Treatise* (§ 19), of “the plain difference between the state of nature and the state of war, which however some men have confounded,” that “however some men have confounded” seems to be a direct reference to Hobbes, who had taught, famously, as we have just seen above, that the state of nature is a state of total war in which nothing can be unjust. In other words, according to Hobbes men in the state of nature seem not to perceive right and wrong so much as to perceive what is and is not conducive to their self-preservation, and to act accordingly; for Locke, men in the state of nature perceive or divine in addition to that, and however dimly, that it is possible for someone to have been truly *wronged* by someone else. In other words, they perceive in the nature of things justice, a rule of right and

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<sup>111</sup> For Locke's view of these dangers, see *Second Treatise*, § 13 (“absolute monarchs are but men”) and §§ 138-40 (“preservation of property being the end of government”).

wrong, a law of nature. In fact, this law of nature in the state of nature is “plain and intelligible,” says Locke. He hereby strongly asserts for his readers the possibility that Hobbes does not let his readers entertain, namely that a standard of right in the nature of things, prior to all consent, agreement, and contract—prior, too, to sovereign fiat—is perceived by men in the state of nature and provides them with reasons and justifications for their actions.<sup>112</sup>

From a close look at Locke’s statements in the beginning of the *Second Treatise* on the law of nature, and from a comparison with Hobbes, to whose teaching Locke himself points (§ 19), we can see that Locke intends for the law of nature to be understood as something real. If we think there is such a thing as cruelty, if we think there is such a thing as even the bare possibility of inflicting a punishment beyond what a crime deserves, and if we claim to be able to see such injustices (and others like them) in the world, then we must confess that we hear the voice of reason speaking to us about what is just and unjust prior to the positive laws of this or that authority. Though we may reasonably disagree about the content of the law of nature, it will be difficult to convince anyone that it is simply a fiction. Men can be brought to admit that they recognize such a thing as the law of nature, understood as a rule of right and wrong, when they act in the world, even if they do not abide by that rule. In his *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature*, Locke insists that men are unable to “put off all sense of that law, unless at the same time they cast off all humanity” (*Questions*, II, 119). The ground of that humanity in Locke is reason, rooted above all in our interest in self-preservation—the same interest that, when united with passionate self-love, causes us to over- or underestimate the extent to which the law of nature has

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<sup>112</sup> “There is no race so barbarous, so removed from all humanity, that it does not have some notion of virtue and vice, some consciousness of praise or censure.” Locke, *Questions*, II, 119. Not even in a state of war, Locke suggests, are men indifferent to moral distinctions.

been violated in our own or another's case. Without reason, our interests would lead us away from the law of nature; but without interest, what cause has reason to seek out and understand a law of nature that might best guide us in pursuit of our interests? The voice of reason would speak to us, then, if we would but listen and figure out what it is trying to say. To think it is unreal and reduce it to mere rhetoric is to deny ourselves in principle the luxury of honest moral judgment; it is to pluck out our eyes where we would most like to be able to see.

### Self-love and Interest in the State of Nature

Now, the state of nature in which men at first cooperate—and where men have available to them, if they would but put forth some effort, the law of nature for a guide—devolves into a state of war where men, so far from cooperating, make war on one another. What is the cause of this, especially given the mutual recognition of a measure of right? According to Locke attaining full knowledge about the law of nature, and hence the rules according to which men might guide their conduct, requires at least some labor, some learning. For the law of nature is “promulgated or made known by reason only” (*Second Treatise*, § 57).<sup>113</sup> One may receive limited guidance if he merely consults, but to achieve a full understanding requires one both to consult and to study.

Since following the law presupposes knowing it, and since knowing the law requires consultation and study, we must reframe our question. Previously, it was this: why is it difficult for men to follow the law of nature, especially when they are free? Now, we need to ask: what

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<sup>113</sup> The law of nature, according to Locke's argument, is what human reason unassisted by divine revelation discovers existing in the nature of things; accordingly, the law of nature is promulgated “by reason only.” God's revelation is positive law: it is “given” to man, not “discovered” by man's reason. “Whatever possesses the force of law among men, necessarily recognizes as its source either god or nature or man. Yet whatever man has laid down as a command, or god has delivered by an oracle, is positive law.” Locke, *Questions*, II, 133.

prevents men from consulting and studying the law of nature? Why do men so rarely hearken to the quiet voice of reason? The answer brings us to the heart of the problem with the state of nature, where no government exists to enforce the law; it also provides us with a clear window through which to observe how Locke roots the fundamental problems of politics in his pared-down version of the nature of man. Locke's liberal politics and his philosophy of education are addressed to these fundamental problems, and they are meant to provide permanent solutions.

Where self-love and interest create violent conflict between men, or where men make such conflict imminent by giving the sign that they are actively preparing for it, there is the "state of war." The state of war is "force, or a declared design of force, upon the person of another, where there is no common superior on earth to appeal to for relief" (*Second Treatise*, § 19). Self-love and interest are the two main reasons why men who perceive the law of nature, however dimly, nevertheless neither listen when they hear it, nor attempt to think through what it says to them when it speaks. These are the two forces that, if left unchecked by executive power, undermine human freedom and make civil society necessary and much preferable to the state of nature. Executive power can be a rationalizing force because it creates the conditions of peace under which real study of the law of nature is possible; these conditions in turn make more likely the eventuality that men will live together according to reason. Let us spend some time on these two great forces that check our ability to hear and follow reason and undermine natural freedom.

In the state of nature, adults—mature adults, not thumotic and angsty teenagers—possess what Locke calls a "perfect" and "uncontrollable" freedom; in this natural state all men, writes Locke, enjoy "a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or

depending upon the will of any other man” (*Second Treatise*, §§ 4, 6). This freedom is a great blessing, but apparently also a kind of curse. Adults in the state of nature possess reason: they are capable, in principle, of “consulting” and “studying” the “law of nature,” a law which is, according to Locke, “intelligible and plain” (*Second Treatise*, §§ 6, 12). They are also free in the sense of ungoverned: “[w]ant of a common judge with authority, puts all men in a state of nature” (*Second Treatise*, § 19). The law of nature might serve as a guide to the use of freedom in the state of nature for all men who possess reason, but this state nevertheless devolves into a state of war; the presence of the law of nature does not prevent the state of war. The presence or escalation of violence in this condition, despite the presence of the law of nature, needs to be explained. I suggest we draw this preliminary conclusion: although for Locke freedom is a natural right, this appeal to the fate of the free—very free—human beings in the state of nature suggests that he questioned very deeply the ability of most men to be truly reasonable, at least for any significant duration of time, outside the bounds of law. The state of nature, “however free, is full of fears and continual dangers” (*Second Treatise*, § 123). Why might this be?

Three relevant factors combine to cause the state of nature to devolve into a state of war: the interests of men, which are life, liberty, and property, their self-love, which makes them partial to themselves and their friends, and their lack of an agreed-upon executive power to which they may delegate the task of protecting their rights and interests, by force if necessary. Without an executive power in the state of nature, men are left to their own devices in the effort to protect and enforce their mutual rights, their interests, and the justice of their cause. Because there is no common power, each man must be his own judge of how best to protect and enforce his natural rights. Each man here possesses the “executive power” and is, consequently, a kind

of king in his own eyes. This situation has a Biblical parallel: in the days when “there was no king in Israel,” “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”<sup>114</sup> That is exactly the case in the state of nature. In such a state, Locke may well speak of the “weak hands of justice in this world,” which are much too weak to tame self-love and interest (*Second Treatise*, § 176).

The “inconveniences” of such a state, says Locke, “must certainly be Great . . . since ’tis easily to be imagined, that he who was so unjust as to do his Brother an Injury, will scarce be so just as to condemn himself for it.” Locke explains,

To this strange Doctrine, viz. That *in the State of Nature, every one has the Executive Power* of the Law of Nature, I doubt not but it will be objected, That it is unreasonable for Men to be Judges in their own Cases, that Self-love will make Men partial to themselves and their Friends. And on the other side, that Ill Nature, Passion, and Revenge will carry them too far in punishing others. And hence nothing but Confusion and Disorder will follow, and that therefore God hath certainly appointed Government to restrain the partiality and violence of men. I easily grant, that *Civil Government* is the proper Remedy for the Inconveniences of the State of Nature (*Second Treatise*, § 13).

Here we have Locke’s general explanation for why men do not hearken to the voice of reason, and an eloquent statement of one of the most basic purposes of government—the curbing of each man’s self-love and interest. Without government, sooner or later these corrupt our reason, and thus our freedom. These are the problems that lead Locke to say that freedom is not (as Filmer had said it was) “a liberty for every one to do what he lists, to live as he pleases, and not to be tied by any laws” (*Second Treatise*, § 22). What Filmer had described, according to Locke, was not a state of freedom, but a “state of license.” Locke insists on the distinction between the two.

The state of nature turns violent because where there is no civil government men must enforce their natural rights themselves. We have already seen some of the problems related to enforcing the law of nature in the state of nature above. Now we may add this danger: the

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<sup>114</sup> Judges 21:25 (KJV).

enforcement cannot help but be skewed and biased by men's looking after their own interests more carefully and assiduously than those of their neighbors. This is a prioritizing for which all men must, in Locke's view, be excused. It is impossible not to be concerned with our own fate; it is possible, however, not to care about the fate of others, especially those we do not and may never know. By nature we are concerned with our own good; but the golden rule, especially in its more elevated formulation—"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves"—while a very beautiful sublimation of our self-interest, is a holy, not quite a liberal, way of living in the world.<sup>115</sup> The more liberal way teaches a far-seeing, elevated, and cautious kind of self-regard, based not merely on the insight that men can never stop caring about their own fate and their own good, but that they will in most cases inevitably care for it a little more than they care for the good of others.

In addition to these reasons, Locke has hinted that the law of nature (or the voice of reason) may not speak as "plainly" and "intelligibly" as he had at first let on. The fully developed moral code of conduct to which we would do well to adhere is not "innate," but learned: it requires time, study, and the cultivation of good habits. In addition to this, men have different capacities for this study and make progress in different degrees—a serious problem we will take up later in this chapter. For all these reasons, merely knowing what it is good and right to do is not always a simple affair in every situation; and further, acting in accordance with that knowledge requires overcoming obstacles other than ignorance. But we must immediately add that these difficulties do not render vain all attempts to make progress in understanding the law of nature. It is in principle possible to arrive at a reasonable view of any given problem that

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<sup>115</sup> Philippians 2:3 (KJV).



might arise for us: that is the Lockean creed. But self-love and interest come between a man and both his need to know and his desire to follow that reasonable view. There are, then, two parts to the explanation of why the state of nature devolves into a state of war. First, all men are self-interested and lovers of themselves, and second, there is a widespread lack of reasonably sound judgment, especially in matters that lie at the intersection of interest and right.

Locke is again comparable to Machiavelli here. Though Machiavelli develops no “state of nature” teaching, he does have this to say about the relationship between good laws and good arms in political societies: “The principal foundations that all states have . . . are good laws and good arms. And because there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms, and where there are good arms there must be good laws, I shall leave out the reasoning on laws and shall speak of arms.”<sup>116</sup> This is a view that would make many a natural law theorist squirm. For traditionally—as in Aquinas and Hooker, for example—the natural law is that which allows us to tell whether or not a law is just, and thus truly a law and genuinely obliging. But Machiavelli bypasses the question of justice here. The meaning of his “where there are good arms there must be good laws” is, in effect, this: the only criterion for a good law is whether it is well enforced; if it is well enforced, there will be order, regularity, and stability within the political community. Having a perfectly good law that is not enforced is no different from having no law at all.

Locke does not exhibit so great an indifference to the goodness or badness of the laws; we have already seen his opinion that many of “the positive laws of commonwealths” are full of the “fancies and intricate contrivances of men, following contrary and hidden interests put into words”—even if they are well-enforced. But he also recognizes that without good enforcement

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<sup>116</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 48.

the dictates of the law of nature or the pronouncements of reason will have been given or perceived in vain. Locke is concerned with just laws, laws that seek to provide for the good of the community as a whole and protect its rights, but he also sees that an essential component of all good laws is a fair, reasonable, and consistent enforcement of what they say.<sup>117</sup> Locke does not go so far as Hobbes did in suggesting that in a state of war “nothing can be unjust,” but he has indeed made an argument that leads to a conclusion with a decidedly Machiavellian flavor.

The devolution of the state of nature and the consequent necessity for government—for “an established, settled, known law,” “a known and indifferent judge,” and “a power to back and support the sentence when right” (*Second Treatise*, §§ 124-26)—are Locke’s forceful comments on the question of whether most human beings can be guided in their private lives by reason alone. Living together according to reason is becomes impossible, sooner or later, without a limited government that checks self-love and interest by enforcing positive laws; the first duty of reasonable men, therefore, is to create and consent to limited government. The passionate and celebratory rhetoric of freedom sprinkled throughout the *Second Treatise* must be read in the light of the fate of the adults in Locke’s state of nature; they once enjoyed that very freedom.

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<sup>117</sup> Locke even seems to allow for the possibility that a sentence pronounced by legitimate authorities could be wrong when he writes of a power to support the sentence “when right.” This is yet more evidence that Locke was concerned with the distinction between good and bad laws. However, whether we judge rightly when we judge that the lawmaker has delivered a just or unjust sentence, and whether we ought accordingly to help or hinder him from enforcing it on (some part of) the political community, or on ourselves, is not, according to Locke, something that by appeal to any earthly authority we can know with certainty. He seems to imply this when he says, concerning the question of whether or not another has put himself in a state of war with me—or the people’s judgment of whether a prince has put himself in a state of war with them —“of that I myself can only be judge in my own conscience, as I will answer it, at the great day, to the supreme Judge of all men.” *Second Treatise*, § 21. Considering their own safety and interests, and their consciences, men must determine as best they can whether they ought to go to war or change their prince. And although Locke reserves for God the privilege of a Last Judgment, here, on earth, the right to judge of this belongs to the people—and only the people.

### Defending “Native Rustic Reason”: The Potential of the Ordinary Intellect

What a man thinks shapes how he understands his own interest and guides the way in which he acts in order to serve it. If for Locke freedom and reason are intimately connected, this is the primary way in which that connection manifests itself. A man’s conduct and action are crucially dependent on his understanding and knowledge.

No man ever sets himself about anything but upon some view or other which serves him for a reason for what he does; and whatsoever faculties he employs, the understanding, with such light as it has, well or ill informed, constantly leads; and by that light, true or false, all his operative powers are directed (*Conduct*, § 1).

According to Locke here, men are guided—and guided without fail in all of what they voluntarily do—by some idea or image in their minds. The understanding, “*well or ill informed*, constantly leads” (my emphasis). Because the actions we choose depend upon our understanding, it matters greatly, both for himself and by implication for others, what a man thinks of things. Locke continues in this same passage as follows.

The will itself, how absolute and uncontrollable however it may be thought, never fails in its obedience to the dictates of the understanding. Temples have their sacred images, and we see what influence they have always had over a great part of mankind. But in truth the ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them, and to these they all universally pay a ready submission.

Locke’s great desire to show how “the busie mind of man” might be made more rational and orderly—that is, his “enlightenment”—is informed by his understanding of the immense power of the mind (*First Treatise*, § 58). “It is therefore of the highest concernment,” he concludes here in the *Conduct*, “that great care should be taken of the understanding to conduct it right in the search of knowledge and in the judgments it makes” (§ 1).

The puzzle identified at the beginning of this chapter remains perplexing: if the power of the mind is so crucial, why not the rule of an educated elite whose orderly minds are models of “epistemic hygiene”? Locke's liberalism does not require a privileged intellectual elite to guide and direct it, even after the creation of limited government, for two related reasons. First, ordinary men are capable of enlightenment, and so do not require guidance from such an elite, at least not in principle. Not only can an ordinary man understand the reasons for why he ought to provide his willing consent to the creation of a government that would, for example, keep him safe better than he could do himself, but also he can make adequate progress in understanding “the business of his particular calling in the commonwealth and of religion, which is his calling as he is a man in the world.” Locke is sure that “this is usually enough to take up his whole time; and there are few that inform themselves in these, which is every man's proper and peculiar business, so to the bottom as they should do” (*Conduct*, § 19). There will, then, be levels and varieties of understanding of the law of nature; nevertheless, Locke still lays the theoretical foundations of his liberalism with a faith in “native rustic reason.” Second, the claims of such an intellectual elite are often suspect and sometimes wholly fraudulent; they would, if left unchecked, amount to an unjust imposition on the freedom of others. Let us now see if we can make good on these two claims.

Locke is eager to show ordinary men that they have the tools to govern themselves: the moral and intellectual capacities for citizenship, the wherewithal to provide reasoned consent, and the ability to make progress in understanding the law of nature—including the truth of things, the world, and oneself in which the law of nature is grounded. This understanding, Locke says, is available to ordinary men if they will properly cultivate their own natural intellectual

resources through a certain kind of education. Locke asks, “Can grown men never be improved or enlarged in their understandings? I say not so, but . . . it will not be done without industry and application, which will require more time and pains than grown men, settled in their course of life, will allow to it, and therefore very seldom is done” (*Conduct*, § 6). Locke is on the whole more favorable to the ordinary intellect than most philosophers thought it prudent to be.

Locke’s insistence on the progress available to the ordinary intellect, and the encouragement he gives to this progress, might well involve ordinary men in some intellectual and spiritual risks; after all, it can be dangerous to strike out on one’s own. But the risks that “Locke is urging the laborer to take,” writes Jeremy Waldron in his *God, Locke, and Equality*, are “underwritten . . . by his conception of the fundamental adequacy of even the meanest intellect.”<sup>118</sup> According to Waldron, Locke “thinks of himself as *more* sympathetic to the abilities and contributions of members of the working class than most of his contemporaries,” and he is fond of contrasting “the straightforward intellect of the plain man with the “learned gibberish” of scholars, philosophers, and lawyers.”<sup>119</sup> Locke held these sympathies in full awareness that ordinary men formed the bulk of “the greatest part of Mankind, who are given up to Labour . . . whose Lives are worn out, only in the Provisions for Living” (*Essay*, 4.20.2). Although the necessity for labor impinges on the freedom and leisure that ordinary men have to think for themselves about the most important issues, Locke did not draw from this sociological fact the conclusion that they were any less capable in principle of ordering their lives by reason than those who possessed greater leisure and resources.

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<sup>118</sup> Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, 87.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

The kind of knowledge with which Locke in his enlightenment mode is most concerned is the knowledge related to how we choose to live our lives. At the beginning of the *Essay*, when Locke sets out to describe the kind of inquiry he is about to undertake in the work, Locke informs his readers that, abstract and long though it may be, the *Essay* treats ideas that are crucially relevant for how we act in the world. “Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct.” The reader is hereby informed that all the rest of what he is about to read is related, somehow, to how we choose to live our lives. He continues: “If we can find out those measures, whereby a rational creature, put in that state in which man is in this world, may, and ought to govern his opinions, and actions depending thereon, we need not to be troubled that some other things escape our knowledge” (*Essay*, 1.1.6). Although there are many things a man might understand, not all of it is related to the choices, especially the very important moral choices, that he must make in the course of a life. Differences in understanding between man and man in the irrelevant areas of knowledge do not count, as it were, in the consideration of who should rule whom and how we ought to live. Not all differences of understanding between “country gentlemen” and “mechanics” bear on the question and the possibility of self-rule. Accordingly, Locke does not “infer from the predicament of the laboring classes any general doctrine of submission to authority.”<sup>120</sup>

But what about the knowledge that does count, like the law of nature? The law of nature, it bears repeating, “teaches all mankind.” This law of reason, “in its true notion,” writes Locke,

is not so much the limitation, as the direction of a free and intelligent agent to his proper interest, and prescribes no farther than is for the general good of those under that law: could they be happier without it, the law, as an useless thing, would of itself vanish; and

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 87.

that ill deserves the name of confinement which hedges us in only from bogs and precipices (*Second Treatise*, § 57).

If reason and reasonable laws constrain our freedom, it is only, according to Locke, in order that we be fulfilled and made happier in the lasting and fundamental, as distinguished from the fashionable and fleeting, sense of that word “happy.” Law should direct us to those things that fulfill and satisfy our natures, or at least prevent the capacity and promise of our nature from corruption.<sup>121</sup> This is the law that is available to, and would teach, “all mankind,” regardless of their station in life. This is that law of justice and right that Locke says can be recognized, independent of and even prior to a common power making rules for us through civil law.

If the gap between the understanding of the “country gentleman” and the “mechanic” is not to be so great as to merit in principle the rule of the one over the other, this is the subject in which Locke must demonstrate the ordinary man’s ability to make adequate and equal progress

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<sup>121</sup> Locke defines “ethics” as follows: “the seeking out [of] those Rules, and Measures of humane Actions, which lead to Happiness, and the Means to practise them. The end of this is not bare Speculation, and the Knowledge of Truth; but Right, and a Conduct suitable to it.” *Essay*, 4.21.3. The law of nature is that rule or measure of right. But for Locke, “natures” (as I wrote) seems more appropriate than “nature” because not everyone’s “nature” is exactly the same. “The Mind has a different relish, as well as the Palate. . . . [and] as pleasant Tastes depend not on the things themselves, but their agreeableness to this or that particular Palate, wherein there is great variety: So the greatest Happiness consists, in the having those things, which produce the greatest Pleasure; and in the absence of those, which cause any disturbance, any pain. Now these, to different Men, are very different things.” *Essay*, 2.21.55. Locke’s defense of a law of nature, and his great respect for human individuality, sit together in some tension in his thought. Nevertheless, they are both very much there. One might say that Locke accommodates human individuality by trying to moderate and limit, without denying the validity or universality, of the law of nature. “It is an error, according to Locke, to conceive of human happiness in purely subjective terms. He is able to maintain that, among all mortal beings, human (or rational-corporeal) beings are uniquely capable of happiness (2.20.5; 2.27.17, 26) only on the basis of an understanding of happiness as more than the mere perception of pleasure and pain. Only in a narrow, minimalist sense—only in reference to “present Happiness”—does Locke hold that “who is content is happy” (2.21.59).” Myers, *Star and Compass*, 143.

in understanding. Locke's understanding of the merits and potential of "native rustic reason" underwrites the promise of his liberal politics of self-government, which takes the law of nature as its guide.<sup>122</sup> The most crucial aspects of understanding, as we have seen above, concern one's "calling" as a citizen in a commonwealth and as a man in the world. And the law of nature, one might say, teaches a man that he ought to find out the rules or develop the skills whereby he might perform that calling both well and with a view to his own lasting fulfillment.<sup>123</sup> Locke's refusal to privilege the "gentlemen" over the "mechanics" in a political way is rooted in his own view, on the one side, of the merits and potential of the ordinary understanding, and on the other, of the dangers and vices of the educated intellect. Let us now take a look at the side of ordinary understanding. Most intellectual differences between the two classes of men are not likely to result in a genuine inequality of understanding in the relevant and crucial sense. In the relevant and crucial sense, Locke thought the ordinary intellect to be capable of "enlightenment."

Locke makes this argument even while recognizing that there are great disparities of intellect among men. As Locke sees it, men are endowed by nature with varying levels of the capacity for thinking and these various levels of ability are distributed normally. Some men are born unnaturally deformed, like the profoundly intellectually disabled, for example; they have "a want of natural parts," their "very natures seem to want a foundation to raise on it that which

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<sup>122</sup> "If the law of nature is not binding on men, neither can any human positive law bind them, since the laws of the civil magistrate derive all their force from the binding power of this law. . . . Nor must we obey a king out of fear, because he is more powerful and can compel us. For this would be to establish the power of tyrants, thieves, and pirates . . . the obligation of civil law depends on the law of nature." Locke, *Questions*, VIII, 214-15.

<sup>123</sup> In *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), John Dunn argues that Locke's understanding of the concept of a "calling" is the key to understanding his notion of duty in particular and his political thought in general.



other men easily attain unto,” and they “are to be excused” (*Conduct*, § 6; cf. *Second Treatise*, § 60). Others are gifted well above average.

I confess, there are some men’s constitutions of body and mind so vigorous, and well fram’d by nature, that they need not much assistance from others; but by the strength of their natural genius, they are from their cradles carried towards what is excellent; and by the privilege of their happy constitutions, are able to do wonders. But examples of this kind are but few (*Some Thoughts*, § 1).

Nature produces intellectual capacity in profuse variety: “there is, it is visible, great variety in men’s understandings” (*Conduct*, § 2). Some cannot receive education; others hardly need it.

The great portion of us are born, however, somewhere in the middle. And nature’s distribution of intellectual talent, Locke assumes, is pretty much constant across time and place: “the woods of America, as well as the schools of Athens, produce men of several abilities in the same kind” (*Conduct*, § 2). In Locke’s works on education, the *Conduct* and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, the audience for Locke’s education in terms of raw talent is the great majority in the middle, and within that majority, the average.

The “brute fact” is this: Mother Nature is not an egalitarian. In his discussion in the *Second Treatise* of the meaning of his claim that “*all Men by Nature are equal*,” Locke explains that he “cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of *Equality*: *Age* or *Virtue* may give Men a just Precedency: *Excellency of Parts and Merit* may place others above the Common Level: *Birth* may subject some, and *Alliance* or *Benefits* others.” Here “excellency of parts” refers to a generous dispensation of natural intellectual ability, perhaps a dispensation that has even been improved and refined through practice and formal training. In saying that some men are distinguished in this regard, and in many other ways by nature, he again admits the great fact of natural intellectual inequality. But Locke immediately draws out the political import of this fact:

“yet all this consists with the equality, which all men are in, in respect of jurisdiction or dominion one over another; which was the equality I there spoke of, as proper to the business in hand, being that equal right, that every man hath, to his natural freedom” (§ 54). Jeremy Waldron puts it this way:

Despite Locke’s own vocational respect for intellectual excellence, he does not fall into the trap of differentiating humans in their merit or moral or political standing by the sophistication of their intellects. The properties on which his theory of equality is grounded are [the ones that] he regards as socially and politically sufficient for a practical grasp of morality.<sup>124</sup>

No natural category of difference, including “excellency of parts,” is decisive for Locke in determining the politically relevant sense of the word “equality.”

Now that we have seen Locke’s balanced view of the distribution of natural intelligence, let us see now why these natural endowments are not by themselves, not even for the natural geniuses, “excellences.” Human excellence, for Locke, is a product of good practice over time; it is earned. Locke distinguishes between natural ability and the cultivation of that ability, and that distinction lies at the heart of his intellectual egalitarianism. Locke “democratizes” the intellect by insisting on this distinction and the necessity for labor. “We are born,” he writes, “with faculties and powers capable almost of anything, such at least as would carry us further than can be easily imagined; but it is only the exercise of those powers which gives us ability and skill in anything and leads us towards perfection.” “The legs of a dancing master and the fingers of a musician fall as it were naturally without thought or pains into regular and admirable

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<sup>124</sup> Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, 107. In his chapter entitled “The Democratic Intellect,” from which this quote is drawn, Waldron attempts to refute the notion, advanced by C. B. Macpherson in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 222, that Locke thought, like many of his contemporaries did, “that the members of the laboring class do not and cannot live a fully rational life.” What Locke teaches in the *Conduct* and *Essay* supports Waldron’s view, but not Macpherson’s.

motions. . . . [To] what incredible and astonishing actions do we find rope-dancers and tumblers bring their bodies[?] . . . on that very account [people] give money to see them.” Locke explains,

All these admired motions beyond the reach and almost the conception of unpracticed spectators are nothing but the mere effects of use and industry in men whose bodies have nothing peculiar in them from those of the amazed lookers on.

*As it is in the body, so it is in the mind*; practice makes it what it is, and most even of those excellences which are looked on as natural endowments will be found, when examined into more narrowly, to be the product of exercise and to be raised to that pitch only by repeated actions (*Conduct*, § 4; my emphasis).

To be sure, this may seem exaggerated. Some pianists, for example, have long and dexterous fingers, some gymnasts are double-jointed, and we all know people who insist, when it comes to dancing, that they have “two left feet.” We know that there are important differences in the kinds of bodies we have; we are given advantages and disadvantages by nature that precede all practice. And if this is so in bodies, why might it not also be true concerning minds? In all these objections what is asserted is that something natural, and not a lack of good practice over time, prevents individuals from mastering these various skill sets.

What would Locke say in response to these observations? For Locke, as we have seen, natural ability is unevenly distributed. “I do not deny that natural disposition may often give the first rise to [some manifestation of human excellence]; but that never carries a man far without use and exercise, and it is practice *alone* that brings the powers of the mind as well as those of the body to their perfection” (my emphasis). The meaning of “alone” is that there will be no difference in achieved mastery between one without natural ability and one with it, without practice. We are born with more or less potential; but without good practice over time, all potential goes to waste. “Many a good poetic vein is buried under a trade and never produces anything for want of improvement”: without practice, those with a poetic vein will produce no

more and no better poetry than those without that vein (*Conduct*, § 4). For Locke, “Most men come very short of what they might attain unto *in their several degrees* by a neglect of their understandings” (*Conduct*, § 2; emphasis mine). One’s natural endowment cannot be changed, but all can improve upon their natural endowment. To “stand upon [one’s] own legs” in matters of the intellect requires first believing that it can be done. Laboring, which means not neglecting nature’s gifts, lies, here as elsewhere, at the root of human accomplishment. Nature furnishes “only the almost worthless materials”; the rest is up to us (*Second Treatise*, § 43).

Here, in matters of the intellect, and elsewhere, such as in economics, the idea of labor is foundational. In his chapter “Of Property” in the *Second Treatise*, Locke writes,

He that is nourished by the acorns he picked up under an oak, or the apples he gathered from the trees in the wood, has certainly appropriated them to himself. No body can deny but the nourishment is his. I ask then, when did they begin to be his? . . . and it is plain, if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could. That labour put a distinction between them and common: that added something to them more than nature, the common mother of all, had done; and so they became his private right (§ 28).

Here, in the state of nature, labor establishes the right to private property. It is exactly so, after a fashion, in matters of the intellect and the pursuit of truth, too. In the *Essay*, Locke writes,

We may as rationally hope to see with other men’s eyes, as to know by other men’s understandings. So much as we ourselves consider and comprehend of truth and reason, so much we possess of real and true knowledge. . . . what [a man] believes only, and takes upon trust, are but shreds; . . . [and] such borrowed wealth, like fairy-money, though it were gold in the hand from which he received it, will be but leaves and dust when it comes to use (1.4.23).

When and how a man’s thoughts become his own are inquiries that Locke undertakes in the *Conduct*, the central theme of which is that art of employing the mind in the pursuit of truth that would allow one to “stand on one’s own legs” and know “by one’s own understanding.”

Knowing is seeing, and, if it be so, it is madness to persuade ourselves that we do so by another man’s eyes, let him use never so many words to tell us that what he asserts is very

visible. Till we ourselves see it with our own eyes and perceive it by our own understandings, we are as much in the dark and as void of knowledge as before, let us believe any learned author as much as we will (*Conduct*, § 24).

For Locke, it is the labor of reason, just as it is the labor of the body, that makes an insight into the nature of things our own as distinguished from someone else's, from something borrowed.<sup>125</sup>

Many scholars have noted that this teaching on the importance of human labor, and the corresponding decrease in the importance of nature and her gifts, has implications for both politics and education. If the differences in our knowledge are ultimately the product of labor—because without labor even the most naturally gifted produce nothing of value—it is easier to argue that the natural differences between us do not deserve as much recognition, political or otherwise, as labor itself does. Uday Singh Mehta, in his *The Anxiety of Freedom*, a study of the role of “individuality” in Locke’s thought, comments, “To the extent that property comes to be . . . associated with the creativity, dignity, and distinctness of human beings, one can understand how Locke, in summarizing his own political ideas as nothing more than protection of property, can be seen as defending a larger, more noble enterprise.”<sup>126</sup> That enterprise is

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<sup>125</sup> As there is a transition from the state of nature to civil society that affects property rights, so the transition in the individual from a state of childhood to adulthood affects the right to one’s own reason. Regarding property: in civil society, under government, “the laws regulate the right of property, and the possession of land is determined by positive constitutions.” *Second Treatise*, § 50. Regarding the life of the mind: “a child is free by his father’s title, by his father’s understanding, which is to govern him till he hath it of his own.” *Ibid.*, § 61. In the case of material acquisition, men consent, in civil society, to the authority of legitimate government; in the case of the acquisition of knowledge and truth, men should take their bearings, when they come to the age of reason, by “the things themselves.”

<sup>126</sup> Uday Singh Mehta, *The Anxiety of Freedom: Imagination and Individuality in Locke’s Political Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 149. Mehta immediately directs us, presumably for a fuller understanding of that “larger, more noble enterprise,” to *Second Treatise*, § 134, where Locke writes that the “*first and fundamental natural Law . . . is the preservation of the Society.*” Closely related to this (and appearing in this same section), is Locke’s insistence on the right the people have to make and consent to their own laws.

distinctly egalitarian: there is a certain dignity in labor. It is akin to the dignity possessed by a nation that builds and keeps watch over its own political home (its government) and a people that preserves itself by obeying its own laws. In a quite real sense, then, the requirement of labor contributes to equality: everyone must labor. Just as it is labor, and not nature, that “makes the far greatest part of the value of things we enjoy in this world,” so it is labor, and not nature, that provides the legitimate grounds for the political and social distinctions among men. The idea and dignity of labor form an important root of Locke’s egalitarianism.<sup>127</sup>

When Locke shows both the necessity for and the possibility of labor, including the labor of reason—of which all intellects that are not severely deformed by nature are capable “in their several degrees”—he helps to ground his defense of “native rustic reason.” By nature men possess no principles of knowledge: there are no such things as “innate principles.” All ideas, rationally ordered in the mind or not, are either discovered and acquired from without or put together and constructed from within. Nature does not provide the decisive differences in rank among men. Their activity, their use of what nature has given, does. Locke’s turn to “education,” then, is the result of an inner logical necessity in his overall argument. As Peter Myers writes, “because morally qualifying human rationality is not among nature’s spontaneous productions, according to Locke, human liberty depends upon our capacity to cultivate it.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Other scholars, too, note the connection between Locke’s teaching on human labor and his teaching on individuality and politics. For example, in *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 181, Thomas Pangle comments, “Locke, one might say, reproduces on the level of psychology, or internal nature, the teaching about man’s relation to nature that he elaborated, as regards external nature, in his discussion of property.” Richard Ashcraft also discusses the potentially radical implications of Locke’s ethic of labor in *Revolutionary Politics and Locke’s Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 262-68.

<sup>128</sup> Myers, *Star and Compass*, 143.

Broadly understood, education for Locke is the activity of actively shaping into an orderly whole—or (and this is softer, but truer to the spirit of Lockean education)—intelligently and deliberately allowing experiences and learning to shape the elements that nature first provides in nascent or rudimentary form. The decisive differences between the “country gentleman” and the “illiterate mechanic” are not natural, but man-made.

### Defending “Native Rustic Reason”: The Dangers of the Educated Intellect

We have seen, so far, that Locke believes ordinary men possesses the capacity to pursue and see the truth for themselves. Moreover, for Locke, should men wish to “deal fairly with their own understandings and their own souls” this is exactly what they must do, especially concerning religion and the law of nature—the things of their “greatest concernment”—but also concerning other things. At times Locke even speaks of this endeavor as a duty we owe ourselves. The “vigor of mind able to . . . look into its own principles” is rare; it is “a freedom which few men have the notion of in themselves and fewer are allowed the practice of by others, it being the great art and business of the teachers and guides in most sects to suppress as much as they can this fundamental duty which every man owes himself” (*Conduct*, § 41). Here Locke characterizes this independence of mind as a kind of duty we owe ourselves, a duty that it is in our best interest to perform. This combination or reconciling of duty and interest is typical of Locke because according to him the law of nature, “in its true notion, is not so much the limitation as the direction of a free and intelligent agent to his proper interest.”

In addition to Locke’s characterization of the search for truth as a kind of duty to oneself, we also see in this passage the opposition that Locke is so fond of setting up in his writings about

intellectual freedom, namely the opposition between the man who would see for himself and the intellectual, political, or spiritual elites that form stumbling blocks for him. In order to support this argument about elites as stumbling blocks Locke shows, especially in the *Essay*, not so much that every scholar is a fraud as that ordinary men have good reason not to take intellectual authorities at their word. The educated minds that serve as intellectual authorities are often well entrenched in prejudices, too, and to subject oneself to them is to put oneself at a disadvantage. In civil and educated society, prejudices and subjection to authority parallel the role that self-love and interest play in the state of nature: they effectively prevent seeing or studying the law of nature with an unbiassed eye. This view of the dangers of intellectual authority, combined with the interest each man has to see and perceive the truth for himself—and the confidence that his own labor will take him there, if he employs his own natural faculties correctly—are the foundations on which Locke’s teaching about the value and intrinsic worth of a free and independent mind is built. It is to the dangers of the educated intellect that we now turn.

To use one’s reason to pursue the truth about the world, men, and things, especially in those matters of our “nearest” and “greatest concernment,” like theology and the law of nature, is not a wholly simple matter. There are barriers to the cultivation of the mind. Both natural and unnatural kinds of impediments hinder this effort, such as opportunity and plain bad luck. Some men who are less talented progress farther than others who are more talented; also, men of equal natural talents often do not make equal progress. What are these barriers? Here we may begin with a somewhat lengthy quote from the *Essay*. It will appear that for Locke there are a number of very good reasons why some men of “equal parts” with others nevertheless “carry” themselves “in their reasoning so far beyond others” (*Conduct*, § 30). Locke explains,



most men cannot live without employing their time in the daily labours of their callings; nor be at quiet in their minds without some foundation or principle to rest their thoughts on. There is scarce any one so floating and superficial in his understanding, who hath not some revered propositions, which are to him the principles on which he bottoms his reasonings; and by which he judgeth of truth and falsehood, right and wrong: which some, wanting skill and leisure, and others the inclination, and some being taught, that they ought not to examine; there are few to be found who are not exposed by their ignorance, laziness, education, or precipitancy, to take them upon trust. . . . it is no wonder that grown men, either perplexed in the necessary affairs of life, or hot in the pursuit of pleasures, should not seriously sit down to examine their own tenets . . . And had men leisure, parts, and will, who is there almost that dare shake the foundations of all his past thoughts and actions, and endure to bring upon himself the shame of having been a long time wholly in mistake and error (*Essay*, 1.3.24-25)?

For Locke, these facts add up to the view that individuals are much less likely, in general, to acquire freedom and independence of mind than they are to remain under the spell of certain powerful prejudices and illusions. The three above-mentioned prerequisites for the rigorous pursuit of truth—"leisure, parts, and will," which is to say, time and opportunity, ability, and a firm desire for progress—are rarely combined in a single individual, and they are just as likely to be absent in men of ordinary intellect as those who are endowed with superior natural gifts.

For Locke, however, we all have a responsibility to cultivate our reason. Ruth Grant and Nathan Tarcov explain that to be guided by reason is, in Locke's view, "to judge fairly and hence to act fairly; it is to overcome the effects of interest, passion, and prejudice that are the obstacles to morality. Locke conceives of rationality as fairness. Each of us thus has a *moral*

responsibility to cultivate our rational faculties.”<sup>129</sup> Is it not, then, somewhat counter-intuitive that Locke, a philosopher of education himself, includes “education” as a source of prejudice in the quote above? To what does one turn in order to cure oneself from prejudice and illusion, if not an education of some sort? Education seems to be contrary to illusion and ignorance, even the cure for these things, but Locke brings it in here to show that under less than ideal circumstances it can powerfully confine and narrow the mind—just as easily as it can enliven and free it, under more ideal circumstances, to make the progress for which it naturally strives.

False or doubtful positions, relied upon as unquestionable maxims, keep those in the dark from truth who build on them. Such are usually the prejudices imbibed from education, party, reverence, fashion, interest, etc. This is the mote which everyone sees in his brother's eye, but never regards the beam in his own (*Conduct*, § 10).

Many of the defects of mind that Locke will identify and analyze in the *Conduct* are the product of prejudices acquired through “education” of one sort or another.

It is not a hard matter to show that for Locke the “elites” of the university are just as likely to twist one’s mind as to open and improve it. Note that the first source of prejudice Locke identifies in the above quote is “education.” That elites and intellectual leaders have a tendency to deepen and codify moral and political prejudices rather than facilitate their removal is one of Locke’s constant critiques of those who write and think for a living. Jeremy Waldron comments, “It is in many ways the *educated* intellect that Locke regarded as a social danger. He often said

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<sup>129</sup> Nathan Tarcov, Introduction to *John Locke: Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, eds. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), xii. Tarcov suggests that Locke wrote the *Conduct* with this task in mind. “The *Conduct* is a manual of instruction in that task as well as a delightful attack on the smugness of narrow-minded specialists and parochial partisans. Throughout the work, Locke draws the connections between rational deliberation, on the one hand, and impartiality, toleration, distrust of authority, and personal liberation from authoritative opinion, on the other. The capacity for independent judgment and reasonable conduct is the crucial capacity for both freedom and morality.” Ibid.

that the capacities and dispositions of ordinary people were much more reliable morally and politically than the effete corrupt sensibility of “all knowing Doctors” and “learned Disputants”.<sup>130</sup> Why was Locke wary of the educated intellect, and why did he teach others to be wary of its traditional claims to knowledge and expertise?

Throughout both the *Essay* and the *Conduct*, Locke shows an almost constant concern with imposition, errors, and laziness in matters of the mind. In the *Essay*, one merely needs to keep an eye open for the ways in which Locke addresses these problems, for here Locke presents no systematic discussion of intellectual vices and the “great many natural defects in the understanding capable of amendment,” as he does in the *Conduct* (*Conduct*, § 2). It is the case, however, that in the *Essay* Locke writes about it loosely on almost every other page; his view of the problem is intricately woven throughout the argument of the work as a whole. And though the presentation is somewhat scattered—his various concerns related to “epistemic hygiene” often come out in digressions—his thoughts are informed by a single critical perspective and intent: the identification and destruction of intellectual hubris. Waldron expresses the spirit that informs this perspective as follows: Locke “shows a healthy awareness of the foibles of scholars, particularly their vanity and love of power. . . . many of their professional virtues aim rather at flattery and admiration than at hard, sometimes unpalatable truth.”<sup>131</sup> Because the *Essay* provides the intellectual framework within which Locke develops his critique of the vices and defects of the understanding, it provides the grounds from which Locke launches the *Conduct*’s more constructive project of overcoming of the prejudices of the mind.

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<sup>130</sup> Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, 85. (Waldron quotes from Locke’s *Essay*, 3.10.9.)

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

It makes sense for this reason to begin with a brief discussion of the *Essay*, and to turn more fully to the argument of the *Conduct* in the next chapter. Although we cannot do the *Essay* full justice in so short a space, we will see why Locke was wary of the educated intellect by examining a few key passages from the beginning and the middle of the work. These passages will be enough to convince Locke's readers that ordinary men, as well as those more gifted, do intellectual authorities no disservice in refusing to take them at their word. This refusal, and every man's duty to see the truth for himself as much as possible, each mutually support and tend to the same result, the central goal of Locke's whole endeavor to spread enlightenment and the universal acquisition of knowledge: the free and independent mind.

The *Essay* provides us with a natural place to begin that discussion: the same place where Locke begins it, namely in the introductory chapter and in his critique of innate ideas in Book I. This place makes for the right beginning because the teachers of innate ideas exhibit the very dangers that Locke identifies. The theme of imposing one's own thoughts, or a system of thoughts, on others is so closely bound up with the argument of Locke's *Essay* that one could say that the purpose of the entire 700-page work is to reveal the vanity of the purported teachers of mankind and the dangers, personal as well as political, of that vanity. We see evidence of this in the introductory chapter, where Locke writes,

the Knowledge, and Persuasions, which are to be found amongst Men, so various, different, and wholly contradictory; and yet asserted some where or other with such Assurance, and Confidence, that he that shall take a view of the Opinions of Mankind, observe their Opposition, and at the same time, consider the Fondness, and Devotion wherewith they are embraced; the Resolution, and Eagerness, wherewith they are maintained, may perhaps have Reason to suspect, That either there is no such thing as Truth at all; or that Mankind hath no sufficient Means to attain a certain Knowledge of it.

Why are so many contradictory important “truths” held so passionately?<sup>132</sup> This state of affairs is likely to incline a reasonable man to the view that there is no such thing as truth at all. This all makes little sense, Locke suggests. “I thought,” Locke continues, “that the first Step towards satisfying several Enquiries, the Mind of Man was very apt to run into, was, to take a Survey of our own Understandings, examine our own Powers, and see to what Things they were adapted.” Locke suggests he will consider his *Essay* a success if he can “prevail with the busy Mind of Man, to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its Comprehension; to stop, when it is at the utmost Extent of its Tether; and to sit down in a quiet Ignorance of those Things, which, upon Examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our Capacities” (*Essay*, 1.1.2). Here, indeed, is an admirable declaration of philosophic moderation.

The corrupt habits of thought that form Locke’s target in Book I of the *Essay* were deeply entrenched. He is sure that university teachers—lovers of power just as much as anyone else—are all too prone to abuse their privileged status as leaders of educated opinion. In this case, the partisans of innatism claim to be teaching the universal and absolute truth, and claim they learned it from Nature herself. But Locke shows they have little to do with Nature, and suggests, on the contrary, that they are artificially constructed doctrines kept in fashion by men who use them to compete for honor and esteem. “They are the language and business of the schools and academies of learned nations accustomed to that sort of conversation, or learning, where disputes

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<sup>132</sup> Gilbert Ryle comments, “Violent controversy was a salient mark of Locke’s age. In matters of religion above all, though followed closely by matters of politics, people who held opinions at all held them rabidly. . . . If your opinions differ from mine, then to the scaffold or to exile or to Hell you should go. Conflicts between your and my opinions could be settled only by the elimination of you whose opinions must be wrong and pernicious. . . . It is against this background of controversy without toleration that we need to read Locke’s *Essay*.” “John Locke,” *Critica: Revista Hispanoamericana de Filosofía* 1, no. 2 (May, 1967), 8.

are frequent” (*Essay*, 1.2.27). In his view, then, defenders of innatism had a bad tendency of speaking of what is the case in nature or by nature, when in fact they were only familiar with the knowledge they had been taught by other men.

This tendency leaves elites open to the charge that, either out of ignorance or ambition, they treat other, possibly more ordinary intellects with incivility, and see other minds as pawns to be acquired in a game of prestige and power.<sup>133</sup> Natural right teachers, unless they are careful not to, tend to reason, not as judicious students of nature, but as cronies of a club. The logic of this kind of reasoning goes as follows, according to Locke.

The Principles which all mankind allow for true, are innate; those that Men of right Reason admit, are the Principles allowed by all mankind; we and those of our mind, are Men of reason; therefore we agreeing, our Principles are innate: which is a very pretty way of arguing, and a short cut to Infallibility (*Essay*, 1.3.20).

In Locke’s opinion, the root of this sort of false reasoning is either vanity or ambition.

Locke concludes his discussion of innatism with the practical upshot: these teachers undermine the independence and freedom of mind necessary for an individual’s own intransigent and unyielding pursuit of the truth, a task they must personally undertake if they want to “deal fairly with their own understandings and their own souls” (*Conduct*, § 35).

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<sup>133</sup> Here is Gilbert Ryle, again: “Notoriously, Locke in his *Essay* dissects the thoughts of which the human mind is capable into their constituent ideas . . . But what were the bearings of this quasi-mechanics of our intellectual operations upon any, and *a fortiori* upon all of the variegated intellectual interests of literate people in general? If you were a passionate supporter and I was a passionate opponent of the Arian Heresy, or of the Divine Right of Kings, as at that time, we might well have been, how possibly could we find in Locke’s *Essay* a common illumination or a shareable lesson? Well, unless we were too bigoted or fanatical to be teachable at all, we could, I suggest, have found such a lesson, and Locke’s actual readers found it too.” It is a lesson, as Ryle summarizes it, in the intellectual modesty that should characterize our relationship to our own opinions: “opinions deserve[] only that degree of adherence that [is] warranted by the ratio of the amount of their evidence to their scope.” “John Locke,” 7-8.

When Men have found some general Propositions that could not be doubted of, as soon as understood, it was, I know, *a short and easy way to conclude them innate*. This being once received, it eased the lazy from the pains of search, and stopp'd the enquiry of the doubtful, concerning all that was once stiled innate: And it was of no small advantage to those who affected to be Masters and Teachers, to make this the Principle of *Principles*, That Principles must not be questioned: For having once established this Tenet, That there are innate Principles, it put their Followers upon a necessity of receiving some Doctrines as such; which was to take them off from the use of their own Reason and Judgment, and put them upon believing and taking them upon trust.

“In which posture of blind Credulity,” Locke warns, ordinary men “might be more easily governed by, and made useful to some sort of Men, who had the skill and office to principle and guide them.” In other words, for Locke intellectuals are no less given to the lust to rule than are other types of men. In fact, they are more given to it in proportion as the goods to which they lay claim—knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of the most important things—are more highly prized by others.<sup>134</sup> “Nor is it a small power it gives one Man over another, to have the Authority to be the Dictator of Principles, and Teacher of unquestionable Truths” (*Essay*, 1.4.24). In Book I of the *Essay*, Locke sees the danger that the educated intellect poses as one of pretension to knowledge and wisdom of the most important things, a pretension that may distract and derail the man of ordinary intellect from the progress he must make if he is to stand upon his “own legs,” see with his “own eyes,” and know by his “own understanding.”

Having examined the way Locke begins the *Essay*, let us turn now to Book III and briefly examine Locke’s famous discussion of the “imperfections” and “abuses” of language and their

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<sup>134</sup> Edward Feser, in *Locke* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 97-100, comments, “The attraction of Locke’s philosophy, [Gilbert Ryle] suggested, was that its rather deflationary account of knowledge seemed to make possible a way of defusing the fierce, indeed sometimes violent, political and religious disputes that characterized the times in which he wrote. . . . If this interpretation is correct, then the ultimate import of the seemingly abstruse metaphysical and epistemological doctrines developed in Locke’s *Essay* is practical and political.”

“remedies.” Language is, according to Locke, an imperfect instrument for the expression of our thoughts, for primarily two reasons.

Words having naturally no signification, the *Idea* which each stands for, must be learned and retained by those, who would exchange Thoughts, and hold intelligible Discourse with others, in any Language. But this is hardest to be done, where, *First*, The *Ideas* they stand for, are very complex, and made up of a great number of *Ideas* put together. *Secondly*, Where the *Ideas* they stand for, have no certain connexion in Nature; and so no settled Standard, any where in Nature existing [or “which Standard is not easy to be known”], to rectify and adjust them by (*Essay*, 3.9.5).

The uncertain signification of words especially plagues even well-meaning discussions of morality, the subject that lies at the heart of the law of nature. Often moral disagreements are rooted in imprecise speech or the use of unclear ideas, or the use of certain words about which discussants disagree as to the meaning. Locke writes, “Where shall one find any, either *controversial Debate*, or *familiar Discourse*, concerning *Honour*, *Faith*, *Grace*, *Religion*, *Church*, etc. wherein it is not easy to observe the different Notions Men have of them” (*Essay*, 3.9.5)? The imperfection of words makes meaningful moral discourse difficult. This in itself would be obstacle enough, but the problems that stem from the imperfection of language are compounded by mistakes, some of which are intentional.

The university, and sometimes even the church, often seem to be places full of “hard words”—Locke’s phrase for a cacophony of learned gibberish that perplexes the mind and darkens the understanding. Hard words are not just big words that send a man to the dictionary; rather, they are words that are “insignificant,” in the sense of incoherent or, worse, meant to obscure the meaning of an author. It is primarily by an intentional or unintentional sophistry of words, according to Locke, that educated intellects lead astray.

One may observe, in all Languages, certain Words, that if they be examined, will be found, in their first Original and their appropriated Use, not to stand for any clear and



distinct *Ideas*. These, for the most part, the several Sects of philosophy and religion have introduced. For their authors, or promoters, either affecting something singular and out of the way of common apprehensions, or to support some strange Opinions, or cover some Weakness of their Hypothesis, seldom fail to *coin* new Words, and such as, when they come to be examined, may justly be called *insignificant Terms*. For having either had no determinate Collection of *Ideas* annexed to them, when they were first invented; or at least such as, if well examined, will be found inconsistent, 'tis no wonder if afterwards, in the vulgar use of the same party, they remain empty Sounds, with little or no signification, amongst those who think it enough to have them often in their Mouths, as the distinguishing Characters of their Church, or School, without much troubling their heads to examine, what are the precise *Ideas* they stand for (*Essay*, 3.10.2).

The abuse of words is distinguished from the natural imperfections of language. Whereas language is naturally imperfect, abuse implies responsibility. Locke speaks of the “*wilful Faults and Neglects*, which Men are guilty of, in this way of Communication [i.e., the use of words].” Though language is naturally slippery, “wilful faults” are abuses that men could remedy.

Locke insists in his next chapter, “Of the Remedies of the foregoing Imperfections and Abuses,” that teachers might be less magisterial and more honestly present the doubtfulness of their own teachings where appropriate. But this great degree of honesty is by no means easy to display when one’s reputation for knowledge (if not one’s knowledge itself) crucially depends on

others' esteem and plays a significant role in one's academic success.<sup>135</sup> Locke saw that in the academy the desire for honor is inflamed by the arts of "Rhetorick" and "Disputation," which give men a great personal stake in winning arguments and destroying intellectual opponents.

I leave it then to be considered, what the learning of Disputation is, and how well they are employed for the advantage of themselves or others . . . who spend their Lives in Disputes and Controversies. When I shall see any of those Combatants strip all his Terms of Ambiguity and Obscurity, (which every one may do in the Words he uses himself) I shall think him a Champion for Knowledge, Truth, and Peace, and not the Slave of Vain-glory, Ambition, or a Party (*Essay*, 3.11.7).

There may be copious talk of what is true, but what is pursued is the glory of a fine reputation.

While imperfections in the use of language are natural, the desire to be esteemed for one's knowledge and wisdom inclines men away from an honest assessment of their own thoughts.

Locke insists in this same chapter that "Merchants and Lovers, Cooks and Taylors, have Words wherewithal to dispatch their ordinary Affairs; and so, I think, might Philosophers and Disputants too, if they had a Mind to understand, and to be clearly understood" (*Essay*, 3.11.10).

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<sup>135</sup> In his debate with Leo Strauss over the meaning of Xenophon's *Hiero*, Alexandre Kojève insists in a footnote that intellectuals are at least as—and in fact probably more—susceptible to vanity as anyone else. Intellectuals "are on the whole more vain than men of action. Indeed, it is readily understandable why they would be. Men do the specific things they do in order to *succeed* or "to achieve success" (and not to fail). Now, the "success" of an undertaking involving action can be measured by its objective "outcome" (a bridge that does not collapse, a business that makes money, a war won, a state that is strong and prosperous, etc.), independently of other people's opinion of it, while the "success" of a book or of an intellectual discourse is nothing but other people's recognition of its value. So that the intellectual depends very much more than does the man of action . . . on other people's admiration, and he is more sensitive than the man of action to the absence of such admiration. Without it, he has absolutely no valid reason to admire himself, while the man of action can admire himself on account of his objective (even solitary) "successes." And that is why, as a general rule, the intellectual who does nothing but talk and write is more "vain" than the man who acts." "Tyranny and Wisdom," in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, Revised and Expanded edition, Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence, eds. V. Gourevitch and M. S. Roth (Chicago: University Press, 2000), 162.

“Hard terms” are for Locke more the product of a lust for glory than of any real desire to see and communicate the truth about things; they are used to show off and to acquire a following.

We may compare the situation in the intellectual world to the problem in the state of nature we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, for they are analogous. Just as in the state of nature self-love and interest sooner or later prevent harmonious living among men, and make government necessary, so in the university and in intellectual pursuits generally, self-love and interest combine and tempt individuals to be vain, self-serving, and more interested in acquiring a following or being loyal to a sect or party, than in maintaining a posture of humility towards the truth and sharing it in good faith. As in the state of nature the law of nature is present, but, requiring study and lacking the power of enforcement, is ignored, so in the intellectual world the truth is available, but, requiring diligent, inglorious, and “long poring in the dark,” is left behind in the race for honor, power, and esteem. And, as the powerful forces of self-love and interest make a criminal try to avoid punishment in order to make good on his crimes (“he who was so unjust as to do his brother an injury, will scarce be so just as to condemn himself for it”), so vanity and self-love in matters of the mind give men an incentive to cover their errors, and the doubtfulness of their propositions, with “hard words” and “insignificant speech.”

Locke’s charge against “intellectuals” in general underlies the spirit of his critique of innate theoretical and moral principles, too, which we discussed in the first two chapters. As Locke characterizes it, the appeal to reason and to the right to the use of one’s own reason, which he takes very seriously, existed uneasily alongside those theoretical and moral principles that had become in his time (and in his word), an “unquestionable” orthodoxy. While one may protest in the name of that orthodoxy, and not without some reason, that Locke in his polemic was now and

then unfair in describing the complex and nuanced position that is innatism, it cannot be denied that the appeal made by that tradition to nature was to his mind wholly questionable. Although in his polemic Locke succeeded in placing the burden of proof on the defenders of innatism, rather than on those who deny it, one cannot say that he definitively proved his case; rather, the question taken up there remains, as it were, a question. This fact, however, cuts Locke's way: questions are for those who need and want to think; and understanding is, in Locke's view, precisely what is required for a healthy, prudent sense of morality—one that permits itself to consider in any given case both what justice requires and where one's true advantage lies.

Thinking, according to Locke, is an endeavor full of patience, circumspection, and sincerity, and its principle goal (if not its only) is a person's own "epistemic hygiene." "To match the discourses of all he shall meet with, as if nothing could come amiss to him and his head was so well a stored magazine that nothing could be proposed which he was not master of and was readily furnished to entertain anyone on," is not the aim (*Conduct*, § 19).

I do not expect . . . [that] the assent should in everyone be proportioned to the grounds and clearness wherewith every truth is capable to be made out, or that men should be perfectly kept from error; that is more than human nature can by any means be advanced to; I aim at no such unattainable privilege; I am only speaking of what they should do who would deal fairly with their own minds and make a right use of their faculties in the pursuit of truth; we fail them a great deal more than they fail us (*Conduct*, § 34).

"We fail them a great deal more than they fail us." This captures the spirit of Locke's defense of native rustic reason. According to Locke, reason is nature's finest gift—considering its potential—but it is "almost worthless" without labor. And for each of us, this means our own labor.

If it is true that we have a right and a duty to use our reason in this way, we can see why, for Locke, those of ordinary intellect as well as those more gifted ought to develop a healthy skepticism regarding the pronouncements of various intellectual and religious authorities. "Not

that I want a due respect to other Men's Opinions," Locke writes, "but, after all, the *greatest reverence is due to Truth*" (*Essay*, 1.4.23). Locke gives us good reasons to be wary of the imposition that would prevent us from exercising this, our most fundamental duty or right, and to do what we can to grasp the truth ourselves. In calling us to this task, which Locke does in part by raising the possibility that our teachers are not motivated by a love of truth but by a desire to be recognized for having it—which is a narrower kind of self-interest—Locke reminds us that the proper posture of the mind towards truth is one of humility, not arrogance or dogmatism.

We are taught to clothe our minds as we do our bodies after the fashion in vogue . . . [and] taking the whole world, how much of it do truth and orthodoxy possess together?<sup>136</sup>

Our own very tempers dispose us to a right use of our understandings if we would follow, as we should, the inclinations of our nature.<sup>137</sup>

—John Locke

#### **Chapter Four: “Native Rustic Reason” and Prejudice**

The potential of native rustic reason, as Locke calls it, is central to his defense of the possibility of enlightenment and therefore also of self-rule. The natural endowments that human beings share almost universally by nature are enough for each person to undertake, in at least some form, the care of his or her own “epistemic hygiene.” In the last chapter, the main obstacles to this undertaking turned out to be two: either a belief that making progress in understanding the law of nature was not available to or not possible for ordinary citizens, or an unthinking trust in our teachers. These two were also, as we saw, deeply related: trust in authority is necessary where opportunities for the cultivation of reason are either unavailable or impossible for an individual. This last case—the sheer impossibility of making such progress on account of lacking the requisite level of natural intellectual endowment—is, according to Locke, quite rare, for most of what is attributed to natural ability is in fact a product of labor.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> *Conduct*, § 34.

<sup>137</sup> *Conduct*, § 6.

<sup>138</sup> To quote again what was quoted before: “As it is in the body, so it is in the mind; practice makes it what it is, and most even of those excellences which are looked on as natural endowments will be found, when examined into more narrowly, to be the product of exercise and to be raised to that pitch only by repeated actions.” *Conduct*, § 4.

At the beginning of the last chapter, I asserted that Locke is the philosopher of liberty. But now we see that he is also, in a way, a philosopher of labor, too: he is a philosopher of labor because he is the philosopher of liberty. The case for each sort of labor—the one that creates wealth and leisure, which makes possible the one that informs and cultivates the mind—is improved and supported, as Locke sees it, by casting doubt on the intellectual integrity of cultured elites: not every scholar, professor, or priest cares more for what is true than for the reputation and recognition they receive from students, peers, or laypersons. The temptation to vanity and recognition (and, of course, laziness on the part of ordinary citizens who do have the opportunity to make such progress) are important obstacles to the cultivation of reason.

They are not, however, the only ones. The project of enlightenment as described in the last chapter—an individual's concern with his or her own epistemic hygiene—is difficult, too, because thinking, both at the individual and political levels, is beset with the problem Locke calls “prejudice.” In this chapter we transition from the vices that arise from within individuals to the dangers to the progress of understanding that come primarily from without. Ideas can be dangerous things: they lie at the bottom of and support that political danger we know as partisanship and the religious danger we call sectarianism; they form the rallying cries of parties and the dogmas of sects. Ideas make prejudice possible, and in so doing they introduce not only a great potential for instability to our political life, but also form another obstacle to the enlightenment that would lead us to a sound understanding of the law of nature. It is to this problem that we turn in this chapter. Here our subject is the prejudices “imbibed from education, party, reverence, fashion, interest, etc.” (*Conduct*, § 10). These are, on the whole, more “social”

kinds of phenomena—which have effects on individuals—for we “imbibe” our prejudices.

Prejudice of one kind or another forms a powerful obstacle to knowledge.

This chapter is organized as follows. I first describe the problem of prejudice as it appeared to Locke in his time. The orthodoxy with which Locke was most familiar was a Christian one, and as he explains it the emphasis in Christianity on having the right beliefs lends itself to the tendency to persecute and dominate human beings in ways that make it difficult to distinguish between performing the duty of charity towards others and the pleasures of ruling them. In this section I argue that, according to Locke, ordinary citizens cannot help but become deeply prejudiced in circumstances where varieties of religious ideas are available and they are required to believe and conform to one set of them. I also argue, however, that in Locke’s view neither tolerance nor force can help a man discover his own prejudices, and that this points to the limits of the good that policies of toleration can bring about.

This discussion in turn leads us to consider Locke’s enlightenment rationalism as a whole. The tendency to persecution is so powerful, and so ugly, that it is conceivable, I suggest, that Locke’s whole political philosophy—including the statesmanlike way he conducts his epistemological arguments in the *Essay*—is designed to declaw the intellectual elites (Christian or otherwise) who are inclined to this vice as well as the follies and prejudices of ordinary citizens that help to make their own domination by others possible. I think to a large extent that this is one of the ends Locke serves in his writings generally. However, this broad interpretation does not easily square with what Locke says in many places concerning the place and value of religious faith in a person’s life and the contribution he understands it to make to the order and security of society. Three brief examples: Locke gives pride of place to theology among



sciences; he insists that it is not irrational to believe in a God, even though it cannot be finally demonstrated; and he tells us in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* that “the true principle and measure of virtue . . . is the knowledge of a man’s duty, and the satisfaction it is to obey his maker, in following the dictates of that light God has given him, with the hopes of acceptation and reward” (§ 61). The “hopes” of God’s “acceptation and reward” give life and vigor to the duty involved in “following the dictates of that light God has given” us; in Locke’s view, God calls us to be rational and to improve our reason. These examples support the view that Locke saw more good in faith and religion than evil, and that his was no attempt to make it disappear. However that may be, in this central section we consider whether Locke is building anything up or only tearing something down; in other words, we consider whether Locke has a teaching only on avoiding a bad life or also on living the good one.

Finally, in the last section of the chapter, I turn to Locke’s teaching on the overcoming of prejudice in the *Conduct* (the *Conduct*, in fact, plays a prominent role throughout the entire chapter). This is, I argue there, the most interesting part of the *Conduct*. Moreover, in those places where Locke discusses things like prejudice and partiality, the temptation to conformity (made possible by the existence of both formal and informal kinds of orthodoxy), and the necessity we have to think and see for ourselves, the rhetoric is at times arresting. I show in this section that there is for Locke no real institutional safeguard against all manner of prejudice. The solution is ultimately the individual’s own willingness to examine his or her own most deeply held opinions. Locke says this is not easy and that it requires an effort of the heart and the mind, and so it is “seldom done.” To conclude the chapter, I discuss a powerful objection to Locke’s teaching on prejudice, one that asserts Locke’s solution to prejudice is not only impossible—

because it tries to build a foundation of knowledge from outside all common opinions about the world—but also rhetorically constructed in order to shame readers out of their reliance on the ideas of the past, especially religious ideas, and make them fall in love not only with the new science, but also the idea of enlightenment generally.

### A Christian Kind of Charity

Let us begin, then, with an example, one of Locke's own: Christians forcefully imposing their views upon or persecuting other Christians on "the Pretences of Loyalty and Obedience to the Prince, or of Tenderness and Sincerity in the Worship of God" (*Letter*, 26). "Men are apt to excuse themselves" for this, Locke explains, "and think they have reason to do so, if they have but a pretense that it is for God or a good cause, that is, in effect, for themselves, their own persuasion or party." Why? Because, Locke explains, it is to persuasions and parties that "the several sects of men, especially in matters of religion, entitle God and a good cause" (*Conduct*, § 14). The problem being described here is the tendency to conflate our private advantage with the common good, or to confuse our own limited perspective with the whole truth—even God's truth. Of course, it is not impossible that our private advantage and interest are compatible with the common good; nor is it impossible that our own limited perspective is also true. But the simple identification of the one with the other, or showing the degree to which they differ, requires a reasonable argument; it requires more than a good intention. To good intentions all parties make an appeal, but Locke claims to see something else in the case.

Whatsoever some People boast of the Antiquity of Places and Names, or of the Pomp of their Outward Worship; Others, of the Reformation of their Discipline; All, of the Orthodoxy of their Faith; (for every one is Orthodox to himself:) These things, and all

others of this nature, are much rather Marks of Men striving for Power and Empire over one another, than of the Church of Christ (*Letter*, 23).

Just as Locke distinguished in the last chapter the love of truth from the love of self and vanity, so here he distinguishes the love of truth from the love of power and dominion over others. This ambition to rule others with and according to one's own ideas is easily hidden from partisans and sectarians because "every one is Orthodox to himself": it might not feel to partisans or sectarians themselves as though they are indulging their own lust to rule.

Now, it is not the case that partisans and sectarians are dishonest and ambitious just because Locke says so. Indeed, if the actors themselves are not aware that in imposing on others they indulge their own lust for rule and dominion—if to them it feels, say, like responsible love and charitable duty—how can Locke be sure that it is? What makes Locke confident that the sincerity to which "Christians in their several sects" pretend is, as he calls it, a pretense? Dislike of feeling imposed upon is no demonstration that those who "impose" do so out of a lust to rule and a desire to make us think like themselves. Besides, what if it is the case not only that they sincerely believe what they say, but also that what they say is true? However that may be, Locke does not seem to think that the use of force alone gives anyone grounds to claim that the use of that force is not rooted in love. Can there not be such a thing as the well-meaning but misguided use of persuasion or force? What evidence can Locke produce to make good on the distinction he makes between the darker side of Christian charity—"striving for Power and Empire"—and an honest to goodness concern for another's salvation—the "striving for . . . the Church of Christ" through a humble and sincere sharing of the faith? How, in short, could Locke claim to know that a given appeal to charity or duty is a pretense?

This is Locke's answer:

I appeal to the Consciences of those that persecute, torment, destroy, and kill other Men upon pretence of Religion, whether they do it out of Friendship and Kindness towards them, or no: And I shall then indeed, and not till then, believe they do so, when I shall see those fiery Zealots correcting, in the same manner, their Friends and familiar Acquaintance, for the manifest Sins they commit against the Precepts of the Gospel . . . for if it be out of a Principle of Charity, as they pretend, and Love to Mens Souls, that they deprive them of their estates, maim them with corporeal Punishments, starve and torment them in noisom Prisons, and in the end even take away their Lives . . . why then do they suffer *Whoredom, Fraud, Malice, and such like enormities*, which (according to the Apostle) manifestly relish of Heathenish Corruption, to predominate so much and abound amongst their Flocks and People? These, and such like things, are certainly more contrary to the Glory of God, to the Purity of the Church, and to the Salvation of Souls, than any conscientious Dissent from Ecclesiastical Decisions, or Separation from Publick Worship, whilst accompanied with Innocency of Life. Why then does this burning Zeal for God, for the Church, and for the Salvation of Souls; burning, I say, literally, with Fire and Faggot; pass by those moral Vices and Wickednesses, without any Chastisement, which are acknowledged by all Men to be diametrically opposite to the Profession of Christianity; and bend all its Nerves either to the introducing of Ceremonies, or to the establishment of Opinions, which for the most part are about nice and intricate Matters, that exceed the Capacity of ordinary Understandings (*Letter*, 24)?

In a word: hypocrisy. It is not the use of force that allows Locke to claim that some Christian charity is really a striving for power and empire over others; no, the inference from the use of force to a lack of love on the part of those who employ force—as if there were no such thing as loving punishment, wherein the punisher thinks, and thinks only, of the good of the punished—is too quick. Whether the use of force has the power to change minds and hearts is another question. For Locke what makes possible the charge that this kind of “charity” is selfish is the fact that we do not punish our pals, family members, spouses, or even ourselves: a “fiery zealot” worth his salt would insist on the strict discipline of his own loving mother, too.

Locke claims, however, to have observed that they do not do this; in fact, so far from correcting their best friends or their selves, they pass by the sins and vices of their own “Flocks and People.” Having established some support for the charge of hypocrisy in this way, Locke draws the conclusion that seems to him warranted in the case: this kind of political and

theological wrangling has for its real foundation, not Christian love, but a struggle “for Power and Empire” over others. But “whosoever will lift himself under the Banner of Christ, must in the first place, and above all things, make War upon his own Lusts and Vices” (*Letter*, 23).

If any one do otherwise, and whilst he is cruel and implacable towards those that differ from him in Opinion, he be indulgent to such Iniquities and Immoralities as are unbecoming the Name of a Christian, let such a one talk never so much of the Church, he plainly demonstrates by his Actions, that ‘tis another Kingdom he aims at, and not the Advancement of the Kingdom of God (*Letter*, 25).

Locke distinguishes two sorts of aspiration: one for “the Kingdom of God” and the other for “Power and Empire” in this world. The use of force alone does not allow us to distinguish between the two; for the choice to use force could be a well-meaning error based on the misunderstanding that through force we can change other people’s ideas and beliefs. What Locke tries to show here is that, wherever a zealous man skips over his friends by indulging their unChristian vices, or fails to make war on his own, his attempt to root out unsound doctrine in others is actually the sign of a lust for power. Such a struggle usually concerns “nice and intricate Matters, that exceed the Capacity of ordinary Understandings.” (For example, take the “substance” of the bread and wine during the Eucharist: is it just bread and wine, or is it really the body and blood of Christ? We know what Locke thinks about our ability to know the “substances” of things.) This struggle for power is over the interpretation of Christian doctrine, or in other words, Christian religious *ideas* of one sort or another. Which set of ideas shall be asserted, affirmed, and reaffirmed; which shall rule? Ideas play a crucial role in this contest.

Locke argues later in the *Letter* that Christian doctrine does not authorize the use of force, and elsewhere that the spread of Christianity does not require force (early Christianity spread despite being widely persecuted), but neither of these is his argument here in the first part of the

*Letter*. Even supposing that Christian doctrine plainly authorized the use of force for the extirpation of unbelief, sin, and vice, Locke could—and would—still level this charge of hypocrisy everywhere that force was used disproportionately against one’s enemies instead of one’s friends. Although in other ways Locke’s argument does depend on what the Bible teaches, Locke develops a kind of argument here that does not depend on the Bible’s teaching on the use of force. In particular, the force of the charge of hypocrisy depends on Locke’s elevation of the importance of Christian behavior in relation to Christian belief. If having the right Christian opinions is more important than behaving in the right Christian manner, then the charge would seem to be less strong. And on the contrary, if Christian behavior is just as important as Christian belief, or even more important, then it is strong.

Falling short of “the glory of God,” even merely through here and there a peccadillo, makes no Christian a hypocrite; after all, the New Testament informs every man that he is a sinner in need of redemption.<sup>139</sup> But punishing one’s enemies instead of one’s friends, and tolerating habitual deviations from Christian behavior by one’s friends while punishing deviations from Christian doctrine by others, convinces Locke that persecutors do not act out “friendship and kindness” towards those they persecute and that therefore their appeal in the case to charity is a “pretense.” Theirs is no small sin; it is systematic injustice. So, Locke can make this charge of hypocrisy stick regardless of the Bible’s teaching on the use of force.

This struggle for uniformity of religious opinion (or, in fact, of any opinion) is not easily confined to an isolated case or two, but necessarily has the power, Locke thinks, to infect ordinary citizens and even whole societies with prejudice. For when it is the case in religious

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<sup>139</sup> Romans 3:23 (KJV).

matters that men are “not permitted to be always wavering and uncertain”—as would be the case wherever, diverse religious options beings present, governors of nations do not pursue a policy of toleration but conformity—there men “must embrace and profess some tenets or other,” on the basis of “some principles or other,” which “can be no other than such as they have and can manage” (*Conduct*, § 6). “The world is apt to cast great blame on those who have an indifferency for opinions, especially in religion. I fear this is the foundation of great error and worse consequences” (*Conduct*, § 12). As a result of the pressure of such a requirement, ordinary citizens, who might not have the leisure, ability, or even the inclination to search out religious truths and propositions to the bottom, are unavoidably swept up in a dangerous religious struggle that takes place on the social and political plane.

Under such circumstances, ordinary citizens cannot avoid losing, or failing to attain, the independence of mind that ought to be, or might be in actual fact, their aspiration, for they are compelled to defend, somehow, the set of ideas they are forced to adopt but do not understand. “To be indifferent which of two opinions is true is the right temper of the mind that preserves it from being imposed on and disposes it to examine with that indifference till it has done its best to find the truth; and this is the only direct and safe way to it” (*Conduct*, § 12). But where it is necessary to choose, “it would be a shame, nay a contradiction, too heavy for anyone's mind to lie constantly under, for him to pretend seriously to be persuaded of the truth of any religion and yet not to be able to give any reason of one's belief or to say anything for his preference of this to any other opinion” (*Conduct*, § 6). The pressure to choose requires either that ordinary citizens rely on insufficient principles and ideas in their own minds, or on other men's opinions, in order to avoid the shame that accompanies defending principles and beliefs one does not understand.

In either case the possibility of independence of mind is foreclosed, at least for those who want it (the lazy, however, Locke observes, might feel “eased . . . from the pains of search”). Under these circumstances, other men’s ideas and prejudices quickly and easily become deeply our own. Toleration, then, serves an important purpose: it frees the mind to consider the truth of things without the pressure, at least the official pressure, of having to choose, make manifest to others, and defend one’s beliefs. In this limited way, tolerance provides the opportunity for independence of mind. But there are limits to what toleration can accomplish. By itself it no more produces clarity of thought than the use of force persuades anyone of what is true. What produces clarity of thought is the careful and diligent labor involved in circumspect inquiry.

The problem of prejudice, especially here in its Christian manifestation, invites us to reconsider again the purpose and aim of Locke’s enlightenment rationalism. Locke lived in a Christian epoch, but it was a Christian epoch plagued by various kinds of persecution. Is it conceivable that Locke’s teaching on knowledge, on the limits of what we can know for certain, is designed solely to address and correct this one ugly tendency, namely, the tendency to persecute others on account of their false religious opinions (a tendency to which the Christian religion, with all its emphasis on having the right beliefs about matters that are, according to its own doctrine, ultimately mysterious, might seem to lend itself mightily)? If this is the thrust and purpose of Locke’s teaching on knowledge, then one might say its true function is to undermine the confidence we place in religious teachings generally and Christianity in particular, and thereby to declaw and defang all genuine believers not only of their “pretenses” but also, in a way, of the warmth and confidence in their own faith. Its real purpose would be, on this understanding, to make appear utterly irrational, on the grounds that our minds are neither fit nor



capable of knowing the truth, all pretense of knowing the truth and thus all persecution in its name. If this is the tendency of Locke's thought, its effect is primarily critical and destructive.

On the other hand, and as we saw in the first chapter, Locke begins the *Essay* with an homage to the hunt for truth and a warning against radical skepticism and its primary effect, which is to despair of knowing anything at all. That despair, we might note in passing, has the potential to lead one into precisely the kind of zealotry Locke warns against—one that leads a man not to care whether his opinions are true or false and just to stick to a party or the opinions of his group. In addition to this, in various ways throughout the *Essay* and the *Conduct* Locke reminds his readers that their happiness depends in part upon their making progress in understanding, especially since understanding guides us in those actions that are up to us to do. It is of more than a little importance, Locke claims, for citizens to have ideas of justice and of the obligation to be just “steady and settled” in their minds (*Conduct*, § 9). And considering at least the bare possibility of another life to come will be the business of every person who undertakes the project of his own enlightenment; for no rational man, Locke says, can help considering, sooner or later, the possibility of a future life and his stake in it (*Essay*, 4.20.6). Our doubts about the afterlife can be a powerful encouragement to rational thought and considered reflection. Finally, what is the point of recommending to his readers in the *Conduct* the study of theology as the queen of the sciences and of demonstrating in the *Essay* that believing in God is a reasonable thing to do, if Locke's purpose is merely to undermine the force of such belief (*Conduct*, § 23; *Essay*, 4.10)? Is it possible that the tendency of Locke's thought is more than merely critical and destructive? Does Locke have a positive teaching on what we ought to believe and on how we ought to live? Does he have a teaching concerning “the good life”?

### Interpreting Locke's Enlightenment Rationalism

I have been arguing that the idea of an independent mind is central to Locke's political philosophy. In Locke's view, independence of mind is brought about in individuals by the cultivation of their reason, which makes possible the refinement of their faculty of judgment concerning what is both truly beneficial and just. But what is the point of this cultivation, really? If it is true, as Locke himself claims, that real certainty is not available to us, how do we interpret Locke's thoroughgoing rationalism—his desire that “reason” rule both in the minds of individuals and in political communities, and his teaching that all men can and should attempt to make progress in the improvement of their minds and the cultivation of their understanding?

Broadly speaking, there are two views that one might take towards Locke's effort here, two views of what lies at the root of Locke's constant and unwavering insistence that men improve their minds. The first is largely favorable: Locke's effort is a noble one rooted in a love of mankind and a desire that men fulfill as much as possible that to which their nature points. In particular, and above all, Locke is concerned to show that in fulfilling their natures men become, as one commentator puts it, “masters”—not of others, but of themselves—and to show that they can use their reason to do this.<sup>140</sup> The second is less favorable: Locke's effort is rooted in a fear of genuine individuality and eccentricity—it is the product of an ignoble “pusillanimity of vision” and “weakness of nerve” regarding the potential disorderliness that accompanies all real human freedom. True, he talks about “reason,” but only because it is the instrument by which men become pliable, obedient, and safe for one another and themselves.<sup>141</sup> Our explication and

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<sup>140</sup> Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom*, ix.

<sup>141</sup> Mehta, *Anxiety of Freedom*, 118.

analysis of Locke's teaching on prejudice must be informed by each of these critical views. To this end, we now briefly examine the argument of each of these camps.

In *Reasoned Freedom*, Schouls, who we bring in as the representative of the favorable interpretation, argues that, for Locke, increasing the ability of men to think abstractly, especially about math, morality, and theology—and not the experimentalism of the new science providing knowledge of physical things—is the real foundation of his teaching on moral and political freedom. Locke did indeed argue in the *Essay* that there was a clarity available in moral discourse that was not available in the physical sciences (!), and that this clarity could be appropriated by individuals who can learn to think clearly about ideas. Moral ideas—like virtue and vice, justice and injustice, obligation and permission, right and wrong—are “abstract,” for Locke; they fall into that category of ideas that he calls “mixed modes.”

In order that we not balk at the idea that clarity of thought about our own ideas is one of those pillars on which Locke understood moral and political freedom to rest, here is the argument drawn from Locke's own words in the *Conduct*.

Outward corporeal objects that constantly importune our senses and captivate our appetites fail not to fill our heads with lively and lasting ideas of that kind [i.e., of sensible objects]. Here the mind needs not be set upon getting greater store; they offer themselves fast enough and are usually entertained in such plenty and lodged so carefully, that the mind wants room or attention for others that it has more use and need of. To fit the understanding . . . for such reasoning as I have been above speaking of, care should be taken to fill it with moral and more abstract ideas; for these not offering themselves to the senses, but being to be framed to the understanding, people are generally so neglectful of a faculty they are apt to think wants nothing, that I fear most men's minds are more unfurnished with such ideas than is imagined. . . . to convince people of what moment it is to their understandings to be furnished with such abstract ideas steady and settled in it, give me leave to ask how anyone shall be able to know whether he be obliged to be just, if he has not established ideas in his mind of obligation and of justice, since knowledge consists in nothing but the perceived agreement or disagreement of those ideas; and so of all others the like which concern our lives and manners (§ 9).

Locke is not incorrectly dubbed the “father of empiricism,” if by that we mean the guiding of our knowledge and assent as much as possible by the rigorous scientific investigation of the physical and material world in which we live, breath, and feel ourselves existing. Such investigations, however, hardly exhaust the kind of things we need and desire to know; they are certainly not “morality and divinity; those parts of knowledge, that men are most concerned to be clear in” (*Essay*, Epistle to the Reader). His reputation as an empiricist notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to suggest that this “British sensualist” regarded as unintelligible those ideas that have neither a physical referent in the world nor describe a material object: on the contrary, moral rules might be “capable of demonstration” (*Essay*, 1.3.1).<sup>142</sup> These ideas are not only intelligible, but also the ones that we have “more use and need of” because these—and these alone—teach us how to use our freedom and guide us in the conduct of our lives. Just as justice and obligation, which are ideas—they do not grow on trees: they exist in human minds—teach us that we are “obliged to be just,” so other, similar ideas lie at the bottom and inform us of the extent of our duties and the bounds of our privilege in all things “which concern our lives and manners.”

Locke is concerned with abstract ideas like morality and divinity because men are born free; they can choose whether and how they will do the things that are up to them to do. In

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<sup>142</sup> To be sure, an argument claiming that morality is “capable of demonstration” is different from an argument that claims to have demonstrated both all of what morality requires of us and that we are truly obliged to fulfill these requirements. Locke, famously if somewhat frustratingly, confines himself to the argument that morality might be “capable of demonstration”; he neither fully and comprehensively shows what it consists in nor demonstrates that we are truly obliged to be moral. Sometimes even his claim that the rules of morality are capable of demonstration is framed in the language of “probability”: “the idea of a supreme being, infinite in power, goodness, and wisdom, whose workmanship we are, and on whom we depend; and the idea of ourselves, as understanding rational beings; being such as are clear in us, would, *I suppose*, if duly considered and pursued, afford such foundations of our duty and rules of action, as *might* place morality amongst the sciences capable of demonstration.” *Essay*, 4.3.18; my emphases.

Locke's language, a man's understanding is what determines what he voluntarily "sets himself about" (*Conduct*, § 1). "We are born free, as we are born rational; not that we have actually the exercise of either: age, that brings one, brings with it the other too" (*Second Treatise*, § 61); and "though we all call ourselves so because we are born to it if we please, yet we may truly say nature gives us but the seeds of it. We are born to be, if we please, rational creatures, but 'tis use and exercise only that makes us so" (*Conduct*, § 6). To say that we are "born to be masters" is a characterization of Locke's view of human potential and purpose. If men are guided in their freedom by their understanding, and if they are capable of improving their understanding—each of which Locke claims—then perhaps they are, as Schouls boldly asserts, "born to be masters."<sup>143</sup>

To use the language of "mastery" to describe Locke's teaching on education and the progress of the understanding is somewhat strange, however. It brings to mind, among other things, Aristotle's doctrine of the natural master and slave. Locke does not recognize natural masters: his central political doctrine in the *Second Treatise*—the very heart of his political philosophy—is, first, that men are born free, and second, that legitimate authority is no one's natural right because legitimate authority is always based on consent. The only kind of political authority to which men can freely and rationally consent is an artificial construction; no one merits it by their "virtue." Schouls's use of the term "mastery" requires a bit of explanation, then, if it is to be properly and usefully applied to the understanding of Locke.

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<sup>143</sup> Schouls's full sentence, from which we quoted above, is striking: "Human beings, for Locke, are born to be masters." *Reasoned Freedom*, ix. Although Locke is rarely so blunt, the Lockean gentlemanly ideal does heavily emphasize the idea of self-mastery, especially of the potentially unruly human passions and the potentially greatly disordered human imagination.

By using “mastery” to describe the goal of Locke’s education, Schouls means to point to something entirely different than a comparison of Locke’s teaching with Aristotle’s doctrine of the natural ruler; Schouls means something akin to the idea of individual autonomy that we find in Kant. “It is Locke’s position,” writes Schouls, “that each human being is rational by nature, and that the meaning of “rational” remains constant: “rational” always designates the human power of reasoning and the human willingness to act in accordance with the dictates of one’s reason.”<sup>144</sup> According to Schouls, because Locke takes man to be by nature free and rational, he thinks it is man’s good to be master of himself, and in such a way that he acquires the abilities to think rationally and to routinely submit his will to the voice of sound reason.

There is a human “ideal” here. The successful ruling of mind and desire by reason means, in more practical terms, that a man becomes master of the passions in his soul and overcomes the prejudices of his mind. In Schouls’s language, he frees himself from his mental bondage and intellectual servitude “to superstition, to human institutions, and to other human

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<sup>144</sup> Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom*, 43. Schouls often uses the word “autonomy” to describe the purpose of Locke’s education. He interprets Locke’s description of the “fundamental duty which every man owes himself” once he has reached the “age of reason” as “to be critical of what custom or habit or tradition would make one accept on trust. . . . To be critical is to work at the realization of one’s autonomy.” Ibid., 8. Joseph Carrig draws back in horror at the assimilation of Locke to Kant that Schouls’s description implies; he suggests that Schouls use of the word “autonomy” to describe the purpose of a Lockean education is a “startling assertion” and that education for Locke means, ultimately, only the formation of habit. Moreover, “there is no suggestion that habits will, or should, be broken at any point.” “Liberal Impediments to Liberal Education: The Assent to Locke,” *Review of Politics* 63, no. 1 (Winter, 2001), 49, fn. 10. Later, speaking in particular of Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, which emphasizes the importance of the development of both reason and the right habits in children, Carrig insists that “the “reason” of the “reasonable” is insufficient to allow the individual who is “past a child” effectively to free himself from the “empire of habit.” “Reaching the age of reason” is merely a figure of speech. . . . The properly educated individual never escapes the control of his father, although he appears to others (and to himself as well) to be freely going about his business. In this sense, “reasonable” may be defined as *the appearance of rationality*.” Ibid., 63.

beings.”<sup>145</sup> This is the sense in which Schouls uses “master” to characterize the thrust of education after the manner of Locke; a man is born to be master, not of others, but of himself. He is born to one day manifest an orderliness of mind and soul that was not part of his original natural endowment. Without this kind of transformation and growth, which is the product above all of a Lockean education broadly understood, men are in danger of using their freedom poorly—by allowing it to waste away unproductively, or by persecuting other people—and thus turning out to be bad for themselves and others. Freedom is not for license, but for the form, restraint, and control that results in mastery of a man’s self; and this achievement is due, ultimately, to the cultivation of reason. In general, Schouls is on good Lockean grounds here. In his chapter “Of Power” in the *Essay*, Locke asks, “Is it worth the name of freedom to be at liberty

to play the fool, and draw shame and misery upon [a] man’s self? If to break loose from the conduct of reason, and to want that restraint of examination and judgment, which keeps us from choosing or doing the worse, be liberty, true liberty, madmen and fools are the only freemen: but yet, I think, nobody would choose to be mad for the sake of such liberty, but he that is mad already (2.21.50).

The submission to reason, therefore, will involve restraint and self-control, a restraint and self-control that Schouls, following Locke, sees as perfectly consistent with genuine freedom. The heading title Locke supplied for *Essay*, 2.21.50, from which this quote is drawn, is this: “A constant determination to a pursuit of happiness no abridgment of liberty.” Schouls, using his own term, calls this combination “mastery” when it becomes habitual in a person.

Schouls’s Locke is noble: he wants men and women to live up to the potential that nature bestows on them; he wants people to be all they can be. For Locke, this means the development of and obedience to reason to the fullest possible extent; and the development of reason, in turn,

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<sup>145</sup> Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom*, ix.

means the healthy discipline (not the annihilation) of the passions and the overcoming of prejudice, and all this for a man's own good and by extension the good of those that live in his political community. What makes the development of reason and the overcoming of prejudice possible is the clarity and certainty that are available in our thoughts concerning morality, math, and theology—a kind of clarity and certainty that are not as much available in our study of the natural world and its causes and effects.<sup>146</sup>

Abstract ideas, therefore, are important for Locke. The moral obligations that would inform our lives exist in the judgment, and in the judgment alone. From this arises Locke's concern with the development of clear thinking and of our ability to judge rightly "matters of greatest concernment" (*Conduct*, § 34). From this also arises Locke's insistence that moral and theological clarity are available, good to possess, and that we ought to seek them. Schouls writes, "It is this reasoning (rather than about "substances") whose very process is of prime importance in the destruction of prejudice, thus in the liberation of the reasoner's mind, and in placing the reasoner in the only position from which legitimate mastery may be achieved." "Fundamentally," Schouls concludes, "it is this reasoning on which, for Locke, both human freedom and progress depend"; it is "this function of reason . . . which allows for the

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<sup>146</sup> It is rather fascinating, I think, for Locke to imply on the one hand that morality, math, and theology are almost equally intelligible, and on the other, that they are more intelligible than the study of nature. Precisely where we are likely today to "reason in the lump," that is, to not think clearly, or worse, to believe from the start that clarity is impossible—in matters of morality and theology—Locke insisted that clarity was both necessary and possible. "In those parts of knowledge where it is *thought* demonstration has nothing to do, men reason as it were in the lump; and if, upon a summary and confused view or upon a partial consideration, they can raise the appearance of a probability, they usually rest content." *Conduct*, § 7; my emphasis. However morality and theology may ultimately fare alongside geometry, Locke definitely suggests that more clarity is available in morality and theology than in the study of nature.



characterization of Locke as a philosopher of mastery.”<sup>147</sup> One might put the matter as Schouls sees it in the following way. At the end of the *Essay*, Locke says that “All that can fall within the compass of human understanding” can be divided into three different sorts of knowledge: “physica” (or “natural philosophy”), “practica” (or “ethics”), and the “doctrine of signs” (or “logic”) (*Essay*, 4.21). In Schouls’ reading, Locke is concerned, above all, with “ethics,” “the seeking out those rules and measures of human actions, which lead to happiness, and the means to practise them.” For Locke, happiness is the end; reason, the means.

Schouls sees Locke’s education in *Some Thoughts* and in the *Conduct* as the practical presentation of the philosophy in Locke’s *Essay*, which is as it were a phenomenological description of the mind’s ability to think and judge. Even in the *Essay* Schouls understands the deeper and more pressing issue to be freedom, especially that internal freedom with which Locke associates a powerful intellectual and spiritual liberation, and with which Schouls, following Locke in spirit, if not in letter, calls “mastery.” Though we are not born with the exercise of our freedom and reason, we are born to exercise them, and to exercise them well.

We turn now to *The Anxiety of Freedom*, where Mehta, who we bring in as the representative of the less favorable view, argues that Locke’s great emphasis on the cultivation of our faculty of reason is rooted, not in the hope that men come to embody and live out the life of “reasoned freedom” to which their nature points, but in fear—fear of all minds that are unhinged, undocked, and unmoored from “reality.” Unlike Schouls’s Locke, who is noble, even bold, Mehta’s Locke is cowardly: at the root of his apparent admiration for a life lived in freedom in accordance with reason is his more fundamental fear of “the busy mind of man.” According to

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<sup>147</sup> Schouls, *Reasoned Freedom*, 15.

Mehta, the canonical interpretations of Locke fail to appreciate “a central source of Locke’s own concerns regarding the individual”: they fail “to appreciate the extent to which Locke is troubled by the natural capacities of the mind and, as a specific instance of this, its capacity and tendency to be governed by an overexcited imagination.”<sup>148</sup> For Mehta, Locke is above all a kind of psychologist who fears, and is yet fascinated by, “the natural tendencies of the mind.”<sup>149</sup>

For Schouls, the *Essay* is a revolutionary work that calls us to our true task: the emancipation and improvement of our judgment and understanding and, therefore, to mastery of ourselves, on the assumption that it is good for us to live a life in accordance with the deepest needs of our nature. Mehta, by contrast, admits that some such noble vision may have crossed Locke’s mind, but claims it neither sets his political philosophy in motion nor motivates his effort. Locke is not preoccupied with noble self-mastery, but safety, stability, and orderliness, especially in the society at large, and it is for this end that he concerns himself with the internal orderliness of the individual, and thus with the individual “mind.”<sup>150</sup> In order to show that Locke’s desire to “improve” the understanding is rooted in pusillanimity, Mehta highlights Locke’s fear of the dangers that human curiosity, “madness,” and an overexcited imagination pose for both individuals pursuing their own good as well as society in general.

At the beginning of his analysis of Locke’s view of the “busy mind,” Mehta quotes the beginning of the *Essay* where Locke writes that he will consider his *Essay* a success if he can

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<sup>148</sup> Mehta, *Anxiety of Freedom*, 92.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>150</sup> “In dealing with Locke’s understanding of the mind, we are dealing with an entity that is still in need of careful attention. We cannot assume, as Locke himself did not, that its signification is settled. . . . [Understanding its signification] demands from the author (and the reader) an attentiveness that must be sensitive to the fluid yet confident provenance of its meaning.” Ibid., 102.

succeed in prevailing “with the busy mind of man, to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension; to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether; and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things, which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities” (1.1.4). Where others have sensed here the beginning of an argument whose ultimate utility lies in teaching statesmen and other intellectual leaders how to think prudentially, rather than dogmatically, about the role of ideas, especially religious ideas, in politics, Mehta senses a psychologist’s inner recoil at the state of groundlessness and anchorlessness that men are led into by an unbounded curiosity and the search to know everything.

“It is not a “despair of knowing anything,” write Mehta, but rather a danger of “question[ing] everything,”” with which Locke is truly concerned.<sup>151</sup> “The mind’s quest for knowledge . . . must be viewed with a caution appropriate to an entity that can trip itself up or, to change the metaphor, effortlessly lead itself into a labyrinthian maze.<sup>152</sup> Like the body, the mind must be viewed with constant vigilance.” Mehta understands this danger to threaten individuals and, by implication, the communities in which they live. It is because of this fear that Mehta understands Locke to have concerned himself with “education.” To the problem of the mind’s dangerous quest for knowledge, Locke’s solution, argues Mehta, is “to mold the mind before it becomes self-conscious, to clip its excesses before they become inconveniently and incorrigibly

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 97. (Mehta quotes from Locke, *Essay*, 1.1.6.)

<sup>152</sup> Evidently this did concern Locke, at least after a fashion. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, for example, Locke worries that if one tries to derive one’s rules for living from the “sayings of the Wise, and the Declarations of Philosophers,” one enters “a wild Wood of uncertainty” and “an endless maze; from which [he] should never get out.” 153-54.

linked with the transgressive will (or conception of freedom) of an individual, and this can be done only in a very young child.”<sup>153</sup> This, for Mehta, is the real purpose of “Lockean” education.

With this understanding of Locke’s goal in mind, Mehta reads Locke’s own statement of the *Essay*’s purpose—to prevail with the “busy mind of man” to “sit down in quiet ignorance” of those things its understanding cannot reach—in the following way.

This is not the humility of a man confronted with the vast unending abundance of things to be known; nor is it a self-confident indifference stemming from the recognition that the world and knowledge of it are not organized for his understanding. Instead, Locke shows a vivid sense of timidity verging on fear that our own minds may be confounded and put at a loss by the excesses of our curiosity. [Locke’s] is an outlook that needs to order and organize not just external things but the mind itself, to give it an internal stability in the absence of this being part of its natural endowment.<sup>154</sup>

There is something “obviously disturbing,” Mehta continues, “about Locke’s theoretical restraint, his muted enthusiasm to join in the chorus of celebration that accompanies the modern age’s most cherished interpretation of itself as an age of reason, as an epoch of unbounded curiosity”; against the “extravagances” of the mind, Locke expressed “a lonely voice of dissent.” This dissent was motivated by Locke’s fear, which in Mehta’s view was not always legitimate—hence the “timidity” and “pusillanimity”—of the darker side of human eccentricity.

One should eagerly concede that Locke was not above fearing the “busy mind of man.” In his discussion of the “association of ideas” in the *Essay*, Locke explains that there is “something unreasonable in most men”: “there is scarce any one that does not observe something that seems odd to him, and is in itself really extravagant in the opinions, reasonings, and actions of other men” (*Essay*, 2.33.1). People are odd—and interesting. It is not common for anyone to

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<sup>153</sup> Mehta, *Anxiety of Freedom*, 98. Mehta continues, “Locke’s persistent effort is to bind the mind’s natural and tenacious curiosity, to link or anchor it in some particular purpose.”

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

consult the voice of reason in absolutely everything that they do; sometimes it is comfortable and pleasant just to act—and to think and opine—on a whim. This “something unreasonable” affects the ordinary as well as the ordinary intellect, the mechanic as well as the gentleman. “Men of fair minds, and not given up to the over-weening of self-flattery, are frequently guilty of it; and in many cases one with amazement hears the arguings, and is astonished at the obstinacy of a worthy man, who yields not to the evidence of reason, though laid before him as clear as day-light” (*Essay*, 2.33.2). This sort of thing, Locke insists, is properly called “madness.”<sup>155</sup> Being reasonable takes practice. The mind is by nature somewhat resistant to this development, even though it is in some ways quite malleable; it tends to be internally unstable because an organized interpretation and understanding of the world is not part of its natural endowment.

Locke claims in the *Essay* that madness is not wholly due to “self-love,” which can cause us to trample over the rights of others, nor wholly to “education,” which can, if badly managed, merely reinforce and rivet more securely in our minds the prejudices we have earlier learned.

This sort of unreasonableness is usually imputed to education and prejudice, and for the most part truly enough, though that reaches not the bottom of the disease, nor shows distinctly enough whence it rises, or wherein it lies. Education is often rightly assigned for the cause, and prejudice is a good general name for the thing itself: but yet, I think, he ought to look a little farther, who would trace this sort of madness to the root (2.33.3).<sup>156</sup>

The root of this “madness,” which is “opposition to reason,” is the wrong “connexion of ideas.”

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<sup>155</sup> “I shall be pardoned for calling it by so harsh a name as madness, when it is considered, that opposition to reason deserves that name, and is really madness; and there is scarce a man so free from it, but that if he should always, on all occasions, argue or do as in some cases he constantly does, would not be thought fitter for Bedlam than civil conversation.” *Essay*, 2.33.4.

<sup>156</sup> This use of the word “prejudice” shows us the breadth of meaning with which Locke sometimes employs it. However, the word has a more specific meaning for Locke—here he calls it only “a good general name.” I discuss this narrower meaning later in the chapter.

Some of our ideas have a natural correspondence and connexion one with another: it is the office and excellency of our reason to trace these, and hold them together in that union and correspondence which is founded in their peculiar beings. Besides this, there is another connexion of ideas wholly owing to chance or custom: ideas, that in themselves are not all of kin, come to be so united in some men's minds (*Essay*, 2.33.5).

What minds do, is put ideas together. This is one of the central premises and teachings of the *Essay*. For Locke, madness—"opposition to reason"—ultimately consists in improperly formed and connected ideas. And although wrongly associated ideas are false, because formed out of accordance with the true natures of the objects of those ideas, they are powerful, and can exercise tremendous influence over an individual's mind, and thus his thoughts and actions in the world.<sup>157</sup>

In a sound education, ideas will be rightly, as distinguished from wrongly, connected. Locke understands it to be the business of educators and tutors to facilitate this process, whatever the subject. If education after the manner of Locke is to be successful, it must mold individuality such that madness, "cogitative excess," and imaginative eccentricity are weeded out and avoided. Accordingly, an individual educated after the manner of Locke will have his individuality simultaneously "constructed" and "abridged." A man's "individuality" is, on this account, a construction that limits and restrains his eccentricity, and thus his real individuality. For Mehta, Locke's education is indeed the attempt to forge "individuality," but in order to do this it surreptitiously and "simultaneously truncates its reach, its singularity, its independence and hence limits the likelihood of its being authentically free" and therefore able to accept its own "willful eccentricity."<sup>158</sup> "The Lockean self, while exercising natural capacities, displays an

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<sup>157</sup> Mehta observes that Locke "free[s] madness from the profusion of Gothic and Christian symbolism, [he] gives it a clinical simplicity." *Anxiety of Freedom*, 107-08.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

anthropological potential that constantly threatens to extend beyond the bounds of political efficacy.”<sup>159</sup> For Mehta, Locke’s prescription of epistemic hygiene is in fact a denaturing.

This is one way of putting Mehta’s charge: there are no magnificent weirdos—no “real” or “authentic” individuals—in a Lockean world; Locke’s liberalism is only authentically boring. The Lockean man is not a liberated “master” of any genuine self, but a timid captain of a compromised and truncated self; a Lockean man is not a liberated “master,” but a cautious tinkerer with the Rube Goldberg machine that is his artificially constructed soul. Mehta reads Locke as one who feared the liberation of the individual’s curiosity and imagination and sought to channel that mental energy and potential into safer, more productive, and more beneficial pursuits. And Mehta argues that this channeling, and not any real “emancipation” or attempt at “mastery,” is what most deeply characterizes the thrust of a truly “Lockean” education. The many accomplishments and virtues of Locke’s political liberalism broadly understood are achieved, in Mehta’s view, by a compromise with genuine individuality; they are brought about by a kind of political “settlement,” which, by “various and not merely political” processes, makes concessions to individuality only after having responded to “a deep anxiety regarding the libertine excesses to which human beings are naturally prone.”<sup>160</sup>

We are faced, then, with two diametrically opposite interpretations of the purpose of Locke’s effort to cultivate reason and “improve” the conduct of the understanding. In the first view, that purpose of reason is to empower; in the second, to declaw. In the first, the individual is emancipated from his natural intellectual vices and the prejudices of his time and place for a life of genuine self-mastery and autonomy; in the second, he is intellectually and morally

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 127.

habituated against his natural inclinations by a “constructed individuality” and, unbeknownst to himself, led to identify his “constructed” with his “true” self for both his own and others’ advantage, understood as safety, regularity, and predictability. These are fascinating portraits of Locke’s understanding of the role of reason and education in our lives, and each portrait has a plausibility that students of Locke should not overlook.

Schouls’s analysis is remarkable for bringing us to consider the non-relativistic Locke, the Locke that actually has a teaching on the good life, and the potential of liberalism to facilitate it; Mehta’s analysis is remarkable, too, because it forces us to consider the sacrifices that Locke’s good life may entail for individuals living in liberal regimes. In his political thought, Locke was forced to strike a balance between the freedom of individuals and the security of society; what is perhaps surprising is that in his epistemology and philosophy of education he seems to have felt the necessity to resolve the same tension on the plane of the individual mind. This effort does make him, after a fashion, a kind of psychologist—one who is interested in how societies mold individuals and vice versa. In writing about education and the mind, he never forgets about political freedom; in writing about politics, he never forgets what it means to be truly, internally, and intellectually free. As we proceed and discuss Locke’s understanding of what it means to be free from “prejudice,” we should keep both these alternative views of the role of reason in mind.

They are each true in a way, too, although Schouls’s account is perhaps the more true. There are, I suggest, two reasons to think that Schouls’s account comes closer to the mark: one concerns Locke’s rhetoric, the other, Locke’s argument. First, his account of the role of reason does greater justice to Locke’s rhetoric of freedom, both of the intellectual and the political kind. Locke seems to take quite seriously the distinction between a free and unprejudiced mind and an



unfree and enslaved one. He writes, for example, that “They who are blind will always be led by those that see, or else fall into the ditch: and he is certainly the most subjected, the most enslaved, who is so in his understanding” (*Essay*, 4.20.6). Schouls’s account has the advantage of not having to explain away what Locke says here; Mehta, by contrast, must try to understand this rhetoric, this homage to the perception and acquisition of the truth, as having the ulterior purpose of embedding the individual, with a view to safety both for himself and others, within a society of other constructed and truncated selves. Although one should be wary of always taking philosophers at their word, Mehta’s analysis creates a puzzle that is not in fact a puzzle on Lockean grounds. The simpler of two plausible explanations should carry the day—and the readers’ assent. On the basis of Locke’s rhetoric, we are led to see that he himself sharply distinguishes the pursuit of truth from that of the safety of the society.

Second, Schouls’s account does greater justice to the argument that Locke makes on the basis of this rhetoric. He can accommodate better than Mehta the more racy accounts of individuals overcoming the prejudices of their time and place that Locke in the *Conduct* insists is possible in principle. So far from necessitating the constriction of the mind and its being embedded in a society of likeminded others, the possibility of this kind of emancipation points education after the manner of Locke towards an enlivening and enlarging of the mind. “We should not judge of things by men's opinions, but of opinions by things.” According to Locke, one can neither simply depend on what “the many” think nor on what “the philosophers” think, for “common or uncommon are not the marks to distinguish truth or falsehood.”

The multitude reason but ill, and therefore may be well suspected and cannot be relied on nor should be followed as a sure guide; but philosophers who have quitted the orthodoxy of the community and the popular doctrines of their countries have fallen into as extravagant and as absurd opinions as ever common reception countenanced. It would be

madness to refuse to breathe the common air or quench one's thirst with water because the rabble use them to these purposes; and if there are conveniences of life which common use reaches not, it is not reason to reject them because they are not grown into the ordinary fashion of the country and every villager does not know them. Truth, whether in or out of fashion, is the measure of knowledge and the business of the understanding; whatsoever is besides that, however authorized by consent or recommended by rarity, is nothing but ignorance or something worse (*Conduct*, § 24).

This strong statement shows that what is true may—or may not—be identical with the common opinions, or the opinions of the few, that are available in one's own time and place. One has to engage in the inglorious activity of finding out the truth for oneself. "Truth, whether in or out of fashion, is . . . the business of the understanding." Schouls can account more easily for this simple aspiration on the part of an individual to make progress in this kind of "business" because he reads Locke as saying that our fundamental desire is for mastery, especially self-mastery. Progress in self-mastery also means the gradual overcoming of one's prejudices, something one cannot do without defending the difference between truth and prejudice.

Mehta, by contrast, accounts for this "business" only in terms of the fears that set Locke in motion, namely the pathologies of the natural mind and especially his anxiety concerning the disordered imagination. To be sure, Locke does genuinely fear these things, but the progress in understanding he advocates is not without dangers of another kind. "He that considers is a foe to orthodoxy," whatever its character in a given time and place (*Conduct*, §34). Self-mastery means, on Mehta's view, merely the overcoming of what is dangerous and unpredictable in the self, not the gradual and continual progress of the understanding in its proper "business"; self-mastery means truncation and confinement of the soul. It means above all the making of an essentially anti-social creature into a safe, sociable, and amiable one. However, if the peace,

profit, and safety of society at large is Locke's true and only goal in relation to the education of individuals, then Mehta's account is a powerful reading of the thrust of a Lockean education.

But this view of Locke's goal, I think, is a nearly impossible sell. For Locke insists on the sharp distinction between the proper "business" of the understanding and the orthodoxy of one's place, of the activity of healthy minds and the environment in which they make progress.

All the world are born to orthodoxy; they imbibe at first the allowed opinions of their country and parts, and so, never questioning their truth, not one of a hundred ever examines. They are applauded for presuming they are in the right. He that considers is a foe to orthodoxy, because possibly he may deviate from some of the received doctrines there. And thus men without any industry or acquisition of their own inherit local truths (for it is not the same everywhere) and are inured to assent without evidence. This influences further than is thought; for what one of a hundred of the zealous bigots in all parties ever examined the tenets he is so stiff in or ever thought it his business or duty so to do? It is suspected of lukewarmness to suppose it necessary and a tendency to apostasy to go about it. . . . Thus we are taught to clothe our minds as we do our bodies after the fashion in vogue, and it is accounted fantasticalness or something worse not to do so. This custom (which who dares oppose?) makes the short-sighted bigots and the warier skeptics, as far as it prevails. And those that break from it are in danger of heresy; for, taking the whole world, how much of it does truth and orthodoxy possess together? Though it is by the last alone (which has the good luck to be everywhere) that error and heresy are judged of; for argument and evidence signify nothing in the case and excuse nowhere, but are sure to be borne down in all societies by the infallible orthodoxy of the place. Whether this be the way to truth and right assent, let the opinions that take place and prescribe in the several habitable parts of the earth declare. I never saw any reason yet why truth might not be trusted to its own evidence; I am sure, if that be not able to support it, there is no fence against error, and then truth and falsehood are but names that stand for the same things (*Conduct*, § 34).

So far from making the danger of the individual for society the basis of his understanding of the whole purpose of education, Locke here wholly reverses this relationship: the real danger for an individual's education is society at large and the prejudices and partialities it demands from the individual mind. It is the protection from and overcoming of these influences that Locke describes as part and parcel of the true "business" of the understanding.

One who gradually frees himself from inherited or common opinions, however, is so far from being made thereby “safe” for others that he exists in great tension with them—he is, in a way, a danger to them as well as for himself—insofar as the particular way of life and the habits of mind and heart honored in his political community, whatever they may be, are supported by or founded in those same prejudices from which he is emancipated. A “Lockean” education, then, at least according to Locke, might very well be an upsetting of the status quo, at least for an individual. Such a one might still be a kind of danger for the society, but not in the way that Mehta describes; for it is the orderliness and not the disorder of his mind that now presents the danger. For these reasons I think Schouls comes closer to getting Locke right.

#### Locke on “Prejudice”

Past editors of the *Conduct* confirm for us that Locke placed great emphasis on prejudice. According to an early editor, “What is specially remarkable in the mode of handling logical questions in this treatise is the emphasis laid on what may be called the moral causes of fallacious reasoning: prejudice, haste, mental indolence, over-regard for authority.”<sup>161</sup> According to a more recent editor, “Especially interesting, both for its sound advice and its insight into human weakness is [Locke’s] discussion of prejudice.”<sup>162</sup> Locke seems to have been especially concerned with the idea of prejudice. And yet, this should come as no surprise: for Locke, prejudice is, broadly speaking, the name for those opinions and habits of mind that obstruct and

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<sup>161</sup> Thomas Fowler, Introduction to *Locke’s Conduct of the Understanding* (Oxford, 1901), xxiii.

<sup>162</sup> Francis Garforth, Introduction to *John Locke’s Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (New York, 1966), 16.

diminish the role of reason in an individual's life. In the *Conduct* Locke calls prejudice a disease, and he considered it to be one most worthy of his readers' concern.

In the first section of the *Conduct*, Locke claims that what we think and believe has important implications for how we choose to live our lives. "Temples have their sacred images and we see what influence they have always had over a great part of mankind. But in truth the ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them and to these they all universally pay a ready submission" (§ 1). The expansion of Locke's concern from "temples" to "ideas and images" generally indicates that Locke is concerned with prejudice generally, too, not only prejudice in its Christian manifestation (though from the *Letter* we know he was quite concerned with that). Locke writes about the "ideas and images in men's minds" because to these "*all* universally pay a ready submission"; "*no man* ever sets himself about anything but upon some view or other, which serves him for a reason for what he does" (*Conduct*, § 1; my emphases). In doing what it is up to us to do, our thoughts lead us.

Although only one section of the *Conduct* is explicitly entitled "Prejudice," every section is related to a defense of the possibility and desirability of the activity that leads to the overcoming of prejudice. The sections on prejudice are, as it were, the trunk of the *Conduct*; every other section is somehow a branch that grows from this trunk. For Locke, there is a wide and general sense of the word, and a more distinct and specific meaning. The following quote, which illustrates the wide and general sense, also shows what the *Conduct* as a whole is about; it is about the natural and acquired pathologies of mind that obstruct the progress of understanding.

There are several weaknesses and defects in the understanding, either from the natural temper of the mind or ill habits taken up, which hinder it in its progress to knowledge. Of these there are as many possibly to be found, if the mind were thoroughly studied, as there are diseases of the body, each whereof clogs and disables the understanding to some

degree and therefore deserves to be looked after and cured. I shall set down some few to excite men, especially those who make knowledge their business, to look into themselves and observe whether they do not indulge some weakness, allow some miscarriages in the management of their intellectual faculty, which is prejudicial to them in the search for truth (*Conduct*, § 12).

Locke uses the word “prejudice” here in its general sense, the sense in which it is almost a synonym for “pathology”: prejudice is whatever in the understanding hinders a mind or puts it off the trail in its active search for truth and instructive knowledge.<sup>163</sup> The *Conduct* is about the errors or prejudices, broadly understood, that prevent or obstruct the cultivation of reason. In showing how these might be mitigated or eliminated, Locke understands himself to be making a contribution to the welfare and benefit of his readers. The word prejudice, however, has a more specific meaning for Locke, too, to which we turn after the following section.

### Locke’s Rhetoric and Audience in the *Conduct*

Like a good dialectician, Locke begins the section on prejudice in the *Conduct* from a shared and common premise: “every one is forward to complain of the prejudices that mislead

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<sup>163</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer insists that the enlightenment teaching on prejudice, which Locke helped to shape, is itself prejudiced. He writes, “the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which deprives tradition of its power. . . . it is not until the enlightenment that the concept of prejudice acquires the negative aspect we are familiar with.” *Truth and Method*, trans. Glen-Doepel, eds. Cumming and Barden (New York: Seabury, 1975), 239-40. “Actually,” Gadamer continues, “‘prejudice’ means a judgment that is given before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined. . . . Thus ‘prejudice’ certainly does not mean a false judgment, but it is part of the idea that it can have a positive and a negative value.” Drawing especially on the Latin meaning of the word “pre-judgment,” Gadamer distinguishes between justified or legitimate prejudices, which are productive of knowledge, and unjustified or illegitimate prejudices, which are not. *Ibid.*, 247. For Locke, however, a “legitimate prejudice” would be a contradiction in terms. Part of the meaning of prejudice for Locke is that it hinders knowledge and the advancement of knowledge—and not just sometimes, but always. So, Gadamer does seem to be on to something when he claims that the enlightenment teaching on prejudice narrowed its traditional meaning.

other men or parties as if he were free and had none of his own. This being objected on all sides 'tis agreed that it is a fault and a hindrance to knowledge." All agree, then, according to Locke, that prejudice is bad and ought to be eliminated because it is an obstacle to truth and the progress of knowledge. There is, however, a problem: "nobody is convinced of his [prejudice] by the accusation of another, he recriminates by the same rule and is clear" of the charge (*Conduct*, § 10). If one who is accused of prejudice thinks that the accusation is a product of the accuser's own prejudice, as distinguished from his considered and rational reflection, the charge will not be taken seriously. When "You have been misled" is met with "No, you have been misled," nobody wins, nobody's understanding is advanced. Instead of an instructive conversation, one of this type is likely to descend, and easily does descend, into name calling and abuse. This is in miniature the kind of conversation Locke would have called "captious uninformative wrangling," and he compared it unfavorably to the pleasure of "rational conversation with a friend."<sup>164</sup>

Now, does it make any sense for everyone to complain about something of which nobody admits to be guilty? Perhaps we do not like to admit our prejudices. However that may be, everyone claims to see prejudice: no one confesses to it. What, then, is the cure for prejudice? A person with an illness curable by drugs who denies that he is sick is possible to cure: slip him the drugs on the sly and he will be cured whether he admits his illness or no. With prejudice,

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<sup>164</sup> In the chapter from which this quote is drawn, *Essay*, 2.20, Locke is concerned to reduce the various and sundry passions we powerfully feel to modes of pleasure and pain. "I might perhaps have instanced in other modes of pleasure and pain . . . [such] as the pain of hunger and thirst, and the pleasure of eating and drinking to remove them: the pain of tender eyes, and the pleasure of musick; pain from captious uninformative wrangling, and the pleasure of rational conversation with a friend, or of well-directed study in the search and discovery of truth." *Essay*, 2.20.18. While one may be inclined to object to Locke's reductionism in his analysis of our passions, it is worth noting that the pleasure of thinking and study were for him, as they were for Aristotle (see *Ethics*, Book X), two of the best sorts of pleasure that exist.

however, it is not so: the denial is itself a part of the illness. So, “the only way to remove this great cause of ignorance and error out of the world,” Locke explains, “is for everyone impartially to examine himself” (*Conduct*, § 10).

Now, removing “this great cause of ignorance and error,” prejudice, “out of the world” sounds like, to say the least, a project of magnificently ambitious proportions. And we cannot do much on our own. We can attempt to disabuse others of their false opinions, but we cannot think for them. Since to understand means to see for oneself, we can only cure our own prejudices.

We may as rationally hope to see with other men’s eyes, as to know by other men’s understandings. So much as we ourselves consider and comprehend of truth and reason, so much we possess of real and true knowledge. . . . What [a man] believes only, and takes upon trust, are but shreds . . . such borrowed wealth, like fairy-money, though it were gold in the hand from which he received it, will be but leaves and dust when it comes to use (*Essay*, 1.4.23).

A person must see things for himself if he or she would truly understand them. Given Locke’s view of what it means to know something, trust in others will be forever a different thing than the possession of true knowledge, however inevitable or necessary trust may be now and then.

There is another reason, too, why the solution to prejudice is limited to “impartially examining” our own beliefs and opinions. It is this: the most insidious kinds of prejudice are the ones we do not know that we have. Here neither force—nor tolerance (!)—can help us know which of our opinions is and is not a prejudice.

You speak more than once of men’s being brought to lay aside their prejudices to make them consider as they ought, and judge right of matters in religion; and I grant without doing so they cannot: but it is impossible for force to make them do it, unless it could show them which are prejudices in their minds, and distinguish them from the truths there. Who is there almost that has not prejudices, that he does not know to be so; and what can force do in that case? It can no more remove them, to make way for truth, than it can remove one truth to make way for another; or rather remove an established truth, or



that which is looked on as an unquestionable principle, (for so are often men's prejudices,) to make way for a truth not yet known.<sup>165</sup>

The freedom to embrace almost any principle whatever, which a robust tolerance affords, is of little to no more help in the elimination of prejudice than the suggestion that the use of force can show us the truth, because only our own desire to know what is true, and the necessity we feel to search for it, can lead us to undertake the diligent work required for searching out religious and other important truths to the bottom. "To be indifferent whether we embrace falsehood for truth or no is the great road to error" (*Conduct*, § 12). One of the dangers of tolerance is indifference to truth; this indifference is present both in the zealots who no longer genuinely care (if they did they would wonder and examine) whether what they defend is true and in those who do not see the point in defending any truth whatever. Prejudices are not eliminated by ceasing to care about what is true, but only by concerning ourselves with a search for it more carefully.

Locke presents us with a general solution to a general problem without providing a specific example of any particular prejudice. Why does Locke not begin by saying what the truth is and, with that standard firmly in mind, showing what the prejudices are? He has, in fact, indicated the reason for his manner of proceeding: when one tells another that he is prejudiced, the one who is told is not likely to believe it. Being told that one is prejudiced is not the cause of the doubt that would prompt the kind of inquiry Locke desires to encourage. As a result of this strategy, no thoughtful reader has to chafe at seeing his opinions called a prejudice by Locke; such accusations are more likely to entrench rather than disabuse others of their false opinions anyway. The thoughtful reader has only to consider the puzzle Locke describes: everyone claims

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<sup>165</sup> Locke, *A Third Letter on Toleration*, in *Works*, 5:297-98. The addressee is Jonas Proast, with whom Locke held a long, drawn out public correspondence about religious toleration.

to see prejudice, yet no one confesses to it. He is then thrown back upon his own resources in order to rule out the suspicion, “Might it be me? Am I the prejudiced one?”

Facilitating this inward turn, I suggest, is the rhetorical strategy of Locke’s discussion here. Accusations of prejudice draw one out of a reflective state: they engage one’s pride, and they incline one to fight with less regard for what is actually true than in order to win an argument. And since this turn is an inward one, it is theoretically consistent for Locke to allow his audience to select itself: “to those who are willing to get rid of this great hindrance of knowledge (for to such only I write), to those who would shake off this great and dangerous impostor prejudice . . .” (*Conduct*, § 10). “To those who are willing” and “to those who would”: “to such only I write.” And yet that is, in theory at least, everyone—for everyone sees prejudice.

This appeal to “everybody” is made on the assumption that no one is immune to prejudice. “Who is there almost that is ever brought fairly to examine his own principles and see whether they are such as will bear the trial” (*Conduct*, § 10)? Everyone’s concern for the prejudices that blind others is the flip side of their concern—at least their ostensible concern—with not being blind, with grasping the truth. All partisans, insofar as they are partisans, claim the truth is on their side. “What everyone pretends to be desirous to have a sight of” is “truth in its full extent” (*Conduct*, § 3). We all recognize the necessity for claiming that truth is in fact our aim: when we admit otherwise, we give up our right to be heard. The audience for the *Conduct*, then, is everybody. However, given the self-selecting character of Locke’s audience—and it could be no other kind—we should not be too sanguine, as Locke himself was not, about the possibility of totally removing “this great cause of ignorance and error out of the world.”

## Prejudice and its Sources

We have seen the broad and expansive version of prejudice: prejudice is whatever hinders knowledge and the progress of the mind; it is therefore bad. This is the more specific meaning:

False or doubtful positions relied upon as unquestionable maxims keep those in the dark from truth, who build on them. Such are usually the prejudices imbibed from education, party, reverence, fashion, interest, etc.: this is the mote which everyone sees in his brother's eye, but never regards the beam in his own (*Conduct*, § 10).

Here, then, is a more substantive description of prejudice. Here we learn that Locke sees prejudice as a “false or doubtful position”—an opinion or principle—that is “relied upon as an unquestionable maxim,” something one does not question or refuses to question.

Let us spend a moment with the sources of prejudice that Locke identifies. Locke is clear that prejudices are acquired from a variety of sources. Among them he includes the following: “education, party, reverence, fashion, interest, etc.” The “etc.” indicates that in Locke's opinion this list is not exhaustive. The five likely origins of prejudice he does mention are revealing, however, for they indicate the typical ways in which Locke understands our judgment to become distorted and corrupted. Moreover, together they indicate those things from which an independent mind must strive to become independent. In a nutshell, these things can be reduced into two categories: those that come from within, such as are the passions and other natural defects that would enslave the mind, or the vices of intellectuals, which include prejudice and partiality, and those that come from without, especially “the orthodoxy of one's place,” by which Locke means the reigning ideas and beliefs current or revered in one's time and place. It is this last, the “orthodoxy of one's place,” that is our special focus in this chapter.

*Education* has for Locke much the same meaning as it does for us: it designates primarily the learning acquired from our teachers, but it includes both formal learning, as in a classroom,

and informal learning, such as from one's parents, a tutor, or their friends at home. Education is in a way everything; Locke's understanding of it quite capacious.<sup>166</sup> Not every facet of education as Locke understands it is a source of prejudice, but some, like lessons learned from parents and teachers, most definitely qualify as potential sources of prejudice.

*Party* carries the meaning of a particular group of people who are active politically and are united by certain distinct ways of thinking, believing, or the possession of common interests. It is in relation to parties that Locke most often speaks of "orthodoxies," "doctrines," and "tenets"; adherence to these is usually a sign of belonging or wishing to belong. The word "party" is closely related to "partiality": we are inclined to be partial toward like-minded others; and membership in a group of like-minded others gives rise to the temptation to see what is good in a partial way.

*Reverence*, the source that occupies the list's central place, is sometimes used by Locke as a synonym for "veneration." Reverence denotes the unusually high respect in which something is held; for example, both a principle (like the natural equality of man) and a man (like St. Paul) can be "revered," in which case a thorough investigation of their merits looks like an affront or apostasy. Locke is wary of reverence because it discourages impartial inquiry into that which is revered and thereby protects it from the cold and unflinching light of reason, which is our "only star and compass" (*First Treatise*, § 58). But Locke appears quite sensible when he

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<sup>166</sup> For example, Locke's treatise on education, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, describes the thorough attention that good parents must pay to all the parts of their children's education: diet and the health of the body; their establishment and application—and thus their children's experience—of authority, which has lasting effects; the particular natural tempers, virtues, and vices of their children, which it is their task to help modify, bring out, or correct for the better as needed; good manners, good habits, and the development of civility; formal learning, as from a tutor hired by the parents; extracurricular activities, like dancing or music; the learning that prepares children for a job or trade; and finally, the proper uses of recreation and travel.

says of young learners that they “must at first be believers” (*Conduct*, § 28); what would young learners know, if they did not at first believe what they were taught? However that may be, Locke understands reverence to be established by custom and habit over time.<sup>167</sup>

*Fashion* in this context sometimes means an idiosyncratic practice or habit, as in the phrase “after one’s own fashion.” More frequently it is used by Locke to characterize the ways and habits of thought and belief that are current among a group of people, usually a respected group; hence popular “fashions” that are “in vogue” are powerful and influential in some place and time. At one point Locke ironically calls fashion “the infallible orthodoxy of [any] place” (*Conduct*, § 34). One can be “in” or “out” of fashion. For Locke, fashion exercises such tremendous power because generally we are sensitive to the opinions of others, and so we are tempted to think like them. To be “ill thought of” can produce in us acute psychological pain. Locke seems to think there are such things as intellectual fashions, too.

*Interest*, finally, is almost always used by Locke in conjunction with other words, especially “passion,” but also “humour” and “fancy.” That interest is so frequently used by Locke in conjunction with these words suggests that interest can produce many of the same effects they do: being whimsical, stubborn, unpredictable, or deaf to reason. Locke says that interest and passion “dazzle” the mind because they lead us, without our knowing it, to blur the distinction between what is actually true and what we would prefer to be true (*Conduct*, § 33). Short-term interests can deceive us, too, because in speaking louder to us than our long-term interests they make it easy for us to misjudge what is in our true or long-term interest. In sum, Locke finds each of these five terms to be useful and meaningful because they each designate

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<sup>167</sup> For an example, see *Essay*, 1.3.25.

phenomena that can corrupt one's judgment and distort the independence of mind that we must cultivate to impartially seek what is true, fair, and genuinely good for us.

This activity of overcoming one's own prejudices is understood by Locke to be necessary for self-rule. Since for Locke thoughts and ideas in the mind are so powerful in directing us in the use of our freedom (*Conduct*, § 1), overcoming the passions and vices that enslave the mind, and the orthodoxies of time, place, fashion, and reverence that would confine, narrow, and hedge it in, is a moral requirement. For to rule one's self is to be led by reason and to make reasonable choices. As Grant and Tarcov put it, for Locke "to be self-governing is to be guided by reason. To be guided by reason, in turn, is to judge fairly and hence to act fairly; it is to overcome the effects of interest, passion, and prejudice. . . . Each of us thus has a *moral* responsibility to cultivate our rational faculties."<sup>168</sup> Without this progress, self-rule becomes selfishness.

Why, then, do men "not rather make use of sure and unquestionable principles rather than rest on such grounds as may deceive them?" "Because they cannot," Locke insists—not without some training, some primer and practice in how to conduct their understanding in the search for truth. "This inability proceeds not from want of natural parts (for these few whose case that is are to be excused) but for want of use and exercise. Few men are from their youth accustomed to strict reasoning . . . nay, the most of men are so wholly strangers to this that they do not so much as perceive their want of it" (*Conduct*, § 6). The exercise of the mind opens the mind.

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<sup>168</sup> Introduction to *John Locke: Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, xii. Grant and Tarcov continue in this same paragraph, "The *Conduct* is a manual of instruction in that task as well as a delightful attack on the smugness of narrow-minded specialists and parochial partisans. Throughout the work, Locke draws the connections between rational deliberation, on the one hand, and impartiality, toleration, distrust of authority, and personal liberation from authoritative opinion, on the other. The capacity for independent judgment and reasonable conduct is the crucial capacity for both freedom and morality."

### Prejudice as a Sign of Attachment to Truth

From his discussion of the excesses of Christian charity in the *Letter*—a prime example of just how nasty the effects of prejudice and orthodoxy can become when combined with force—one might get the impression that Locke has nothing nice to say about anyone with a prejudice, of whatever sort. But that is not in fact the case. Locke’s discussion of prejudice is nuanced and subtle. Setting aside the attempt to establish uniformity of opinion in religion through the use of forceful imposition—and the lust for “Power and Empire” over other men to which that attempt at uniformity sooner or later gives rise—the phenomenon of prejudice actually illustrates the mind’s natural pursuit of, and desire for, the truth.

If truth was something we cared little about, we could part with our prejudices as easily as we change our clothes. Prejudices are harder to overcome than that; and that is because, in the first place, men need principles of some sort in order to live, but the knowledge that would inform those principles and correct them, if necessary, is not always easily obtained. The law of nature requires reason and study. In our “twilight state”—in which we are able to know some things, but certainly not all—we cling to the little we think we know. In the second place (and of this we already have an example above in Locke’s description of the excesses of Christian charity), it is because some interest, advantage, or privilege is attached to the having of this or that opinion or principle. So, the search for the simple truth, especially that related to our “great Concernments,” is usually not easy; but on top of that, unbiased search is threatened by interest and self-love (in the Christian case, the pleasure of ruling others through one’s own ideas).

According to Locke, a “fault that stops or misleads men in their knowledge . . . is a custom [that is, a habit] of taking up with principles that are not self-evident and very often not so much as true.” However, the attachment to wrong principles or wrong measures of true and false does not always indicate willful stupidity or the desire to impose on others. It may be the case that some give offense by actively attempting to persuade others to think and believe like themselves; but to point out that only—to see this attempt at persuasion on the part of those who mean well as merely and only the selfish desire to impose—is to not wholly understand it.

Have we not met such persons as fit the following description that Locke paints?

There is not any who pretends to the least reason but when any of these his false maxims are brought to the test, must acknowledge them to be fallible and such as he will not allow in those that differ from him; and yet after he is convinced of this you shall see him go on in the use of them and the very next occasion that offers argue again upon the same grounds. Would one not be ready to think that men are willing to impose upon themselves and mislead their own understanding who conduct them by such wrong measures even after they see they cannot be relied on (*Conduct*, § 6)?

Explain and explain to someone why it is not reasonable to think as they do, then watch as they turn and insist on their own view again, even sometimes after having agreed to the objections raised! These prejudiced ones, who perhaps “impose” themselves in conversation on others (not from a position of official authority, but in private life)—however annoying this may be for those who consider themselves to be more enlightened—“believe what they say” and are manifesting their mind’s natural attachment to, and need for, a foundation on which to rest its opinions. And that need is one that the more “enlightened” have in common with “ordinary” citizens.

*But yet they will not appear so blameable as may be thought at first sight;* for I think there are a great many that argue thus in earnest and do it not to impose on themselves or others. They are persuaded of what they say and think there is weight in it, though in a like case they have been convinced there is none; but men would be intolerable to themselves and contemptible to others, if they should embrace opinions without any ground and hold what they could give no manner of reason for. True or false, solid or



sandy, the mind must have some foundation to rest itself upon . . . it no sooner entertains any proposition but it presently hastens to some hypothesis to bottom it on; 'til then it is unquiet and unsettled. So much do our own very tempers dispose us to a right use of our understandings, if we would follow as we should the inclinations of our nature (*Conduct*, § 6; my emphasis).

Here, then, is a much more charitable explanation for the existence of prejudice, which is quite different than the desire for “Power and Empire” over others. Locke distinguishes between kinds of prejudice: some are “hypocrites,” but some are “in earnest.”

Prejudice is a difficult phenomenon to grapple with precisely because the distinction between these two is not always clear; and this lack of clarity is exacerbated by the claim that all partisans make, and are compelled to make on their own behalf, unless they wish to be simply ignored: “truth” is “the mark all pretend to aim at” (*Conduct*, § 3). Some who are prejudiced have ceased to care for the truth; others care for it, but have simply missed the mark. However that may be, it is no fault to concern ourselves honestly with truth and the search for it; in fact, for Locke, it is the activity to which our nature “inclines” us, because the mind cannot help but seek some kind of foundation for its own thoughts and opinions. This need helps to account not only for the existence and long duration of prejudice, but also for why in Locke’s view prejudices are, with effort, curable or removable.

Locke is also sure that it is possible, however, for an individual to attempt to rid himself or herself of the frustration brought about by a failed attempt to figure out what is true by condemning the search itself as non-productive foolishness. This is the result, Locke suggests, of relying too much on one or two bad or incorrect principles and then learning that those principles are in fact bad or unsupportable and do not lead to the certainty they led their possessors to pretend. “Take these [one or two rules] from them and [a man is sometimes]

perfectly at a loss, [his] compass and pole star are gone,” and if he gives himself up to the reasons advanced against his own position, he sometimes also gives up “all truth and further inquiry and [thinks] there is no such thing as certainty” (*Conduct*, § 6). This giving up can make one more vulnerable to the dominant “local truths” and more likely to become a zealot for a position the truth of which does not actually concern him. Here, Locke asserts, is the great “road to error”: “to be indifferent whether we embrace falsehood for truth or no is the great road to error” (*Conduct*, § 12). Decrying all certainty leads some persons into a wild kind of zealotry that is unconcerned with the truth; the spring or cause of this kind of zealotry is the frustration that results from having tried—and either failed or become tired—in the search for certainty.<sup>169</sup>

To conclude this section. In the *Conduct* (and in the *Essay*, too) Locke advances repeatedly his argument that enlightenment—the concern with one’s own epistemic hygiene—is possible in principle for every person who is not radically intellectually deformed by nature. According to Locke, persons without “Latin and learning” from the university, “men of low and mean education, who have never elevated their thoughts above the spade and the plough, nor looked beyond the ordinary drudgery of a day laborer,” and the “children of a poor countryman”—and these are paradigm cases for him—do not have to lazily enslave and relegate forever their assent to others or to an authority of one sort or another. Nor must they give up the search for knowledge when they encounter the obstacles of intellectual fashion and other local orthodoxies of their time and place, which hedge in everyone from time to time.

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<sup>169</sup> Leo Strauss, citing Lessing's January 9, 1771 letter to Mendelssohn, gives this definition of dogmatism: “the inclination “to identify the goal of our thinking with the point at which we have become tired of thinking”,” and he states that it “is so natural to man that it is not likely to be a preserve of the past.” *Natural Right and History*, 22.

It is as if Locke wishes to say: let no one of high-powered education overestimate the necessity for himself; the average person can, with a little help, take care of himself.

What then, can grown men never be improved or enlarged in their understandings? I say not so, but this I think I may say, that it will not be done without industry and application, which will require more time and pains than grown men, settled in their course of life, will allow to it, and therefore very seldom is done. And this very capacity of attaining it by use and exercise only brings us back to that which I laid down before, that it is only practice that improves our minds as well as bodies, and we must expect nothing from our understandings any farther than they are perfected by habits (*Conduct*, § 6).

We see that while Locke is optimistic, he is also sensible: improving or enlarging one's understanding is "very seldom done" by those who are "settled in their course of life."

Locke argues that prejudices can be overcome, and that all men who are not radically deformed by nature can improve and enlarge their understandings, but he does not seem to entertain any great hope that all adults past the age of simply having to believe their teachers will be eager and willing to undertake such a project of their own volition. While children and other young learners "must be believers," adults "settled in the course of life" are unlikely, at least in general, to be well-disposed to the additional effort that progress in understanding requires. We see Locke making concessions in these ways to what one might call the inevitability, if not the necessity, of prejudice in both private and political life.

### Recognizing and "Curing" Prejudice

Locke writes that, to those who wish to rid themselves of prejudices, he will "offer this one mark whereby prejudice may be known."

He that is strongly of any opinion must suppose (unless he be self-condemned) that his persuasion is built upon good grounds, and that his assent is no greater than what the evidence of the truth he holds forces him to, and that they are arguments, and not inclination or fancy, that make him so confident and positive in his tenets. Now if, after

all his profession, he cannot bear any opposition to his opinion, if he cannot so much as give a patient hearing, much less examine and weigh the arguments on the other side, does he not plainly confess it is prejudice governs him and it is not the evidence of truth, but some lazy anticipation, some beloved presumption that he desires to rest undisturbed in? For if what he holds be as he give out, well fenced with evidence, and he sees it to be true, what need he fear to put it to the proof? . . . He whose assent goes beyond his evidence owes this excess of his adherence only to prejudice (*Conduct*, § 10).

Prejudice leads us to obstinately refuse to inquire into the grounds of the positions or principles that we have “imbibed from education, party, reverence, fashion, interest, etc.” Opposition to inquiry into one’s principles is the great sign of prejudice, of the desire to be left alone, “to rest undisturbed” in “some lazy anticipation, some beloved presumption.” The great sign of prejudice is the refusal to cast one’s eye inward toward the ground and veracity of one’s own deeply held principles. “This [inward turn] I own is no easy thing to do; but I am not enquiring the easy way to opinion, but the right way to truth, which they must follow who will deal fairly with their own understandings and their own souls” (*Conduct*, § 35). Admittedly, this is a task one will undertake only if one’s desire to see the truth for oneself—or, in Lockean lingo, one’s “uneasiness” concerning whether one actually sees or possesses the truth—is strong enough.

The refusal to look inward is perfectly compatible with the attempt to eradicate the errors of judgment of others; it is perfectly compatible with the spirit of censure, bigotry, and persecution. This refusal, however, is just another way of not caring about what is true; this refusal means that one cares little for attaining the clarity of thought and carefully gauged intensity of attachment to principles that for Locke are the hallmarks of sound understanding. Locke’s strategy for eliminating prejudice, then, is not to unhinge men from their desire to see and to know what is true—not to dismiss or disparage or laugh away the desire to know what is

true—but to strengthen this desire by creating some anxiety about whether or not one possesses it; the root cause of the prevalence of prejudice in the world for Locke is a lack of this desire.

We turn now to the remedies that Locke provides for the elimination of prejudice (*Conduct*, §§ 11-12). Instead of this or that prejudice, which it is possible that Locke may very well have had in mind, in the *Conduct* he proceeds by showing his readers what genuine seekers after knowledge in fact do when they make the effort to really know something and to get it right in their own understanding. The level of circumspection and reflection they attain is high, and can be extraordinarily high. And we know that Locke considers the *Conduct* to be relevant both for men “who have never elevated their thoughts above the spade and the plough” (§ 6) and for men who are, or consider themselves to be, “philosophers” (§ 32). To each of them Locke gives the same message: seeking the truth requires attempting to sort through one’s own thoughts and opinions and put them on as solid a foundation as possible. It does not require one to impose this sorting and this foundation onto other people’s thoughts; it does not require that one complain about the prejudices of others. “If others will not deal fairly with their own minds, does that make my errors truths” (*Conduct*, §10)? Instead of the attempt to examine and correct others’ thoughts, Locke proposes self-examination and self-correction; he insists that we ought to inquire into our own seriously held opinions and principles. “The necessity of believing, without knowledge, nay often upon very slight grounds, in this fleeting state of action and blindness we are in, should make us more busy and careful to inform ourselves, than constrain others” (*Essay*,

4.16.4). This same inward turn—from the attempt to ferret out and correct the errors of others, to the attempt to put one’s own opinions on solid ground—is observable in the *Essay*.<sup>170</sup>

The remedies are two, simple in theory but difficult in practice: “first, he must not be in love with any opinion, or wish it to be true until he knows it to be so, and then he will not need to wish it” (*Conduct*, § 11); and “secondly, he must do that which he will find himself very averse to as judging the thing unnecessary or himself incapable of doing it, he must try whether his principles be certainly true or no and how far he may safely rely upon them” (*Conduct*, § 12). These two remedies exemplify the “inward” turning of the mind. According to Locke, this is the only way for us to begin to overcome our own prejudices.

To be called and labeled “prejudiced” offends our pride and inflames our self-love. To overcome the prejudices in our own mind, we have to relocate this pride; we must, according to Locke, transfer it from a pride in being thought to be a knower to a pride in actually knowing. This transfer requires that we let go a bit of the image of ourselves that we see reflected in the eyes of others—an image not really under our control anyway—and concern ourselves with ourselves, an activity that does not require that we attempt to make our own minds the measure of all things or of other people’s minds.

If others will not deal fairly with their own minds, does that make my errors truths? Or ought it to make me in love with them and willing to impose upon myself? If others love cataracts on their eyes, should that hinder me from couching mine as soon as I could?

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<sup>170</sup> Consider, in this light, the very beginning of the *Essay*: “the understanding, like the eye, whilst it makes us see and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself; and it requires art and pains to set it at a distance, and make it its own object. But, whatever be the difficulties that lie in the way of this inquiry; whatever it be, that keeps us so much in the dark to ourselves; sure I am, that all the light we can let in upon our own minds, all the acquaintance we can make with our own understandings, will not only be very pleasant, but bring us great advantage, in directing our thoughts in the search of other things.” *Essay*, 1.1.1.

Everyone declares against blindness, and yet who almost is not fond of that which dims his sight and keeps the clear light out of his mind (*Conduct*, § 10)?

The *Conduct* is a self-portrait of the activity of proud reason successfully transferring and relocating its pride. There is, then, a profound psychological component involved in the overcoming of prejudice; it is more than an effort of the intellect. One has to divorce oneself, at least inwardly, from the inclination to vanity and recognition that Locke warns us against and attach oneself as much as possible instead to an understanding of “the things themselves.” One has to learn not to “judge of things by men's opinions, but of opinions by things.”<sup>171</sup>

The difficulty of this inner relocation of our pride helps to make sense of the religious rhetoric that Locke brings in to support our effort to cultivate our reason and judgment. The letting go a little of our concern with the image of ourselves reflected in the eyes of others is no doubt difficult, but we need not be discouraged or dismayed: God is watching, and He is rooting

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<sup>171</sup> Now, it is the possibility of doing just this that Kojève disputes in his essay “Tyranny and Wisdom.” “An “isolated” thinker’s subjective “evidence” is invalidated as a *criterion* of truth by the simple fact that there is madness which, insofar as it is a correct deduction from subjectively “evident” premises, can be “systematic” or “logical.” . . . It is only by seeing our ideas shared by others (or at least by *an* other) or accepted by them as *worth discussing* (even if only because they are regarded as wrong) that we can be sure of not finding ourselves in the realm of madness (without being sure that we are in the realm of truth).” “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 153. In other words, we cannot help but judge things by others’ opinions sometimes, for there is no independent criterion, in the final analysis, for distinguishing the true from the false and hence sanity from madness. So “if one does not want to leave it at the merely subjective criteria of “evidence” or of “revelation” (which do not exclude the danger of madness), one cannot be a philosopher without at the same time wanting to be a philosophical *pedagogue*,” or in other words, without wanting to fashion others’ minds and habits of thought after the model of his own. Ibid., 163. Philosophers seek recognition, according to Kojève, because only by seeing themselves and their ideas reflected in others around them and the world generally can they convince themselves that what they think has some truth in it and that they are not mad. This is very un-Lockean in spirit. For according to Locke, and as we just quoted, “we should not judge of things by men’s opinions, but of opinions by things.” *Conduct*, § 24. Unless Locke defends this possibility he cannot consistently maintain there is a difference between truth and prejudice.

for us. “This is the mote,” Locke says of prejudice, “which every one sees in his brother’s eye, but never regards the beam in his own” (*Conduct*, § 10). Jesus spoke a parable: Locke interprets it.<sup>172</sup> For Locke the “beam” in one’s eye is brought about by paying too little attention to the progress of one’s own understanding; it is, in fact, this “paying too little attention” itself. Like the author of the moral teaching in the New Testament, Locke is also reasonably sure that the teaching he sows will fall on plenty of rocky ground. Of a man’s eliminating his own prejudices, Locke writes, “whether fewer have the heart or skill to do [this], I shall not determine” (*Conduct*, § 12). The religious rhetoric, however, is meant to lend the argument, as well as the receptive part of the audience, a helping hand. It does this, not by providing methodological guidance, but motivation.<sup>173</sup> Part of that motivation is the anxiety we feel, or might feel, when we think that God is interested in the conclusions we are apt to draw, especially concerning Him. The religious rhetoric helps to produce that “uneasiness” concerning the truth that leads us to consider again—and again and again—whether we have “got it right.”

Now, this admonishment from Locke to start from a “neutral” or “indifferent” starting point—“to be indifferent which of two opinions is true is the right temper of the mind that preserves it from being imposed on and disposes it to examine with that indifference till it has done its best to find the truth; and this is the only direct and safe way to it” (*Conduct*, § 12)—forces us to raise a critical question. It is this: if it is true that we cannot be brought up in the

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<sup>172</sup> Compare Matthew 7:1-5 and Luke 6:39-42 (KJV).

<sup>173</sup> There is more religious rhetoric in the *Conduct*, too; with the exception of § 23 on the supreme value of theology as a particular branch of study, it is, I think, all to the purpose of lending this helping hand. See, for example, §§ 11, 14, 24, and 38. In the *Conduct*, God is the God of Truth; thus, in attending to the clarity of our thoughts and the progress of our understanding, we serve and obey God. In failing to do so, we serve and obey another master, “the father and propagator of lies.” Ibid., § 11.



world without opining and believing certain things in the process, thanks to those well-meaning ones who care first and properly for us; if, in short, we cannot help but be “prejudiced” *somehow*—how is it that we could ever learn to put ourselves in a state of “indifferency” towards the various opinions and principles available to us when we reach “the age of reason”? How can we stop wishing that some things are in fact true, whether of the world, the universe, or of ourselves, once we have first come to believe them? How does one make this leap? Is not Locke asking the impossible of individuals who are brought up in “the real world,” who must always go through that formative state—childhood—in which one learns and becomes attached to principles before one can reflect?<sup>174</sup> Even supposing an “indifferency” of the mind is possible, what about attachments of the heart? Can these be thought away or thought through?

The indifferency that Locke recommends has been criticized for being utopian and idealistic. Robert Kraynack, in his *History and Modernity in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes*, suggests that Locke properly belongs with other enlightenment thinkers—“like Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, [and] Spinoza”—because he made the same fundamental assumption they did about “types” of minds in the world: “the unenlightened mind of the past, which has been deceived by its trust in authority, conventional speech, and the testimony of the senses; and the enlightened mind, which will be freed from all such deceptions and will accept as trustworthy only

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<sup>174</sup> Consider in this light *Essay*, 1.3.21-27 and 4.20.9-10.

deductions from evident conceptions of the mind.”<sup>175</sup> According to Kraynack, this distinction between types of mind and thinking lies at the bottom of their concern with “method.” In so distinguishing, these thinkers assumed the “unenlightened” nature of past thinkers and past thought, which was not based on method, and the “enlightened” nature of future thought, which is “methodical.” Although they do not demonstrate their assumption that the thought of the past was, on account of its lack of “method,” fundamentally erroneous, they nevertheless insist that “rules of method or correct thinking” will bring about real knowledge and a more rational future.

The new method advocated begins, Kraynack observes, not from the “common opinions” from which Socratic dialectics took its starting point, but from a standpoint outside of common opinion. “The revolutionary aim of enlightenment science . . . is to build a theory of knowledge *without beginning from opinion.*” Enlightenment science, Kraynack argues,

seeks an absolute beginning point outside of opinion (and kindred phenomena, such as belief, trust, faith, prejudice, tradition, custom, habit, common sense, convention, reasoning from authority) . . . It does so by treating both opinion and traditional science [dialectics] as a *historical category*—as a thing of the past which can be and must be transcended, once and for all times. . . . [It] seeks to bring about the emancipation of the mind from authoritative opinion by a historical leap rather than by a dialectical ascent. In so doing it introduces an implicit utopian claim: that opinion or prejudice will eventually disappear and be relegated to the past (‘the Dark Ages’) rather than persist and coexist alongside true knowledge, as the classical philosophers believed.

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<sup>175</sup> Robert Kraynack, *History and Modernity in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 103-04. Kraynack suggests that they were led to form this assumption of the two fundamental types of minds by their “dissatisfaction with Scholastic training in the universities and the challenges posed by the Copernican-Galilean revolution in natural philosophy.” Galileo had shown that “the order of the universe is contrary to its appearance in common sense”: might, then, “the whole way of thinking hitherto” be “untrustworthy”? “These momentous thoughts explain their interest in method, in rules for correct thinking that would help them consciously, even willfully, to resist the temptations that have deceived or misled the mind throughout history”—and much better, they thought, than the old art of “dialectic,” which had failed to produce any “certain knowledge.” Ibid., 103. Consider *Conduct*, § 1, in this light.

“To support such a utopian claim,” Kraynack concludes, “enlightenment science must begin with a kind of grand conspiracy theory which shows that the human mind hitherto has been kept in the dark.” That grand conspiracy, he contends, is put together rhetorically by assuming the fundamental distinction between two types of mind: enlightened minds and prejudiced ones.<sup>176</sup>

Kraynack argues that this enlightenment science is dogmatic in the highest degree. Because enlightenment thought treats the whole of the world of “common sense” as in need of radical reconstruction, it sees the necessity to begin its analyses from a point outside common sense, and this means outside of the opinions that ordinary men take for granted as true. Beginning from this point, it tries to build up a science of man as well as of nature from undoubtable and unshakeable foundations. There is only one problem, Kraynack observes: there is no such thing as a stable or undoubtable “point of view” outside all common opinion. “A starting point that takes nothing on trust must appear as if it were self-evident or self-grounding,” but the only perspective that exists outside all common opinion is radical doubt, from which nothing can be established.<sup>177</sup> In its effort to begin reflection from a standpoint outside common sense, “the enlightened mind . . . severs the tie between itself and the world, between the mind and nature, between subject and object, between thinking and being.” And “without such a connection or grounding, the self-reliant mind is nothing but subjective certainty; it can make no claim to scientific objectivity and has no way of standing polemically against the doctrines of the past and expelling the kingdom of darkness.”<sup>178</sup> Because they lacked a “certain” starting point for knowledge, the enlightenment philosophers were forced—and led their readers, too—into a

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<sup>176</sup> Kraynack, *History and Modernity*, 101-03.

<sup>177</sup> Kojève would add: “and from which sanity cannot be distinguished from madness.”

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-93.

polemical, rather than a truly scientific, posture of mind. At the root of that polemic was the contrast between the deluded and prejudiced mind, unthinkingly attached to the past, and the free and unprejudiced mind, which thinks methodically and “scientifically.”<sup>179</sup>

Now, we must ask ourselves: does Lockean “indifferency” entail the search for a starting point for our opinions and beliefs wholly outside common opinion? There is good reason to think it does not. When Locke talks about the effort individuals must make to progress in their understanding, he speaks of “a vigor of mind able to contest the empire of habit and look into its own principles” (*Conduct*, § 41). That is, “enlightenment” after the manner of Locke is for people who already have their own principles, and wish to inquire into their ground and certainty. For such a project, the indifferency of which Locke speaks is not impossibly radical.

We can begin with what we know we believe or think already; we do not have to think away everything we ever thought we knew. “It is not every one knows, or can bring himself to Des

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<sup>179</sup> Gadamer, too, understands the enlightenment teaching on knowledge and prejudice to be an overstatement. The enlightenment, he writes, “thinks in terms of the freedom from ‘superstition’ and the prejudices of the past.” *Truth and Method*, 242. Speaking of the enlightenment’s “extremism,” he continues, “the real consequence of the enlightenment is . . . the subjection of all authority to reason.” *Ibid.*, 249, 247. Gadamer understands what he calls the “prejudice” in favor of method, which would limit our real knowledge to that which can be produced or discovered by rigorous science, to be a product of the enlightenment. The enlightenment, he insists, narrowed our field of vision; it narrowed the sphere in which we seek to find what is true. But there are “modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science.” *Ibid.*, xii. A similar argument is made by Leo Strauss in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 178-181. Strauss writes, “The justification—and at the same time the questionable character of “prejudice” as a category—does not come to light until revealed religion is taken into consideration. . . . Revealed religion essentially appeals to a fact that is prior to all human judgment, to the revelation made by God, King of the world.” Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique*, 179. “What is felt from within as fidelity, as obedience, appears to the positive mind as stupidity, imprisonment in prejudices. To that mind, “rebellion” is “liberation,” “to become an apostate” is “liberty.” The contraries prejudice-freedom correspond strictly to the contraries obedience-rebellion, and strictly contradict them.” *Ibid.*, 180-81. Both Gadamer and Strauss understand the enlightenment as a whole to be a questionable project, one which gives rise to its own prejudices.

Cartes's way of doubting, and strip his thoughts of all opinions, till he brings them to self-evident principles, and then upon them builds all his future tenets."<sup>180</sup> Enlightenment after the manner of Locke is simply not that difficult or radical.

The *Essay* and *Conduct* also have a political task. The establishment of religious toleration, and the overcoming of prejudice in order to overcome the persecution that makes toleration, religious and otherwise, look so attractive, as well as the advancement of empirical science of the natural world: these emerge so clearly as goals and guiding stars for Locke that it is hard to see his theory of knowledge outside this context. And yet, Locke is moved, I suggest, less by the prospect of building a super-structure of undoubtable knowledge on undoubtable foundations—Locke says of the *Essay* at the end of Book I, “I warn the Reader not to expect undeniable cogent demonstrations . . . all that I shall say for the Principles I proceed on, is, that I can only *appeal* to Mens own unprejudiced *Experience*, and Observation, whether they be true, or no” (*Essay*, 1.4.25)—than by moderating the excesses of partisan zeal and religious zealotry that so characterized the elite discourse of his time and place.

It is a short step from the thought that others are wrong to the thought that it is possible, at least in principle, that we ourselves are mistaken. “Everyone is forward to complain of the prejudices that mislead other men or parties, as if he were free and had none of his own.” In encouraging a neutral enquiry Locke asks for us, and partisans especially, to extend to others the credit we are accustomed to implicitly extending ourselves, namely the possibility of being correct after all. Such a fig leaf initially having been granted, a neutral inquiry might well begin. The difficulty with this step has little to do with intellectual ability, or the substantive opinions

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<sup>180</sup> Locke, *A Third Letter on Toleration*, in *Works*, 5:298.

one entertains on a given topic, or even with the attempt to build a structure of knowledge that is indubitable; it has most to do with the simple but powerful feelings of pride and shame, and with interest and self-love—that is, with the fear of being called a fool or with the unwillingness to consider one’s true interest in knowing the truth. The remedy for this fear can be learned, but it cannot be taught: one must learn how to become more afraid of actually believing something false than of being believed or thought to be wrong by others.

We become more “indifferent,” which is for Locke the only rational starting point, when we remind ourselves that our intellect may well be like others in crucial respects—fallible, and in love with idols of the mind instead of the truth. If others so strongly hold to their views, and I to mine, how do I know that I am not exemplifying the same irrational attachment of which I accuse others? If we can reason with ourselves this far, we are more than half-way to “indifferency,” for here we are thrown back onto the question Locke raised above, namely, even supposing another is wrong, “why is it that am I correct?” Answering this question requires an appeal that goes beyond others’ opinions to some understanding of “things in themselves.”

Nor need we aim at a mark too high. “Nobody is under an obligation to know everything” (*Conduct*, § 7). Locke’s expectations for this progress are rather moderate.

[It] is an excellency indeed, and a great one too, to have a real and true knowledge in all or most of the objects of contemplation. But it is what the mind of one and the same man can hardly attain unto; and the instances are so few of those who have in any measure approached towards it, that I know not whether they are to be proposed as examples in the ordinary conduct of the understanding (*Conduct*, § 19).

Yet concerning even this kind of project, “whether fewer have the heart or the skill to do, I shall not determine” (*Conduct*, § 12). Enlightenment is not, therefore, a purely intellectual endeavor: a certain kind of toughness—“a vigor of mind able to contest the empire of habit . . . a freedom

which few men have the notion of in themselves and fewer are allowed the practice of by others” (*Conduct*, § 41)—is required, too. If prejudices do not exist in minds by nature, and if enlightenment after the manner of Locke is possible, then the enlightened mind—the independent mind, as I have called it, which overcomes its prejudices—is possible, too.

For Locke, being prejudiced—even after the manner of those given to the excesses of Christian charity—is an acquired state of mind and heart. The reason the neutral starting point is possible, and not a flight of imaginative fancy or philosophic hubris, is because this neutrality or “indifferency” once characterized us by nature, before we had any prejudices or principles “clapped on” to guide or mislead us (*Conduct*, § 34). Locke understands us to be indifferent to which of two or more positions or principles is true until the sources of prejudice—education, party, reverence, fashion, interest, etc.—get in our way. These, then, are the reasons that Locke’s argument for the possibility of enlightenment are not impossibly radical. The goal is not so much indubitable knowledge as epistemic hygiene.

### Conclusion

This inward turning “cure” for prejudice reflects Locke’s politics of impartiality on both political and individual levels. On the one hand, this turn implies that rational individuals will set for themselves a new and important task, namely that of the discovery and propagation of new and instructive truth and knowledge for the benefit of themselves and society. On the other hand, this inward turn is essential to the internal mechanism by which society as a whole frees itself to give up its effort, however well-meaning, to compel others’ assent to this or that opinion or belief by law, and to persecute individuals— “literally, with fire and faggot,” to use Locke’s

phrase (*A Letter Concerning Toleration*)—when they violate that law. As Locke frames this argument, it is the love of truth above all—and not the easing of men’s consciences, or the desire not to be bound by laws of any sort (still less the emancipation of bodily pleasures)—that necessitates and sanctions this turn. Without this justification and purpose, liberal tolerance is little more than an empty plea that asks us not to care about the sorts of human beings who live beside and around us in our political communities, and that is an absurd request as long as we cannot cease to care about ourselves.

The ethos and institutions of liberalism described in the *Second Treatise*, and the teaching on the mastering of the passions and the overcoming of prejudice, which are the subjects of Locke’s *Some Thoughts* and *Conduct* respectively, go together and provide each other mutual support. The limits of each of the strategies when taken separately, however, indicate the need for this support. Without an executive power to curb our appetite—and thus our “busy minds”—the understanding brought about by certain kinds of education, without which freedom is just license, will be of little effect in the world. And without a liberal education in the original and profound sense of that word—the kind with which we associate a certain spiritual and intellectual liberation—the enormous authority we grant to the powers that be and govern us is in danger of being used for purposes that would undermine the possibility of such a liberation, as well as of political freedom itself. This freedom consists in both the reasoned freedom tending to mastery, which invites individuals to the pursuit of “autonomy,” “mastery,” and even “perfection” (Schouls), as well as the benign yet fascinating individual eccentricities, idiosyncrasies, and “individualities” that ask, each in their own ways, to be respectfully indulged (Mehta). This freedom needs protection.



Jesus Christ, bringing by revelation from Heaven the true religion to mankind, reunited these two again, religion and morality, as the inseparable parts of the worship of God, which ought never to have been separated.<sup>181</sup>

—John Locke

## Chapter Five: The Law of Nature and Christianity

We come now to the question of the role that Christianity plays in Locke's political philosophy. On this question there is much debate: is Locke a Christian philosopher? Is he, in fact, a believer? On this question hangs the interpretation of many an important passage in Locke's writings. The question has come in our way because of Locke's many references to Christianity and the support those references lend to Locke's teaching concerning the law of nature and our access to it. But we also want to know how Locke thinks a person who aspires to the virtue of independent-mindedness ought to posture himself, in Locke's view, towards one of the West's richest and most powerful and influential intellectual and spiritual inheritances. That posture, I will argue in this chapter, is one of qualified gratitude.

Locke's own posture towards religion in general and Christianity in particular has been a theme throughout the dissertation. In the first two chapters I argued that the Christian tradition in its scholastic form was, in Locke's view, in need of revision. In the first place, this tradition, which has for one of its most powerful proponents St. Thomas Aquinas, made certain dubious claims concerning the naturalness of its substantive teachings about the world and about the good life; through a metaphysically neutral teaching on human knowledge Locke was able to reveal the doubtfulness of those claims even while preserving, as he did, the possibility of an appeal to

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<sup>181</sup> "Sacerdos," in Peter King, *The Life of John Locke*, new ed. (London, 1830), 2:84.

nature in order to justify the force and direction of his own moral and political teaching. In the second place, I argued that Locke's theory of knowledge, in its practical implication, results in a transfigured understanding of the role of reason in our moral life and a devaluation of the importance of the conscience; Locke states unforgettably in the *First Treatise* that "reason" is our "only star and compass" (§ 58; my emphasis).

In the third chapter, I argued that Locke considers independence of mind to be crucial, possible, and necessary for citizens living in liberal regimes: liberal regimes, in Locke's view, need self-governing citizens, and independence of mind is necessary for self-governance. Locke seems to consider that progress in reason and progress in self-government will develop hand in hand, each providing direction, justification, and reinforcement for the other. In the fourth chapter, I argued that Locke contributes to this political vision by attempting to show citizens how they might, if they choose, overcome their own prejudices and make progress in reason and knowledge, especially in the moral knowledge contained within the law of nature. And here, in the project that is the care of one's own epistemic hygiene and the elimination of one's prejudices, Christianity seems to play an ambiguous role.

On the one hand, the political entrenchment of organized Christianity gave new life to the opportunity for men to indulge their natural lust to rule; it made possible a Christian kind of "charity" that was to Locke's mind perfectly inconsistent with the true spirit of the teaching of Christianity, as we saw in chapter four. The dangers presented by that kind of charity are rooted, in Locke's view, in the Christian emphasis on having the right knowledge and belief, an emphasis that in practice makes possible and even likely the dangerous elevation in importance of belief over practice. While the danger of radical sectarianism and persecution is inherently

present in any religious or political doctrine that rises to the level of a public teaching, the stakes are infinitely raised when loyalty to this or that religious sect is made necessary for the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship in a state marked by religious pluralism.

On the other hand, however, the study of theology is held by Locke in the highest esteem.

“There is indeed one science,” Locke writes in the *Conduct*,

incomparably above all the rest, where it is not by corruption narrowed into a trade or faction, for mean or ill ends and secular interests; I mean theology, which, containing the knowledge of God and His creatures, our duty to Him and our fellow-creatures, and a view of our present and future state, is the comprehension of all other knowledge directed to its true end, i.e. the honor and veneration of the Creator and the happiness of mankind. This is that noble study which is every man’s duty, and everyone that can be called a rational creature is capable of” (§ 23).

That is high praise. Locke alludes to the ambiguous role of religion—to the dangers it invites as well as the opportunities for enlightenment it affords—in this quote.

Where theology is “not by corruption narrowed into a trade or faction, for mean or ill ends,” there it becomes or remains a “noble study,” comprehending the true ends of all knowledge, namely the glorification of the Creator and “the happiness of mankind.” Locke wrote in the *Essay* that no reasonable person could avoid giving thought at some point to the possibility of another life and the implications of that possibility for how he or she lived. Here the suggestion is more straightforward: this “noble study” is “every man’s duty.” If to follow reason is to follow the law of nature, and vice versa, then some study of theology would seem to be reasonable; it would seem to be required by the law of nature. In what spirit, then, ought we to study theology, according to Locke? Is it simply the case that making progress in one’s own epistemic hygiene and making progress in understanding of the Christian religion are one and the same; is enlightenment possible for studious Christians only? How does the study of theology

support the independence of mind that, according to my argument, Locke considers essential for liberalism's success and longevity? It is to this set of questions that we turn in this chapter.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, we examine the *Second Treatise* for a fuller understanding of the way in which theology supports Locke's understanding of the law of nature. As I hope to show, while theology plays a role in supporting Locke's teaching of natural human equality, the law of nature is not held by Locke to provide the exact same moral teaching as that of Jesus. Second, we turn to the Locke's explicitly theological work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, to see how far Locke can make good on his claim (which he makes both implicitly and explicitly throughout his writings) that the law of nature is comprehended within the Christian "law of works." Although Locke tries as much as possible to show that Jesus and the law of nature teach the same thing, he in fact acknowledges that they do not. Even so, Locke argues, as I show in the third section, that Jesus' promulgation of the law of works is a great aid to the further promulgation of the law of nature. And finally, in the conclusion, I discuss the relationship between independence of mind, which Locke considers a real virtue, and the two most basic moral teachings of the New Testament. I understand those teachings to be, first, seeking and loving the God of the Bible, and second, loving our neighbor as ourselves. For these teachings, Locke seems to reserve surprisingly high praise for an enlightenment philosopher.

Given the political problem made possible by Christian emphasis on having the right beliefs—we would expect Locke to try to resurrect the importance, on theological grounds, of Christian morality in relation to Christian belief. Christian morality, and the divine authority on which it is founded, are great supports for the notion of human equality. And in the *Reasonableness*, Locke tries to show not only that faith and practice ("religion and morality," in

his words) not only should not be separated, but also that Jesus himself never meant for them to be separated. To this argument, and its relation to Locke's law of nature, we now turn.

### The Law of Nature in the *Second Treatise*

The heart of Locke's political philosophy is contained within the *Second Treatise*. There the law of nature appears as the guide to political peace and human prosperity. And this law of nature appears to receive the sanction of a quite respected and influential Anglican divine, Richard Hooker. Locke could have depended on his readers' familiarity with this name. In order to support his claim that men are by nature equal—and therefore equally subject to the law of nature—Locke quotes from the first book of Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*. For Hooker, the natural equality of man provides the foundation for the duty to love our neighbors as ourselves. Immediately after this quote, Locke assimilates Hooker's "obligation to mutual love amongst men" to his own teaching that there is a law of nature in the state of nature.

The *state of nature* has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all *equal and independent*, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure (*Second Treatise*, § 6).

Hooker's description of our duties includes a duty to love others, but Locke describes a duty not to harm them. Though in Locke's state of nature we enjoy a state of "perfect freedom," that freedom does not include a right to harm others without provocation: others are not our property to treat as we wish. In Locke, prior to organized political authority ("civil society"), men have only the law of nature for their guide, and it does not include a duty to love others.

The law of nature is the counsel of reason; in fact, the law of nature *is* reason. And reason teaches, first, that a man is “*bound to preserve himself*,” and second, “when his own preservation comes not in competition,” he is bound “*to preserve the rest of mankind*” (*Second Treatise*, § 6). The law of nature teaches, then, and above all, self-preservation, just as Hobbes had said it did. Our first responsibility—because we are God’s property—is to preserve ourselves; the second counsel of reason is to preserve all our fellow human beings. This law, Locke says later, is “promulgated or made known by *reason* only” (*Second Treatise*, § 57). By insisting that a law like this is made known “by *reason* only” Locke carefully avoids open contradiction with the Biblical teaching, for the Bible, if I am not mistaken, does not teach that the first responsibility of reasonable creatures is their own self-preservation.<sup>182</sup>

However that may be, we should now ask, what does Locke mean by “law”? Locke has a rather capacious and unorthodox understanding of the meaning of law, and his view of what law is informs his understanding of the law of nature, the supreme law.

*Law*, in its true notion, *is* not so much the limitation as *the direction of a free and intelligent agent* to his proper interest, and prescribes no farther than is for the general good of those under that law: could they be happier without it, the *law*, as an useless thing, would of itself vanish; and that ill deserves the name of confinement which hedges us in only from bogs and precipices (*Second Treatise*, § 57).

Law, then, “in its true notion,” is something that is good for those to whom the law applies.

Where that is not the case, the “law” is not, properly speaking, a true law; and accordingly, it does not truly oblige us. Law is something that is good for us, even if it requires a smaller sacrifice to obtain a greater good, and true laws prescribe “no farther than is for the general

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<sup>182</sup> See Exodus 20:1-11 and Matthew 22:36-38. In the Bible (and in both the O.T. and the N.T.), the obligation to love God seems to be the first responsibility of “reasonable creatures.”

good” of those under them. The laws of nature, broadly understood, are those counsels of reason that direct us to what is truly in our interest.

Locke’s understanding of the meaning of law invites serious reflection on the role that religion plays in the development of Locke’s argument in the *Second Treatise*. For, as I think will be easily granted, the Biblical teaching—whether of the Old or the New Testament—is not that the laws by which we are to be preserved and to prosper in this world are promulgated by reason alone. On the contrary: those rules for life and prosperity are promulgated by God Himself. Revelation means God’s revealing to mankind His laws, not reason’s laws, even if upon reflection God’s laws are seen to be consistent with reason’s counsels.

It is also true, however, that some promise of happiness and prosperity—some expectation of good for us—is strongly associated in the Bible with following God’s commandments and studying his laws.

*Blessed* is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his *delight* is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that *yields its fruit* in its season, and its leaf *does not wither*. In all that he does, he *prosper*s. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away (my emphases).<sup>183</sup>

While the Bible appeals explicitly to the laws and commandments of God, Locke appeals to reason as if it could dispense some kind of moral judgment independently of the Bible. And according to Locke, reason teaches, as its first law, the preservation of oneself, whereas the Bible teaches, as its first law, the love of God and the study of his revealed word. There is, then, some tension in Locke’s own understanding between the “law” of reason and the laws of God.

Reason’s first law is self-directed: preserve yourself. The Biblical first laws are other directed:

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<sup>183</sup> Psalm 1:1-4 (ESV).

love God, and love your fellow man. However that may be, this tension does not prevent Locke from making an appeal to religion in order to support his argument for natural human equality in the *Second Treatise*. Locke leaves it to his readers, however, to discern the way(s) in which his understanding of the law of nature, which he erects on the basis of natural equality, differs from or is identical to his understanding of the Bible's moral teaching.

Figuring out those similarities and differences is not always an easy task. Locke, I think, took care to make this interpretive task difficult. But he did so for reasons other than, or at least in addition to, his own self-preservation or the preservation of his good name and the prestige of his reputation. It was still true, a decade or so prior to Locke's birth, that books were not the only things burned for heresy: like all kinds of real love, the flame that is the love of God often burns hot. But Locke argues in the *Reasonableness* that the Bible is the surest and most effective way for human beings to learn about their obligation to observe the rules that preserve peace among mankind. According to Locke, those laws are contained in the "law of nature," and the law of nature is comprehended within the Christian "law of works."

#### The Law of Nature and Law of Works in the *Reasonableness*

The ostensible purpose of Locke's *Reasonableness* is to show what the Bible requires a person to believe in order to be saved. Locke says he undertakes this project because he has found "little Satisfaction and Consistency . . . in most of the Systems of Divinity" with which he is familiar (*Reasonableness*, Preface). Now, according to Locke's reading of the Bible, the Bible teaches not only that something must be believed, but also that something must be done for



salvation, namely “repentance.” He quotes St. Peter in Acts 3:19: “*Repent, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out*” (111). Locke explains this repentance more fully as follows.

What this Repentance was; which the New Covenant required as one of the Conditions to be performed by all those who should receive the Benefits of that Covenant; is plain in the Scripture, to be not only a sorrow for sins past, but (what is a Natural consequence of such sorrow, if it be real) a turning from them, into a new and contrary Life. And so they are joyed together [repentance and the turning to a new life] (*Reasonableness*, 112).

A sincere effort to live “a new and contrary Life” is the real fruit of genuine sorrow for past misdeeds, and this turn is the “doing” part. Both the believing and the doing part, Locke continues (on the same page), are required by the “New Covenant.” “These two, Faith and Repentance; *i. e.* believing Jesus to be the *Messiah*, and a good Life; are the indispensable Conditions of the New Covenant to be performed by all those, who would obtain Eternal Life” These two are what Locke calls “*the Law of Faith*” and “*the Law of Works*” respectively. According to Locke, being a true Christian requires believing that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, and it requires a sincere and conscientious effort to live “a good Life” according to “the law of works.” It does not require perfection—we need the law of faith—but God requires sincere and conscientious effort. These, then, are the requirements of the “New Covenant.”

But “Perhaps it will be demanded,” Locke observes, “Why did God give so hard a Law to Mankind, that to the Apostles time no one of *Adam*’s Issue had kept it” (*Reasonableness*, 13)? In other words, why did God give us laws He foresaw we would not perfectly follow, thereby making needful His dispensation of a new covenant of faith? This is Locke’s answer:

It was such a Law as the Purity of God’s Nature required, and must be the Law of such a Creature as Man, unless God would have made him a Rational Creature, and not required him to have lived by the Law of Reason, but would have countenanced in him Irregularity and Disobedience to that Light which he had; and that Rule, which was suitable to his Nature: Which would have been, to have authorized Disorder, Confusion, and Wickedness in his Creatures. For that this Law was the *Law of Reason*, or as it is

called *of Nature*, we shall see by and by: And if Rational Creatures will not live up to the Rule of their Reason, who shall excuse them? If you will admit them to forsake Reason in one point, why not in another? Where will you stop? To disobey God in any part of his Commands (and 'tis he that Commands what Reason does) is direct Rebellion; which if dispensed with in any Point, Government and Order are at an end; And there can be no bounds set to the Lawless Exorbitancy of unconfined men. *The Law therefore was*, as St. Paul tells us, *Rom. VII. 12. holy, just, and good (Reasonableness, 14).*

In other words, as Locke adds a few sentences later in parentheses, "'tis [God] that Commands what Reason does" (*Reasonableness, 14*). In this passage, Locke assimilates as much as possible the moral law (not the ceremonial laws) of Moses to the law of nature. Because God's nature is "pure," the law is pure, too: "the Rule therefore of Right is the same that ever it was, the Obligation to observe it is also the same: The difference between the *Law of Works* and the *Law of Faith* is only this; that the *Law of Works* makes no allowance for failing on any occasion," but the law of faith "is allowed to supply the defect of full Obedience" (*Reasonableness, 19*).

It would appear, from an argument like Locke's here, that to live reasonably and according to the law of nature, which is "the Eternal Law of Right," and to live like an honest Christian, are one and the same. To the extent that is true, Locke's teaching on the good life might be summarized as follows: "live like a rational Christian." Use reason, which is God's gift, to live a good life, and where necessary or appropriate—where reason falls short, such as in matters of faith that are beyond, but not inconsistent with reason—supplement reason's counsels with the Biblical teaching, whose author supplied us with reason in the first place. "Under the Law of Works is comprehended also the Law of Nature, knowable by Reason, as well as the [moral] Law given by *Moses* . . . Nay, whatever God requires any where to be done without making any allowance for Faith, that is part of the Law of Works" (*Reasonableness, 18-19*).

There is much to support this understanding of Locke's view of the good life here and

throughout his writings generally. But there are also problems with this harmonious blending of the counsel of reason and the laws of God. Locke raises them, too: not only did God reveal his laws—both the old and new covenant—at a certain place and time, but also, because those laws were revealed in time, there were (and still are) plenty of people to whom the Gospel message has not been promulgated. There is, then, an objection to this harmony that arises on the basis of Locke’s own assertions. Observing Locke’s own distinction between the laws of nature and the positive laws of God, we ask, as Locke himself does later in the *Reasonableness*, how could the Bible’s moral teaching, given by God himself, and the “Eternal standard of Right,” a standard accessible through reason to man as man in all times and places, be one and the same, if the standard of right is eternal and the laws of God are revealed only in a particular time and place? How could the laws of nature be eternal if God’s own revelation was not eternally available?

This obvious fact, namely that God’s laws were revealed to mankind to particular persons in a particular time and place, threatens to undo Locke’s argument at its core. For God’s revelation in time might seem to reveal or expose the inadequacy of human reason. Why should God have had to reveal his own rules to mankind, if human reason were enough to demonstrate the way of, and the obligation to live according to, his will (the law of nature) in the first place? Locke considers this to be an important objection to his whole argument. Now, he has already mitigated to some extent the force of this objection by identifying the law of nature with the law of reason, and by insisting that reason was given to man by God for a rule of conduct. Making this identification early in the *Reasonableness* allows Locke to argue later that God’s revelation is not a sign of the inadequacy of reason’s ability to discover the law of nature, but rather its official and authoritative expression. Locke will argue that God came not only to sanction and to

teach the law of nature—for “’tis [God] that Commands what Reason does”—but also to spread awareness that this law will be enforced with rewards and punishments in the afterlife. In this way God’s revelation perfectly expresses, and lends authority to, his original gift to man, reason.

Let us now see more particularly how Locke argues this. In one of the last chapters of the *Reasonableness*, he addresses the issue of promulgation directly.

There is another Difficulty often to be met with, which seems to have something of more weight in it: And that is, that though the *Faith* of those before *Christ*; (believing that God would send the *Messiah*, to be a Prince, and a Saviour to his People, as he had promised;) And the *Faith* of those since his time, (believing *Jesus* to be that *Messiah*, promised and sent by God) shall be accounted to them for Righteousness, yet what shall become of all the rest of Mankind; who having never heard of the Promise or News of a Saviour . . . have had no thought or belief concerning him (*Reasonableness*, 139)?

Locke has asserted that the main article of a justifying faith is that Jesus is the Christ, so this is a real puzzle that arises on the bases of Locke’s own argument. “The Apostle’s Reasoning, *Rom. X. 14.* is very just,” says Locke, “*How shall they believe in him, of whom they have not heard?*” (*Reasonableness*, 139)? If God will allow the belief that Jesus is the Messiah, either the one to come or the one that came (depending on whether one lived before or after Jesus), to supply the defect of man’s unrighteousness (his deviating from the rule of his reason) what will become of those to whom the promise or the news of a savior had not been promulgated?

Locke’s first answer is based on a quote from the Bible: “God will require of every man, *According to what a man hath, and not according to what he hath not.* . . . nor [will he] require any one should believe a Promise, of which he has never heard.”<sup>184</sup> But his second answer reveals his view of the sufficiency of reason for living “a good life.”

God had, by the Light of Reason, revealed to all Mankind, who would make use of that Light, that he was Good and Merciful. The same spark of the of the Divine Nature and

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<sup>184</sup> Locke italicizes the quote from the Bible, 2 Cor. 8:12.

Knowledge in Man, which making him a Man, shewed him the Law he was under as a Man; Shewed him also the way of Attoning the merciful, kind, compassionate Author and Father of him and his Being, when he had transgressed that Law. He that made use of this Candle of the Lord, so far as to find what was his Duty; could not miss to find also the way to Reconciliation and Forgiveness, when he had failed of his Duty: Though if he used not his Reason this way; If he put out, or neglected this Light; he might, perhaps, see neither (*Reasonableness*, 140).<sup>185</sup>

One may well wonder how, on the grounds Locke stakes out in the *Essay*, mere human reason could be led to see that God is provident and merciful without having first heard the contents of God's revelation. However that may be, Locke positively asserts here that the "Law he was under," the law of nature, which is also God's command, can be known by human beings through the use of reason unassisted by divine revelation. And the "Light of Reason" was "revealed to all Mankind, who would make use of that Light." In this way, Locke seems to have solved the problem that had arisen on the basis of the limited promulgation of the "good news."

In fact, however, Locke has put himself in somewhat of a bind. Precisely if this is true, precisely if reason is adequate as a guide to our duties to both God and men, Locke sees that he will need to answer another, related question, which arises on the basis of this answer. "What need was there of a Saviour? What Advantage have we by *Jesus Christ*," if reason was and is sufficient (*Reasonableness*, 141)? Locke's answer to the question of limited promulgation threatens to make Jesus' work on earth, and divine revelation generally, superfluous. One possible answer to this question, as I have suggested above, directly opposes the main thrust of Locke's line of argument: reason is in fact insufficient to teach us the whole of our duty. But this

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<sup>185</sup> John C. Higgins-Biddle, editor of the Clarendon edition of Locke's *Reasonableness*, comments in a footnote to this passage, "There is, indeed, no precise parallel in any of [Locke's] writings on the natural knowledge of God or natural law. His proof of God's existence (*Essay*, IV. X) stops short of such claims." *Reasonableness*, 139, fn. 3.

is not a possibility entertained by Locke because he insists not only that God gave us reason, but also that original sin only made us mortal; it did not make our natures or minds “corrupt.”

I must confess by *Death* here [in Genesis 2:17] I can understand nothing but a ceasing to be, the losing of all actions of Life and Sense. . . . If by *Death* threatned to *Adam* were meant the Corruption of Humane Nature in his Posterity, 'tis strange that the New Testament should not any where take notice of it, and tell us, that Corruption seized on all because of *Adam*'s Transgression, as well as it tells us so of *Death*. But as I remember every ones sin is charged upon himself only (*Reasonableness*, 9).

Since we have the same reason that God always intended for us to have, which He made the rule and guide for our conduct, moral and otherwise, it cannot be that God's revelation is a divine indicator of the inadequacy of reason as a guide for governing conduct.

So, Locke really needs to answer the question he himself has raised: if reason is sufficient, “what Advantage have we by *Jesus Christ*”? If reason could teach human beings the moral law they are under, and could show a man “the way of Attoning the merciful, kind, compassionate Author and Father of him and his Being, when he had transgressed that Law,” what was the point of Jesus' mission to earth? It is to this question that the rest of the long and (in my judgment) austere beautiful rhetoric of chapter 14 of the *Reasonableness* is devoted. And from what we have observed already, it is possible to guess in advance the character of Locke's argument in this chapter; he will not argue that God's revelation to man revealed the insufficiency of His gift of reason, but that it supported that capacity for reason somehow. Since the law of nature is “eternal” and “immutable,” and is also the “law of works” as God understands it, God's revelation will as much as possible be understood by Locke not to have changed the substantive content of the law of nature, but to have made it more clear and

obligatory and to have given human beings a profound reason to follow that law.<sup>186</sup> Locke will argue that Jesus' life work on earth had the salutary moral effect of making reason's laws clear, obligatory, and in the interest of all human beings by divine revelation.

### Christianity as a "Reasonable" Religion

In chapter 14 of the *Reasonableness*, Locke provides five "Advantages," which "we receive[d] by the coming of *Jesus the Messiah*" (142). The first is that the knowledge of the one true God, which Locke argues is available to mankind through reason if they would but diligently and correctly inquire into the matter, is no longer so obscured by the sorts of things that obscure or corrupt the use of reason. "Sense and Lust blinded their minds in some; And a careless Inadvertency in others; And fearful Apprehensions in most . . . [which] gave them up into the hands of their Priests, to fill their Heads with false Notions of the Deity, and their Worship with foolish Rights, as they pleased" (143). In short, "the Works of Nature, in every part of them, sufficiently Evidence a Deity; Yet the World made so little use of their Reason, that they saw him not" (143). It was reason unused, uncultivated, or misguided that prevented mankind prior to Jesus' coming from seeing the "*One God*, and he *Eternal, Invisible*; Not like to any visible Objects, nor to be represented by them" (145).

Prior to Jesus' coming, reason's discovery of the unity, supremacy, and invisibility of God, was locked up in the minds of a few men, who, knowing the powerlessness of reason in a

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<sup>186</sup> "Locke's characteristic mode of argument is to insist that nature, reason, and scripture all converge on the proposition he seeks to defend." Ian Shapiro, "John Locke's Democratic Theory," in *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 336, fn. 55. That proposition, in this case, is that the law of nature is both the eternal law of right, accessible to man as man in all times and places, and God's revealed commands or rules, which Locke calls "the law of works."

world ruled by crafty priests and foolish people, “were fain, in their outward Professions and Worship, to go with the Herd, and keep to the Religion established by Law.”

The Rational and thinking part of Mankind, ’tis true, when they sought after him, found the One, Supream, Invisible God: But if they acknowledged and worshipped him, it was only in their own minds. They kept this Truth locked up in their own breasts as a Secret, nor ever durst ventured it amongst the People; much less amongst the Priests, those wary Guardians of their own Creeds and Profitable Inventions. Hence we see that *Reason*, speaking never so clearly to the Wise and Virtuous, had never Authority enough to prevail on the Multitude; and to perswade the Societies of Men, that there was but One God, that alone was to be owned and worshipped (144).

One of the implications of this argument is that when the “Rational and thinking part” of mankind “found the One, Supream, Invisible God,” their belief that such a god was true would probably have been imputed to them for a justifying faith. For, even though they might not have heard of the promise of a savior to come, God only requires of every man “*According to what a man hath, and not according to what he hath not.*” But be that as it may, Locke suggests here that while reason may speak clearly to the rational and thinking part of mankind, religion is more able to cultivate the kind of authority that can procure for itself a wider audience. And because Christianity is a reasonable religion, the implication is that Christianity helps to procure a greater audience among mankind for reason, and therefore also for the eternal “Standard of Right,” too.

It is important for Locke to insist that Jesus’ coming paved the path for the widespread recognition of the one invisible God, because in his argument here and in the *Essay*, God provides, in his view, the true foundation for moral obligation. Self-interest may lead us to “cry up that for Sacred; which if once trampled on, and prophaned, [we] cannot be safe nor secure”: the observation of several moral rules may be in everyone’s interest (*Essay*, 1.3.6). But interest and obligation are not the same thing; to have an interest is not yet to be truly obliged. Locke argues in the *Essay* that knowledge of God’s rewards and punishments in another life would



oblige us to act morally. “The true ground of Morality . . . can only be the Will and Law of a God, who sees Men in the dark, has in his Hand Rewards and Punishment, and Power enough to call to account the Proudest Offender” (*Essay*, 1.3.6).<sup>187</sup> The suggestion in the *Reasonableness* is that reason has some kind of access to knowledge of a God who is, in addition to being wise and powerful, also merciful.<sup>188</sup> How knowledge of God’s providential mercy is available to reason without the help of revelation Locke simply, and somewhat disappointingly, does not say. However that may be, the argument advanced by Locke in this section is that Jesus’ coming made accessible to mankind at large, for the most part hoodwinked by their lusts, laziness, or fears, what the wise men of old already knew or suspected on the basis of the proper and diligent use of their reason alone, namely that there is only “One, Supream, Invisible God.”

The second advantage is, for the purposes of our analysis, most important. “Next to the Knowledge of one God; Maker of all things; A clear *knowledge of their Duty* was wanting to Mankind” (147). Here we touch upon the single most important idea for Locke’s understanding

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<sup>187</sup> In *Natural Right and History*, 213, Leo Strauss argues that Locke equivocates concerning the true ground of morality. Strauss observes that according to Locke in the *Essay*, “the true ground of morality . . . can only be the will and law of a God, who sees men in the dark . . .”; he then immediately juxtaposes a Locke quote from the *Reasonableness*: “But even if,” Strauss writes, “and precisely if, those rules are divorced from ‘the true ground of morality,’ they stand ‘on their true foundations’: ‘[Prior to Jesus], those just measures of right and wrong, which necessity had anywhere introduced, the civil laws prescribed, or philosophers recommended, stood on *their true foundations*.’” Higgins-Biddle comments, “Th[is] passage proved to Strauss that ‘several moral rules’, which were part of the law of nature, ‘stood on their true foundations’ prior to the revelation of Jesus. Although Strauss quoted his text accurately, the edition he used contains a vital omission. It should read ‘stood not on their true foundations’.” *Reasonableness*, xcvi.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. again *Reasonableness*, 140, quoted previously: “God had, by the Light of Reason, revealed to all Mankind, who would make use of that Light, that he was Good and Merciful. The same spark of the Divine Nature and Knowledge in Man, which making him a Man, shewed him the Law he was under as a Man; Shewed him also the way of Attoning the merciful, kind, compassionate Author and Father of him and his Being, when he had transgressed that Law.”

of morality, which runs throughout his writings, namely the law of nature. “By reason alone,” Locke has already informed us, does the law of nature teach us our duties. In this section, it is the priests, again, who play the villains, and it is the philosophers—those reasonable ones—who, again, are shielded from blame: “Every one went to their Sacrifices and Services: But the Priests made it not their business to teach them *Virtue*. . . . Few went to the Schools of the Philosophers, to be instructed in their Duties; And to know what was Good and Evil in their Actions” (147). The result is bad: since “the Priests sold the better Pennyworths, and therefore had all the Custom . . . Religion was every where distinguished from, and preferred to *Virtue*” (147). Locke is not kind to ancient pagan priests.

A few pages into the section, however, Locke reveals that, in his view, the work that Jesus did in propagating the “Rules of Morality” was superior to the work that the philosophers did in this respect. “Let it be granted,” Locke argues, “(though not true) that all the *Moral Precepts* of the Gospel were known by some Body or other, amongst Mankind, before. . . . What would this amount to, towards being a steady Rule; A certain transcript of a Law that we are under? . . . [For] the Opinion of this or that Philosopher, was of no Authority” (150-51). The ancient philosophers, however reasonable, had, and have, an “authority” problem, whatever it is they knew and taught; it is not that they were mistaken so much as that they lacked authority. Jesus’ promulgation is superior because it adds authority to the counsels of reason. “’Tis true,” Locke reminds us, “there is a *Law of Nature*,” promulgated by reason alone. “But who is there that ever did, or undertook to give it us all entire, as a Law; No more, nor no less, than what was contained in, and had the obligation of that Law? Who, ever made out all the parts of it; Put them together;

And shewed the World their obligation” (153)? No one did this prior to Jesus, in Locke’s view, and he attributes to Jesus the accomplishment of having done it first and best.

For support of this claim, Locke invites his readers to consider Jesus’ work in terms of an actual historical political situation, namely the political response to the rise of Julius Caesar.

Let me ask any one, who is forward to think that the Doctrine of *Morality* was full and clear in the World, at our Saviour’s Birth; Whither would he have directed *Brutus* and *Cassius*, (both Men of Parts and Virtue, the one whereof believed, and the other disbelieved a future Being) to be satisfied in the Rules and Obligations of all the parts of their Duties; If they should have asked him where they might find the Law, they were to live by, and by which they should be charged or acquitted, as guilty or innocent? If to the sayings of the Wise, and the Declarations of Philosophers; He sends them into a wild Wood of uncertainty, to an endless maze; from which they should never get out: If to the Religions of the World, yet worse: And if to their own Reason, he refers them to that which had some light and certainty; but yet had hitherto failed all Mankind in a perfect Rule; And we see, resolved not the doubts that had arisen amongst the Studious and Thinking Philosophers (154).

Now, this example requires some thinking through. In the first place, are we not invited to consider the application of Jesus’ “perfect Rule” to the case of handling a tyrant? And Locke, as any cursory glance at the *Second Treatise* reveals, had a thing or two to say about tyranny.

We are invited to wonder, then, I suggest, what kind of clear rule Brutus and Cassius would find if they had available to them, and turned to for direction, the Christian “law of works,” which Locke has loosely identified with the “law of nature.”<sup>189</sup> And I think the straightforward answer is rather plain: it is not a Christian’s business to dethrone a tyrant, or cross an aspiring tyrant, by violent resistance. Jesus is, after all, the “prince of peace.” He is even reported to have taught his followers to pay their taxes: “Render unto Caesar . . . .” But we

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<sup>189</sup> I say “loosely” because on more than one occasion in the *Reasonableness* Locke preserves the distinction between the law of nature and the Christian law of works by calling the Christian law of works “conformable” to the law of nature, and vice versa. The law of nature and the Christian law of works are conformable, in Locke’s view; they are not, then, in the final analysis identical.

know, from the *Second Treatise*, that Locke famously teaches that the law of nature allows a right of revolution. It allows, in other words, a right to kill tyrants, if that is necessary.

Where-ever violence is used, and injury done, though by hands appointed to administer justice, it is still violence and injury, however coloured with the name, pretences, or forms of law, the end whereof being to protect and redress the innocent, by an unbiassed application of it, to all who are under it; where-ever that is not *bone fide* done, *war is made* upon the sufferers, who having no appeal on earth to right them, they are left to the only remedy in such cases, an appeal to heaven (*Second Treatise*, § 20).

Here, then, is another instance, I think, of how the law of nature deviates from the Christian law of works.<sup>190</sup> Does Jesus actually teach his followers to make any kind of war other than the spiritual kind? Locke will, however, if the circumstances are right. And yet, perhaps, the case is not so clear after all, for Locke appeals to the Bible—to the Hebrew Bible, to be sure—in order to justify this right of revolution (*Second Treatise*, § 21). What are we to make of this example?

Brutus is a believer in God and an afterlife: Cassius is not. Cassius is eager to stop Caesar: “I was born free as Caesar, so were you,” he tells Brutus, but Caesar “is now become a god, and Cassius is a wretched creature.”<sup>191</sup> Brutus, however, needed more than a little encouragement to join the conspiracy. Cassius, who provided that encouragement, and who does not believe in an afterlife, and not Brutus, is then ultimately responsible for the conspiracy against Caesar, even if Brutus eventually joined in the act of tyrannicide. For in general it is the way of Jesus to highlight not only the act, but also the will to act, in relation to the moral law. Would Jesus and Locke have judged Cassius’ case differently? Is Cassius just more calculating and rational than Brutus? Would they each have absolved Cassius of a crime, or would Locke

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<sup>190</sup> It follows from the first deviation, which is the right to do anything in the name of self-preservation, discussed above.

<sup>191</sup> Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell (Croatia: Arden Shakespeare, 2000), 1.2.97, 116-17.

alone have done so? Or would neither of them have absolved him? And what about Brutus? Supposing he had remained uninvolved, would this remaining uninvolved have been sanctioned by the Christian law of works? Would it have been advisable according to Locke's law of nature? Whatever the case, this example seems not to serve clearly Locke's line of argument. How would Brutus and Cassius together, on account of their belief and unbelief respectively, have been helped any more or less than they already were by their own reason? They would have had a "perfect Rule," Locke suggests; but this, of course, begs the question.

If Brutus and Cassius had available to them the New Testament—if, while the conspiracy was still just an idea, they had their servants bring to them a copy of, say, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as presented in the book of Matthew, or chapter 13 of St. Paul's letter to the Romans, and then proceeded to "consult" and "study" it—what, given the information we have, might have followed? Cassius might have been a little impatient, in fact, for he was not a believer. Might not Brutus, however, who was, have rejected all Cassius' further "encouragements" to join in the necessary deed, whether those encouragements were provided through speech or no? Would not Brutus, who was a believer, have rejected his noble Roman impulse ("There was a Brutus once . . .," Cassius reminds him<sup>192</sup>) to defend the republic through an act of murder, after having consulted and studied this "perfect Rule"? In other words, and more generally, does not Christianity teach patience and passivity in the face of grave or threatening political injustice? And is this, if not wholly inconsistent, at least in serious tension with Locke's teaching on the people's right of revolution?

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 1.2.158-60.

The possibility is worth considering that through this example Locke points—in the middle of a defense of the superiority of the Christian system of morality to all ancient pagan religion and philosophy (insofar as they attempted, and failed, unlike Jesus, to propagate a clear, succinct, and obligatory moral code for all mankind)—to the single most profound problem, as he sees it, with the Christian law of works. That problem, if problem it is, manifests itself politically, and can be summed up in the words of Shakespeare’s Cassius: “the fault is not in our stars,” my dear (Christian) Brutus, “but in our selves, that we are underlings.” Let us be Christians, says Locke; but that in the face of tyranny or threatening tyranny God permits us to do more than “peep about to find ourselves dishonourable graves,” that Locke also says.<sup>193</sup>

Now, we do not know for sure what Locke thought of Brutus’ and Cassius’ actions because he does not tell us, maddeningly. My interpretation is, then, conjecture. But I think we are invited to think through this real world historical example in something like the way I have tried to think it through. What is certain is that Locke defends the right, in principle, of an “appeal to heaven” in the *Second Treatise*. The appeal to heaven is, of course, an appeal to battle and to war—and also, if by quiet implication, to honor.<sup>194</sup> That political right would permit Christian men and women to participate in acts of resistance against their political rulers who, according to their judgment, had violated, or intend to violate, their rights. The appeal to heaven is the appeal to heaven precisely because God must judge whether that appeal was made correctly. Not the right of appeal, according to Locke, but our judgment of the necessity of the

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 1.2.136-37.

<sup>194</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 1.2.92: “honour is the subject of my story,” Cassius tells Brutus in his first attempt to use his “weak words” to strike a “show of fire from Brutus.” Locke, however, does not mention this word; he speaks, not of “honor,” but of “self-preservation.”

appeal in a given case, is what Locke says God judges. In other words, God judges whether or not we used our reason correctly. In this hypothetical case, if Brutus and Cassius obeyed this “perfect rule,” instead of taking their bearings by Locke’s law of nature interpretation of it, they would have been made, at least according to themselves, underlings. And according to Locke, no one—not even Christians—needs to consent to being made an underling.

Locke himself is an example of one who, wishing to be understood as a Christian, nevertheless defends, on Biblical grounds, a right of revolution. “Had there been any [earthly authority], any superior jurisdiction on earth, to determine the right between *Jephtha* and the *Ammonites*, they had never come to a *state of war*: but we see he was forced to appeal to heaven” (*Second Treatise*, § 21). This example, drawn from the book of Judges, is meant to provide Biblical support and sanction for the right of revolution. In such controversies,” Locke clarifies, “where the question is put, *who shall be judge?* . . . that question then cannot mean, who shall judge, whether another hath put himself in a *state of war* with me, and whether I may, as *Jephtha* did, *appeal to heaven* in it? of that I myself can only be judge in my own conscience, as I will answer it, at the great day, to the supreme judge of all men” (*Second Treatise*, § 21). In respect of a right of revolution, it seems to me that Locke’s law of nature is not exactly conformable to the Christian law of works. But Locke presents it as if it is.<sup>195</sup> His insistence that

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<sup>195</sup> In doing this he fulfills, intentionally or no, Machiavelli’s call for interpreting our religion “according to virtue” instead of “according to idleness.” “Our religion,” writes Machiavelli, “permits us the exaltation and defense of the fatherland,” and “it wishes us to love and honor it and to prepare ourselves to be such that we can defend it.” *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), book 2, ch. 2. We see here another connection between Locke and Machiavelli, this time an explicitly political one. In becoming astute judges of what is required for their self-preservation, men become also, at least to a greater extent, “masters of their fates.” Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1.2.138.

God will judge those who invoke their right of revolution is part of that presentation; that reminder moderates, or ought to moderate, those overly inclined to invoke that right.

To return and conclude our discussion of this second advantage. The Christian law of works, according to Locke, teaches men their duties more plainly, and with greater authority, than the ancient pagan priests and philosophers ever did; and in this it performs, and according to Locke might continue to perform, a great service to mankind. It is superior to the work of the ancient pagan priests because they “spoke little of Virtue and a good Life”; and it is superior to the work of the ancient pagan philosophers, “who spoke from Reason,” because they “made not much mention of the Deity in their *Ethicks*” (154-55). We know that, according to Locke, the true obligation of a moral rule depends on the existence of a God, who enforces his rules or laws in an afterlife. Locke has taken care to live up to his own principle in respect of the necessity for a moral foundation in his discussion of the first advantage: Jesus cleared the way for a broader appreciation of the truth of the one God, eternal and invisible.

Christian philosophers, Locke observes, have indeed done a little better than the ancient ones in respect of propagating a clear law of works or moral code, too. But that is not because they are or were better philosophers, but because they had the good fortune to live after Jesus did, who built a sound foundation for them. “When Truths are once known to us, though by Tradition, we are apt to be favourable to our own Parts; And ascribe to our own Understandings the Discovery of what, in reality, we borrowed from others” (155).

He that Travels the Roads now, applauds his own strength and legs, that have carried him so far in such a scantling of time; And ascribes all to his own Vigor, little considering how much he owes to their pains, who cleared the Woods, drained the Bogs, built the Bridges, and made the Ways passable; without which he might have toiled much with little progress (156).



If we know our moral duties better than did the ancient pagans, that is not because we are better or smarter human beings, but because we are able to begin from a starting point that was not available to the ancient pagans; that starting point makes all the difference.

A great many things which we have been bred up in the belief of from our Cradles, (and are Notions grown Familiar, and as it were Natural to us, under the Gospel,) we take for unquestionable obvious Truths, and easily demonstrable; without considering how long we might have been in doubt or ignorance of them, had Revelation been silent. And many are beholden to Revelation, who do not acknowledge it (156).

It is “as it were Natural to us” that we ought to treat others as we wish to be treated (or at least not to treat others as we wish not to be treated) and that human beings are by nature equal in their possession of their inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property. And yet, perhaps all persons do not find these truths equally natural. For in Locke’s view the Christian law of works gives rise to a potential weakness that manifests itself above all politically: tyrants are real; and now and again the sons of God, like Brutus, will need a Cassius, who, faithless, “looks quite through the deeds of men.”<sup>196</sup> With a graceful bow to what moral philosophy owes the New Testament, Locke downplays his own effort to improve—to clear another “Wood,” as it were, regarding—Christians’ understanding of their earthly privileges and responsibilities, which include not only a right of revolution, but also a right to preserve themselves in any “state of war.”

The third advantage we have by Jesus’ coming is “a Reformation” of the “outward forms of *Worshipping the Deity*,” for “stately Buildings, costly Ornaments, peculiar and uncouth Habits, and a numerous huddle of pompous, phantastical, cumbersome Ceremonies, every where attended Divine Worship” (159). The problem, observes Locke, is that these practices, instead of the reformation of the inward man, were “thought the principal part, if not the whole of

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<sup>196</sup> Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1.2.201-02.

Religion” (159-60). To this Jesus brought a remedy: “plain, spiritual, suitable Worship . . . with application of Mind and sincerity of Heart,” which is “what God henceforth only required” (160). “Magnificent Temples, and confinement to certain Places, were now no longer necessary for his Worship; Which by a Pure Heart might be performed any where” (160). “Every one was [from now on] to look after his own Heart,” for “it was that alone which God had regard to, and accepted” (160). Jesus simplified outward ritual, according to Locke, by making religious worship more inward and more private—and therefore also more sincere and inwardly transformative. In this passage one hears echoes of the Protestant reformation’s critique of Catholic “ritual” and even Jewish “legalism,” although Locke mentions neither of these by name in the passage.

The fourth advantage, which is in a way the most “Lockean” of them all, is “the great encouragement [Jesus] brought to a virtuous and pious Life” (161). “The Portion of the Righteous has been in all Ages taken notice of, to be pretty scanty in this World. Virtue and Prosperity, do not often accompany one another” (161). This observation, Locke argues, is a great potential obstacle to living a holy life. But “*law*, in its true notion,” Locke told us in the *Second Treatise*, “is not so much the limitation as *the direction of a free and intelligent agent* to his proper interest.” And here Locke argues that, by virtue of the great rewards God has prepared in the next life for those who love and honor him in this one, following the “law of works” and living “a virtuous and pious Life” according to the law of nature is in the true interest of every person. Jesus’ promulgation of the blessedness of a life to come for those who follow him enabled a radical reorientation of how human beings might choose to live their lives on earth.

Human beings, Locke argues, were in need of a clear doctrine concerning the afterlife.

Mankind, who are and must be allowed to pursue their Happiness; Nay, cannot be hindered; Could not but think themselves excused from a strict observation of Rules, which appeared so little to consist with their chief End, Happiness; Whilst they kept them from the enjoyments of the Life; And they had little evidence and security of another. . . . Their thoughts of another life were at best obscure (161).

Ancient pagan priests, it is true, did provide “some talk,” Locke tells us, of an afterlife, which gave rise to some thoughts concerning it, “but they had them generally from their Poets, mixed with their Fables. . . . They came to them bundled up amongst their tales; And for tales they took them.” As for the ancient philosophers, “the chief of their Arguments were from the excellency of Virtue: And the highest they generally went, was the exalting of humane Nature, Whose Perfection lay in virtue” (161). “Before our Saviour’s time, the Doctrine of a future State, though it were not wholly hid, yet it was not clearly known in the World. ’Twas an imperfect view of Reason; Or, perhaps the decay’d remains of an ancient Tradition; which rather seemed to float on Mens Phansies, than sink deep into their Hearts” (162).

Jesus, however, “*brought life and immortality to light*” (162). By clearly revealing the doctrine of an afterlife, in which the virtuous and pious are rewarded, Jesus, by “this one truth changed the Nature of things in the World,” and has “given the advantage to Piety over all that could tempt or deter Men from it” (162).

The Philosophers indeed shewed the beauty of Virtue . . . But leaving her unendowed, very few were willing to espouse her. The generality could not refuse her their esteem and commendation; But still turned their Backs on her and forsook her, as a match not for their turn. But now there being put into the Scales, on her side, *An exceeding and immortal weight of Glory*; Interest is come about to her; And Virtue now is visibly the most enriching purchase, and by much the best bargain. . . . The view of Heaven and Hell, will cast a slight upon the short pleasures and pains of this present state; and give attractions and encouragements to Virtue, which reason, and interest, and the Care of our selves, cannot but allow and prefer. Upon this foundation, and upon this only, Morality stands firm, and may defy all competition. This makes it more than a name; A substantial Good, worth all our aims and endeavours; And thus the Gospel of Jesus Christ has delivered it to us (163).

In his discussion of the fourth advantage, Locke argues that the benefits of following “Virtue” now outweigh the sacrifices that must be made in its name. Here again Locke touches upon the advantage that Jesus’ authority lends to the practice of virtue and piety. The ancient philosophers, who did honor virtue, “seldom set their Rules on Men’s Minds and Practises, by consideration of another Life” (161). Jesus and the apostles’ promulgation of a doctrine of an afterlife, however, lends the weight and obligation to virtue that it once lacked.

The fifth and final advantage Locke discusses is “the promise of assistance.” Leading a virtuous and pious life is not to be understood, even if it is ultimately in our interest, as an easy task. “If we do what we can, [God] will give us his Spirit to help us to do what, and how we should” (163).<sup>197</sup> Even though we have the promise of rewards in an afterlife clearly through the promulgation of the Gospel, we can still notice “how liable to mistakes, how apt to go astray, and how easily to be turned out of the paths of Virtue” we are.

To a Man under the difficulties of his Nature, beset with Temptations, and hedged in with prevailing Customs; ’tis no small encouragement to set himself seriously on the courses of Virtue, and practise of true Religion, That he is from a sure hand, and an almighty arm, promised assistance to support and carry him through” (164).

Locke’s statement that “if we do what we can, [God] will give us his Spirit to help us” is reminiscent of the trite and popular saying, “God helps those who help themselves.” This, of course, is not exactly a biblical teaching; but it meshes well, and is an echo of, Locke’s insistence that prudence is necessary in the management of our own affairs. In fact, earlier in the *Reasonableness*, Locke had described Jesus as a master practitioner, and teacher, of the natural

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<sup>197</sup> Higgins-Biddle comments, “Locke here alludes to the medieval theological phrase *facere quod in se* (‘to do what one can’), which became a hotly debated concept in the reformations of the 16th cent. . . . Locke, however, seeks to avoid the heart of the issue by considering it only in regard to the gift of the Spirit.” *Reasonableness*, 163, fn. 2.

law; in other words, Jesus mastered the art of prudence and brought it to a state of, one might say, divine perfection.<sup>198</sup> For Locke, this prudence includes, as we have seen, looking out to see and judge when and where our own self-preservation might potentially be at risk. Jesus' mission to earth was to clarify, promulgate, and motivate men to obey, the law of reason, the law of nature, God's original grant to mankind. Jesus came to better promulgate a law, then, that was already in existence; he was not an "innovator," at least as Locke paints him, but a reasonable, law-abiding conservative, whose teachings existing governments need not fear.

"Illiterate Men" and "Elevated Understandings"<sup>199</sup>

The above analysis illustrates the complex relationship between Locke's law of nature teaching and Christian doctrine. In both the *Reasonableness* and the *Second Treatise*, Locke calls the law of nature "eternal" and insists that it is the "will of God" (*Reasonableness*, 20, 119; *Second Treatise*, § 135). In the *Second Treatise*, this law of nature (the "Eternal Law of Right," *Reasonableness*, 119) functions as an extra-legal standard of justice or moral right against which

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<sup>198</sup> See Locke, *Reasonableness*, chs. 7-10. Consider, however: if Jesus was a master practitioner of the law of nature, and if the law of nature teaches wise or prudent self-interest, as Locke says it does, is not Locke compelled by his own argument to indicate what manner of self-interest—in addition, perhaps, to self-sacrificial, overflowing divine charity and love for all mankind—motivated Jesus to die for the human race (or to confess that his presentation of Jesus as a master practitioner of the law of nature misses the mark)? Well, Locke (the mercenary imp!) suggests one, somewhat cheekily: "God, we see, designed his Son *Christ Jesus* a Kingdom, an Everlasting Kingdom in Heaven"; but without Jesus' death, which makes possible immortality for sinners, God would have "left him no Subjects; And instead of those Ten Thousand times Ten Thousand, and Thousands of Thousands, there would not have been one left him to sing Praises unto his Name . . . ." Ibid., 117. About this passage Michael Rabieh glosses, "Not a desire to make men more lawful and to promote harmony on earth but a desire to set up his son in the family business was what prompted the new covenant." "The Reasonableness of Locke, or the Questionableness of Christianity," *The Journal of Politics* 53, no. 4 (November, 1991): 954.

<sup>199</sup> These are Locke's words. *Reasonableness*, 159.

the acts and intentions of legislators making positive laws may be judged. The eternal law of nature provides the framework within which Locke understands the nature both of politics and of individual freedom. This law is, then, as much as possible melded together in Locke's thought with God's divine injunction for human beings to treat one another fairly and as equals. In the *Second Treatise*, however, this law appears to deviate somewhat from the Bible's injunction that to seek and love God is our first responsibility. However that may be, that God sanctions, or in fact commands, as Locke suggests, the law of nature, "the Eternal Law of Right," lends that law a legitimacy that it could not have obtained from any other source.

The law of nature, in addition to being a guide for politics, also serves as a guide for individual morality. It is precisely through a lack of diligent study of it, which is in part due to the interest and self-love that keep us from such study, that human beings, sooner or later, come to "make war" on each other. "Though the law of nature be plain and intelligible to all rational creatures; yet men being biassed by their interest, as well as ignorant for want of study of it, are not apt to allow of it as a law binding to them in the application of it to their particular causes." This is precisely one of the difficulties that Locke's government is meant to remedy. In the state of nature there lacks "an *established*, settled, known *law*, received and allowed by common consent to be the standard of right and wrong, and the common measure to decide all controversies between" men (*Second Treatise*, § 124). That is to say, in properly framed governments, there *is* an "established, settled, known law, received and allowed by common consent to be the standard of right and wrong." And that, according to Locke, is a good thing.

Government, however, when properly framed, only abridges the liberties that are necessary in order to provide for the security of those who live under the rule of that government.

This leaves a large sphere of liberty to individuals living in a “Lockean” political order. Freedom “*under government*,” Locke tells us, allows us “a liberty to follow [our] own will in all things, where the rule prescribes not” (*Second Treatise*, § 22). In this sphere of liberty, only the law of nature need be our guide. And while Locke implies in the *Second Treatise* that this law is God’s law, too, in the *Reasonableness* this becomes his argument explicitly. This argument is not without its nuances; one gets the impression Locke fudges and obfuscates here and there. Nevertheless, Locke makes the case that Christian morality might play, and should play, a strong role in guiding the use of our freedom. Let us sum up, then, the general way in which, in Locke’s view, the Christian teaching might do so.

Though some of Locke’s argument in the *Reasonableness* can be construed as unorthodox (and certainly was by some of his contemporaries, who accused him of things they considered to be worse than unorthodoxy, like Deism, Hobbism, and atheism), it is not easy to argue that Locke finds Christianity a wholly objectionable religious faith. The arguments he makes concerning it, here and elsewhere, indicate that he took Christianity seriously not only as a mighty cultural force, but also as a faith that, when understood soberly, seriously, and above all reasonably, contributes more to the well-being of mankind than its opposite. If Locke were master of the education and instruction of the young, they would all begin life believing in God.

Here is Locke in *Some Thoughts*, writing about religious instruction.

I place virtue as the first and most necessary of those endowments that belong to a man or a gentleman; as absolutely requisite to make him valued and beloved by others, acceptable or tolerable to himself. Without that, I think, he will be happy neither in this nor the other world. As the foundation of this, there ought very early to be imprinted on his mind a true notion of God, as of the independent Supreme Being, Author and Maker of all things, from Whom we receive all our good, Who loves us, and gives us all things. And consequent to this, instil into him a love and reverence of this Supreme Being. This is enough to begin with, without going to explain this matter any farther [to him]; for fear

lest by talking too early to him of spirits, and being unseasonably forward to make him understand the incomprehensible nature of that Infinite Being, his head be either fill'd with false, or perplex'd with unintelligible notions of Him. Let him only be told upon occasion, that God made and governs all things, hears and sees every thing, and does all manner of good to those that love and obey Him; you will find, that being told of such a God, other thoughts will be apt to rise up fast enough in his mind about Him; which, as you observe them to have any mistakes, you must set right. And I think it would be better if men generally rested in such an idea of God, without being too curious in their notions about a Being which all must acknowledge incomprehensible; whereby many, who have not strength and clearness of thought to distinguish between what they can, and what they cannot know, run themselves in superstitions or atheism, making God like themselves, or (because they cannot comprehend any thing else) none at all. And I am apt to think, the keeping children constantly morning and evening to acts of devotion to God, as to their Maker, Preserver and Benefactor, in some plain and short form of prayer, suitable to their age and capacity, will be of much more use to them in religion, knowledge, and virtue, than to distract their thoughts with curious enquiries into His inscrutable essence and being (§§ 135-36).

Locke seems to have written much of what he did about religion in order to moderate the baleful effects of immoderate religious passion; he certainly thought young children should believe and that the moderate belief described here would benefit them. But he also thought this kind of moderate belief would be beneficial to grown-ups, too, for a different reason: it would prevent them from coming to love and honor “doctrine” before the preservation of life and morality.

Locke saw benefits as well as dangers to religious faith and religious education; he points to both the benefits and the dangers in this quote. In the first place, a “notion” of God provides the foundation of virtue for children in *Some Thoughts*, just as it explicitly does in the *Reasonableness*. Belief not only plays a role in the moral development of children who, lacking fully developed reason, are as yet unable to understand the law of nature on their own, but also in men who, having grown into the use of their reason, are apt to make mistakes in the use of their reason and thus also in the interpretation of their religion. The goodness of reasonable belief in God is coupled with a humble acknowledgement that He is ultimately incomprehensible. The



mistakes made by too much reasoning about the attributes of the divine are not to the benefit of anyone at all, and perhaps least of all to the ones who make them. They are made by heads “fill’d with false, or perplex’d with unintelligible notions” of the “incomprehensible nature of that Infinite Being,” which mistakes are apt to lead men into “superstitions or atheism,” which is “making God like themselves, or . . . none at all.” Each of these, it would appear, at least from this passage, Locke considers to be dangerous errors rooted in intellectual hubris.

To the extent that Locke’s law of nature and the Christian law of works are the same, we may infer that the problems that beset the consultation and study of the law of nature beset also the consultation and study of the Christian law of works; likewise we may infer that the undesirable effects of this lack of knowledge are similar, too. Those problems as they relate to the law of nature, as we saw in chapter three, are the self-love and interests of all men, the ordinary intellect’s lack of practice in the use of reason (both about religion and other matters), and the educated intellect’s tendency to misunderstand and distort, for its own apparent ends, the counsel of reason contained within the law of nature. Examples of this lack of understanding in the ordinary and educated intellects are not hard to find.

Locke writes of ordinary men who, not being used to “strict reasoning,” rely on only some “one or two rules, on which their conclusions immediately depend”; “take these from them, and they are perfectly at a loss . . . for long deductions from remote principles is what they have not been used to, and cannot manage” (*Conduct*, § 6). Locke also writes of educated men who, having been weaned on “the Language and Business of the Schools, and Academies of learned Nations, accustomed to that sort of Conversation, or Learning, where Disputes are frequent” have learned how to argue and persuade, but whose thoughts and arguments are, as a result, “not

much conducing to the discovery of Truth, or advancement of Knowledge” (*Essay*, 1.3.27). The ordinary intellect can grasp the law of nature, but lacks practice; the educated intellect can grasp more of it on account of practice, but is prevented from doing so when vanity, ever-tempting, leads one to blur the distinction between actually knowing and being thought to know.

Now, in Locke’s view, the Christian law of works is remarkable because its teachings (for example, those found in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount) are without vanity, both at the level of intellect and the level of personal character. “True religion . . . is not instituted in order to the erecting an external pomp, nor to the obtaining of ecclesiastical dominion, nor to the exercising of compulsive force; but to the regulating of men’s lives according to the rules of virtue and piety.” Therefore, Locke tells us, “whosoever will list himself under the banner of Christ, must, in the first place and above all things, make war upon his own lusts and vices. It is in vain for any man to usurp the name of christian, without holiness of life, purity of manners, and benignity and meekness of spirit” (*Letter*, 23). In the *Reasonableness* Locke echoes this understanding of true religion in his description of the origins of Christianity.

The Credit and Authority our Saviour and his Apostles had over the minds of Men, by the Miracles they did; Tempted them not to mix (as we find in that of all the Sects of Philosophers, and other Religions) any Conceits; any wrong Rules; any thing tending to their own by-interest, or that of a Party; in their Morality. No tang of prepossession or phansy; No footsteps of Pride or Vanity; No touch of Ostentation or Ambition, appears to have a hand in it. It is all pure, all sincere; Nothing too much, nothing wanting: But such a compleat Rule of Life, as the wisest Men must acknowledge, tends entirely to the good of Mankind: And that all would be happy, if all would practise it (*Reasonableness*, 159).

Locke’s last statement is, I think, carefully worded: “all would be happy, if all would practise it.” That is different from saying that anyone who practices it would be happy, regardless of who else practices it. Since not all practice it, it is necessary to talk about the right to self-preservation.

Christianity contributes to the virtue of independent-mindedness because it teaches both men of ordinary and educated intellect duties “conformable” to those that reason teaches, but with authority. Ordinary minds, not well-versed in tracing a “Thread of coherent deductions from the first Principle,” can access this teaching because the Christian law of works lies “level to the ordinariness of Apprehension.” “He that can distinguish between sick and well, Lame and sound, dead and alive, is capable of this Doctrine.” And “to one who is once persuaded that Jesus Christ was sent by God to be a King, and a Saviour of those who do believe in him; All his Commands become Principles: There needs no other Proof for the truth of what he says, but that he said it.” “And here I appeal,” Locke asks, “whether this be not the surest, safest, and most effectual way of teaching” (*Reasonableness*, 158-59)? We saw in the last chapter that Locke’s optimism concerning universal enlightenment is tempered by the sober reflection that adults who have reached the age of reason are, at least more often than not, unlikely to possess the “vigour of mind” required “to contest the empire of habit.” To the extent that is true, a substitute will be necessary; for Locke that substitute is the teaching of the New Testament, reasonably interpreted.

Educated minds, accustomed to “the Language and Business of the Schools . . . where Disputes are frequent,” and therefore more vulnerable to the pressures and temptations of “interest,” “Party,” “Pride or Vanity,” and “Ostentation or Ambition,” “cannot but submit to the Authority of this Doctrine as Divine.” And why not? Because, “coming from the mouths of a company of illiterate men, [it] hath not only the attestation of Miracles, but reason to confirm it” (*Reasonableness*, 157-59). That, of course, is another way of saying that while reason alone cannot demonstrate the veracity of miracles, it can affirm the reasonableness of many a Christian teaching on the good life. Enlightenment means, then, for Locke, not only the overcoming of

parochialism, prejudice, and impartiality in our habits of thought, but also the taming and moderation of the excesses of self-love and desire that motivate us to pursue our interests through means and ways not sanctioned by the law of nature. Since Locke's "reasonable" Christianity helps us to do that, the universality of the success of enlightenment would seem to depend, at least somewhat, in his view, on the propagation of a reasonable Christianity.

### **Conclusion: Liberal Faith and the Future of Liberalism**

Locke is a great partisan of the liberated judgment. He praises the kind of mind that is as much as possible free from the shackles of custom, authority, prejudice, partiality, and superstition. But such freedom, being no one's natural endowment, requires labor. It requires labor above all because human beings go through a formative state, childhood, in which their minds and characters are shaped before they have reached the "age of reason." This means, in Locke's view, that every human being has within himself, upon reaching the age of reason, an "empire of habit" into which, if he is brave enough, he may inquire. Moreover, he has an interest in such an inquiry because he can hardly help but wish to know, both for himself in this world and also, possibly, in the next, whether he has an adequate grasp of the reality of things. According to Locke, we have an interest in knowing what is true.

But that interest, like almost every other interest in Locke's view, needs to be moderated. The despair of the skeptic and the fanaticism of the dogmatist are two ways in which the inquiry described can go astray, and Locke's theory of knowledge cuts a middle path between the two. Such a defense of knowledge as Locke makes, as we have seen, leans to the side of skepticism, not dogmatism. And many sober men who considered themselves to be defenders of the true religion and of the existing social order were alarmed by Locke's skepticism.

As was inevitable, Locke's theory of knowledge caused him to reorganize his conception of our private experience of our moral lives. On Lockean grounds, the conscience loses its grandeur, the will is neither evil nor free (nor unfree), and the rational faculty becomes the instrument by which we perform, or fail to perform, those duties we owe ourselves and others. But precisely insofar as this is the case, our successes in this regard become increasingly

inseparable from prudence, and our failures, increasingly indistinguishable from ignorance.

Locke's theory of knowledge, and the increased role of reason in our moral life, go hand in hand.

Carving out his theory of knowledge allowed Locke to defend a "law" knowable by the "light of nature," which is our natural reason. That law is central to his political thought. His defense of this law is quite artful: it is, on the one hand, altogether real, but it is also, on the other, not so obvious as to permit any dogmatic claims in its name. "Locke appealed to the law of nature in a way that both assumes its existence and concedes the human propensity to confound and confuse such standards. He embraced the possibility of an overarching moral law while also resisting dogmatic claims concerning the specific content of that law."<sup>200</sup> This is, in a way, precisely how Locke defends the possibility of knowledge, too: we can think, we can sort out the consistencies and inconsistencies in our ideas, and we can separate the more from the less probable, but we are hardly able to know anything with absolute certainty. Yet that is not cause for despair. Probable knowledge is enough to guide us in public affairs, in our religion, and in our private life; at any rate it is, according to Locke, all we really have.

In Locke's view, all human beings who are not deformed by nature have the capacity to develop the prudence that is necessary for self-government. Pride in one's own rationality is the final and most fundamental basis of Locke's liberalism. "A liberal society and polity require the cultivation of *rationality* and the *pride in rationality*, which were for Locke the ultimate basis of the *love of liberty*."<sup>201</sup> The overcoming of prejudice is, then, both a personal and a political necessity. Without a policy of toleration, individuals must adhere to the dominant beliefs and

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<sup>200</sup> Douglas John Casson, *Liberating Judgment: Fanatics, Skeptics, and John Locke's Politics of Probability* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 254.

<sup>201</sup> Tarcov, "Lockean Liberalism," 65.

opinions prescribed by the law or, perhaps more invidiously, the majority, which would often make them afraid to think for themselves, or angry and biased when they do. And yet, without a little encouragement, advice, and help in the task of liberating their own judgment, most individuals would, even in a “tolerant” society, “live lazily on scraps of begg’d Opinions” and “contentedly suffer their Minds to appear abroad in a pie-bald Livery of coarse Patches, and borrowed Shreds, such as it has pleased Chance, or their Country-Tailor, (I mean the common Opinion of those they have conversed with,) to cloath them in” (*Essay*, Epistle, 4.20.6). The first important work of the understanding, according to Locke, is some kind of self-liberation.

Though pride in our rationality is a great part of the foundation for Locke’s politics of liberty, and though Locke insists that persons who cultivate independence of mind are necessary for the success of his liberalism, the justification for this virtue ultimately rests squarely on the necessities and tendencies of our nature, not on its good fit with or function within any particular regime. Locke asserts that no rational person can do, sooner or later, without considering “the religion thing,” as we might call it today. And independence of mind is necessary for that kind of consideration. Moreover, he argues in the *Conduct* that the inclinations of our nature point to the necessity our minds have to rest on some foundation or other; that inclination is, when properly viewed and interpreted, a constant goading to look into and examine the grounds of our own opinions, principles, and tenets.

Locke goes so far as to emphasize the role of reason in our understanding of religion. Locke’s unorthodox defense of a reasonable Christianity is at the same time a defense of reason and of the law of nature, of which Jesus himself was, according to Locke, the supreme practitioner. There is a delicate interplay between reason and revelation in Locke, and it seems

like pushing him definitively to one side or the other—making of him or his arguments an unequivocal champion of either reason or revelation—always involves a kind of interpretive injustice to him. That, I think, is by design. If this is correct, then understanding Locke as he wished to be understood means acknowledging that he nods his hat respectfully, and without dissimulation (if from across the room), to philosophy’s ancient, inimical friend.

At any rate, the possibility of the truth of revelation spurs us to cultivate the independence of mind necessary to engage revelation without mediating human authority; and yet revelation itself, the New Testament, at least as Locke wishes to have it understood, is to a great extent the embodiment of the reason that was God’s original grant to Adam and to man as a whole. Locke’s defense of reason and his unabashedly positive valuation of pride in our rationality is bound up in his presentation with the study of “theology,” which he calls the one science “incomparably above all the rest.” It would seem that, in Locke’s view, the development of this central liberal virtue, independence of mind, even depends in some manner on theology.

Although is it possible to doubt Locke’s commitment to the pared-down version of Christianity presented in the *Reasonableness*, the natural human equality at the heart of his liberalism in the *Second Treatise* does have for its support a certain kind of theological perspective: “men, being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker . . .” (*Second Treatise*, § 6). Whatever we may think privately, public reason has need of something higher than the creative human will. The creative human will distinguishes badly, or not all, between liberty and license. In this respect, Locke’s theology is another link in the theoretical fence that keeps decent liberals from taking seriously the possibility of the existence of natural masters and slaves. But we have grown rich, and God has grown old. Is it not the part



of the more farsighted today to sense in this development something other than, or at least in addition to, mere liberation from the religious prejudices of the past? This development might cause anxiety, among other reasons, not because liberation of the private mind is scary, but because liberation of public reason from all theological echoes just might mean the public return to theoretical consideration of the possibility that some of us deserve to be slaves. We are all God's creatures, for Locke, which means we are all "equal and independent" by nature.

Still, it is complicated: for if this is the natural condition into which all men are placed by the Creator, one cannot say on Locke's grounds that such a placement is all that benevolent anyway; after all, the state of nature, full of adults who are "equal and independent," devolves sooner or later into a state of war. Reason, too, then, is only a kind of "potential"; but, unlike riches, it cannot be cultivated, truly cultivated, without an honest day's (or lifetime's) work. But be that as it may, natural human equality is one of the fundamental postulates of Locke's liberal politics; and it is a genuine question, if one takes one's bearings by a reason that is utterly deaf to the challenge and respectability of reasonable religion, whether that postulate may not be rationally and publicly discredited in a post-modern age. What prevents it? Can reason unassisted preach natural human equality without misconstruing the facts in this case?

We wonder, then, if Locke's liberalism finds itself in some danger in a post-modern age. The liberal politics that Locke (and others) bequeathed to us has, so far, become increasingly committed to the idea of equality while simultaneously distancing itself from the theological support for that equality. For Locke, a reasonable Christianity lends its support to liberalism, even if that is neither its primary or ultimate purpose nor its self-understanding. That theological support might remind us, among other things, that there are higher goods than possessing

material and legal benefits in a liberal regime. Radical democrats, however, often understand liberalism's theological support as but an obstacle; it stands in the way, so they say, of liberal promises as they understand them—the elimination of human suffering through the expansion of universal rights and economic equality. This, perhaps, is no entirely ignoble project; but orderliness, too, is something good, and so is having a right to the fruits of our own labor. A radically equal order could only be acquired and maintained by ignoring the difference between the rational and the industrious and the quarrelsome and the contentious, and then regulating the fruits of our labor accordingly. (“Are the fruits of our labor really our own? Are not our talents really community resources?” we might ask with John Rawls.) Without a theological framework, such as the one to which Locke appeals, is the individual even intelligible apart from the community? Even supposing he is, does he remain something respectable?

For Locke, a reasonable theology reminds us that there are principles higher and more dignified than equality and narrowly understood self-interest. In so reminding us, it moderates the love of equality that it helps to support and in this way promotes liberalism's health and longevity. But as in our political life, so on the plane of the individual mind: theology does not have pride of place. It is certainly not ordinarily and generally associated inside the university, like science is, with intellectual and spiritual liberation. However that may be, the loss of the place of theology means for Locke the loss in some sense of orderliness of the soul, too: it is no longer so easy to tell the difference between an important question and an unimportant one. Witness the host of modern and post-modern “ideologies” and “-isms” to which we have become prey, each of which make a claim to merit our attention and allegiance; this host of “-ologies” and “-isms” tolerates little inquiry, ironically, into the pedigree of ideas. (The response to this

cacophony of claims on our allegiance, at least in the young, is often inner withdrawal and apathy, not engagement, but this is another story.)

Precisely insofar as secular liberalism forgets theology, which, “containing the knowledge of God and his creatures, our duty to him and our fellow creatures and a view of our present and future state, is the comprehension of all other knowledge directed to its true end, i.e., the honor and veneration of the Creator and the happiness of mankind,” it does two things that might not be in its best interest: first, it forgets that arguments for freedom and enlightenment are, at the end of the day, rooted in things other than utility. In Locke’s view, the ultimate ground of the arguments he makes on behalf of freedom and enlightenment are that they are true, and moreover that they are true because they are rooted in some kind of reality that transcends custom, positive law, and the creative human will, however difficult or obscure that source may in fact be. Second, it gives the Church, which is perhaps beginning to remember itself (?), a dialectical and rhetorical advantage over the minds of every citizen who has ever wondered about the purpose of his or her life. “This is that noble study which is every man’s duty,” Locke writes, “and everyone that can be called a rational creature is capable of” (*Conduct*, § 23). Not that such questions about purpose are to be avoided; the problem, rather, as Locke himself saw it, was that the Church never wants to play second fiddle to any secular authority.

However that may be, Locke could depend in his time on an audience that was receptive to the idea that theology is important and that theology is a worthy study for rational minds. Is there such an audience today, generally speaking? Insofar as religion in general, and for Locke the Bible in particular, plays a role in grounding, propagating, and moderating the essential creeds at the bottom of our social and political life, one can say that this religious tradition

operates as a resource for Locke in his argument for the goodness and desirability of a regime devoted to freedom, order, and prosperity. That tradition helps teach us how to desire, use, and even ignore when necessary, the goods that liberalism is so awesomely good at procuring, at least for the great majority of its members; in other words, such a tradition helps teach us how to live. Locke's teaching on the good life is no less than this: "live like a rational Christian." It seems to me that he would not have envied those liberal political communities today that have fully accepted—but have also made more radical—his teaching concerning the "workmanship of [our] Understanding" in relation to truth, for they can no longer genuinely rely on those same spiritual and intellectual resources he and his audience did for guidance and insight.

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