John Locke's Philosophy of Religion

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Introduction

This essay examines John Locke's philosophy of religion. Here, the focus is on those truths related to religious matters that can be known through reason, which Locke terms a sort of "natural revelation, whereby the eternal Father…communicates to mankind that portion of Truth, which he has laid within the realm of their natural Faculties (*Essay* 4.19.4). I will focus on Locke's discussions in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* along with some of his related writings, correspondence, and notes. Although I take the *Essay* as authoritative, since it is what Locke chose to publish regarding these matters, it is helpful to supplement this material with Locke's reflections written around the same time and to consult his answers to inquiries that arose after the publication of the *Essay*. I believe that these materials further expand and clarify the positions that Locke puts forth in the *Essay*.

Locke thought that we could come to know certain facts about the world through sensation, reflection, and reason. Some of these facts concern the existence and nature of the creator, our place in the world, and our duty to God. Locke provides a cosmological argument for the existence of God. He also produces several proofs concerning God's uniqueness and his goodness and justice. Given certain facts about God's existence and nature, we can come to know some things about the

structure and nature of God's creation and how God's justice is exemplified with respect to his creation. According to Locke, when we understand that God is perfect, we can better see our duty to him and know that he has provided us with sufficient means for our well-being.

One of Locke's most influential discussions in philosophy of religion concerns the relationship between faith and reason. In opposition to some of his contemporaries, Locke held that reason has a significant role to play in the acceptance and understanding of all our religious beliefs. Nowhere is his commitment to the importance of reasoned faith more clear than in his discussion of revelation and miracles. Here we see that Locke denies that miracles and revelation are to be taken as matters of blind faith. Instead, he claims that reason must be used to determine whether a messenger is sent from God and whether the contents of the message are befitting a perfect God.

In this chapter, I first discuss Locke's views on arguments for God's existence. I will discuss his criticisms of Descartes's ontological argument, and explain Locke's own cosmological argument. I will then turn to the related issue of God's uniqueness and examine Locke's proofs for the unity of God. Next, I will consider Locke's views on the ladder of being and man's place in the world. Locke's view that human beings are quite limited with respect to their faculties and knowledge brings up a problem concerning God's goodness and justice, which is discussed in the following section. Finally, I examine Locke's accounts of the relation between faith and reason, and revelation and miracles. In this section, Locke's epistemology will come to the forefront and we will see that his epistemic modesty extends even to matters of faith.

Arguments for the Existence and Unity of God

Locke criticisms of Descartes's ontological argument can be found in "Deus: Des Cartes's Proof of a God from the Idea of Necessary Existence Examined," an unpublished journal entry dated after the publication of the *Essay* (1696). Locke provides his own version of the cosmological argument in the *Essay* (4.10). I will outline his criticisms of Descartes, then examine Locke's proof

and provide the criticisms of it. One important criticism of Locke's argument is that he fails to secure the uniqueness or unity of God. In his correspondence with Van Limborch, Locke provides various proofs for the unity of God, and I will examine these.

In the *Essay*, Locke argued that there are no innate ideas. In "Deus," he argues that Descartes's ontological argument, which begins with our innate idea of God as the being with all the perfections, is an unsuccessful argument. Locke provides three main criticisms of the argument. First, it is not true that everyone possess an idea of a perfect God. That is, there is no innate idea of God. Second, even if one does possess the idea of God as a perfect being, this is no guarantee that such a being exists in reality. Finally, the idea of necessary existence only begs the question.

According to Locke, Descartes's argument does not provide an adequate response to the materialist atheist. Locke thinks that no one doubts that there has been something in existence for all eternity. Rather, the main dispute between the atheist and the theist is regarding the nature of the eternal first cause. Locke maintains that the atheist thinks the eternal cause of the universe and its order is "senseless matter," while the theist maintains that it is "an immaterial eternal knowing spirit." Locke makes similar claims in *Essay* 4.10. Locke believes that Descartes's argument for God's existence fails because his claim that the first being must have necessary existence is a claim that both the theist and the atheist maintain for their own conflicting theses. He writes,

> The question between them then is, which of these really is that eternal Being that has always been. Now I say, whoever will use the idea of necessary existence to prove a God, i.e. an immaterial eternal knowing spirit, will have no more to say for it from the idea of necessary existence, than an Atheist has for his eternal, all-doing, senseless matter…for whatsoever is eternal must needs have necessary existence included in it. And who now has the odds in proving by adding in his mind the idea of necessary existence to his idea of the first being?

> The truth is in this way, that which should be proved, viz. existence, is supposed, and so the question is only begged on both sides ("Deus" 314-5).

Here, Locke claims that including necessary existence in our complex idea of God does not give the theist an advantage over the materialist atheist. For the atheist can claim that his complex idea of eternal matter includes the idea of necessary existence as well.

Locke then goes on to argue that we cannot infer real existence from our ideas of things. He writes:

> But any idea, simple or complex, barely by being in our minds, is no evidence of the real existence of anything out of our minds, answering that idea. Real existence can be proved only by real existence; and therefore, the real existence of God can only be proved by the real existence of other things. ("Deus" 315)

Locke argues that we cannot prove the real existence of anything through the fact that we have an idea of it. We can only prove that something actually exists by showing that it stands in some causal relation to other actually existing things. It is only by examining the things that exist and their properties that we can come to know anything about their causes. Locke thinks that we can know that things external to us exist through our senses, but that knowledge gained through the senses is only probabilistic. Thus, any design argument that proceeds from our knowledge of the external world to an intelligent creator will be merely probabilistic in its conclusions. In order to prove God's existence, we need to begin with premises that are intuitively and certainly known. According to Locke, one can know of one's own existence through "an internal infallible perception." Knowledge of God's existence begins with certain knowledge of oneself as a knowing perceptive being and concludes that the cause of our existence must also be knowing and perceptive. Locke provides his cosmological argument in the *Essay* at 4.10.2-6. In outline, the argument is as follows.

Locke begins with the intuitively certain claim that every man knows that he exists. From this, Locke concludes that some real being exists. He next claims that every man knows that he began to exist at some time and that everything that has a beginning must have a cause of its existence. Locke claims that if there were no first cause of existence, then there would be nothing in existence now. Thus, something must have been in existence from eternity. Whatever the eternal first cause is, it must be the case that it is the cause of all other existents and their properties. Since we know that we have perception and knowledge, we can conclude that the eternal first cause must be a most powerful, perceptive, and knowing being.

Locke's argument has been widely criticized, both by Locke's contemporaries and by historians of philosophy (For some of these criticisms, see Leibniz (1996) 435-6 and Bennett (2005) 162. For further contemporary criticisms of Locke's proof see Ayers (1991) 182 and Wolterstorf (1994) 189). Locke has been accused of making several mistakes in his argument. The most serious of which are two logical errors: (1) the fallacious move from claiming that something has been in existence for all eternity to claiming that some *one* thing has been in existence for all eternity, and (2) the fallacious move from claiming that there is one thing that has existed for all eternity to claiming there is one thing that is the *cause* of everything that has existed for all eternity.

Locke's seemingly fallacious moves might be partly mitigated by understanding that Locke is concerned not with an individual being, but with a kind of Being. That is, Locke is trying to show that the cause of all individuals must be a certain type of thing – one that is "cogitative" rather than "incogitative." Recall that Locke's concern is to argue against an atheistic materialist. He thinks that what is at stake is not whether there has always been something in existence, but rather what sort of thing – incogitative matter or cogitative being – has been in existence for all eternity. Locke thinks that if cognitive being has a beginning, then it must have a cause. However, in order to avoid the infinite regress of causes, we must finally resort to something that has no cause. This leads us to the

conclusion that there has been some cogitative being in existence eternally. One problem is that Locke never explains why there cannot be an infinite chain of cogitative beings that has existed from eternity. Another is that even if Locke is merely arguing for the type of eternal being, we are still left with the problem that more than one individual of this type might constitute the "first" cause. In this case, Locke would fail to secure the existence of the Judeo-Christian God. Locke's defense of the unity of God in the *Essay* begins with the claim that no finite individual being is powerful enough to be the first cause. He writes,

> Since therefore whatsoever is the first eternal Being must necessarily be cogitative; And whatsoever is first of all Things, must necessarily contain in it, and actually have, at least, all the Perfections that can ever after exist; nor can it ever give to another any perfection it hath not, either actually in it self, or at least in a higher degree; it necessarily follows, that the first eternal Being cannot be Matter (4.10.10).

He then argues that there cannot be an "infinite number of eternal finite cogitative beings, independent one of another, of limited force, and distinct thoughts" because they could not produce the "order, harmony, and beauty, which is to be found in Nature" (4.10.10).

In 1697, Philippus van Limborch wrote to Locke requesting arguments that prove the uniqueness of God. Limborch's request was made on behalf of Johannes Hudde. Hudde was a Cartesian, but Locke was not told of Hudde's views until after Locke had sent Limborch his arguments. Locke's arguments for God's unity are based upon God's perfections. Locke begins by defining God as "an infinite eternal incorporeal being perfectly perfect," and argues that "a perfectly perfect being cannot want any of those attributes, perfections, or degrees of perfection which it is better to have than to be without for then he would want soe much of being perfectly perfect" (*Corr.* 2395, English Draft Appendix II). Locke provides three argument for the unity of God each based

on one of God's perfections or attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. I begin with Locke's argument from omnipotence.

Locke tells us "to have power is a greater perfection than to have none; to have more power is a greater perfection than to have lesse and to have all power (which is to be omnipotent) is a greater perfection, than not to have power" (*Corr*. 2395, English Draft Appendix II).

Locke continues:

> But two omnipotents are inconsistent. Because it must be supposed that it is necessary for one to will what the other wills; and then he – of the two whose will is necessarily – determined by the will of the other, is not free: and soe wants that perfection; it being better to be free than under the determination of an others will. If they are not both under the necessity of willing always the same thing, then one may will the doeing of that, which the other may will should not be done, and then the will of the one must prevail over the other, and then he of the two, whose power is not able to second his will, is not omnipotent. For he cannot doe soe much as the other, and then one of them is not omnipotent and soe there are not nor can be two omnipotents and consequently not two gods. (Corr. 2395, English Draft Appendix II)

Locke's argument can be rendered as the following *reductio ad absurdum*:

1. Suppose there are two omnipotent gods.
2. If so, then either each god always wills as the other wills, or each god does not always will as the other wills.
3. If each god always wills as the other wills, then the god whose will is determined by the other god is not free to will as he chooses.
4. The god who is not free to will as he chooses lacks the power of freedom, and so is not omnipotent.

5. If each god does not always will as the other wills, then one god might do what the other god does not will.

6. If one god cannot do something that he wills (because he cannot prevent the other god from doing what he does not will), then he is not omnipotent.

7. Therefore, whether each god always wills as the other god wills or if each god does not always will as the other wills, one god is not omnipotent.

8. Therefore, it is impossible that there be two omnipotent gods.

9. God is necessarily omnipotent (as per the definition of 'God').

10. Therefore, there cannot be two gods.

Locke's second argument is based on God's omniscience. He argues that if there were two or more distinct beings with distinct wills, then one would have the imperfection of not being able to conceal her thoughts from the other. However, if one of the beings can conceal her thoughts, then the other cannot be omniscient since she cannot know what the first thinks or know as much as the first.

Finally, Locke provides a number of arguments related to omnipresence. Locke argues that it is better – a greater perfection – to be everywhere than to be shut out of some places. For if one is "shut out" of certain places then one cannot operate in those places or know what goes on there (*Corr*. 2395, English Draft in Appendix II). Thus, if one is not omnipresent, one is not omnipotent or omniscient. Locke's argument is based on his contention that God is both immaterial and extended. In order for God to have the perfections of omnipotence and omniscience, he must be able to act everywhere and to know everything. But since Locke believes that power and knowledge are powers that must inhere in something real in order to be exemplified, he holds that God must be substantially located at every place. Locke then goes on to provide an argument for the impossibility of two omnipresent gods based on what looks like the Identity of Indiscernibles (For any individuals x and y, for any property P, if x has P if and only if y has P, then x = y). Locke writes,

> If to avoid the foresaid arguments it be said that these two (or two hundred thousand) gods (for by the same reason there can be two there maybe two millions for there can be noe reason to limit their number) have all perfectly exactly the same power, the same knowledge, the same will, and exist equally in the same individual place, this is only to multiply sounds, but in reality to reduce the supposed plurality only to one. For to suppose two intelligent beings, that perpetually know will and act the same thing, and have not a separate existence, is in words to suppose a plurality, but in reality to make but one. For to be inseparably united in understanding, will, action, and place is to be as much united as any intelligent being can be united to its self, and to suppose that where there is such an union there can be two beings is to suppose a division without a division and a thing divided from itself. (*Corr.* 2395, English Draft in Appendix II)

Here, Locke's argument is that there cannot be two beings of the exact same kind with all the same properties in the same place, since there would be no distinction upon which to identify them as separate beings. After showing that a being of the same kind with the same properties cannot be co-located with God, Locke returns to the argument about God's omnipresence. If God is omnipresent, then there cannot be any other being of the same kind located anywhere that God exists since two beings of the same kind would exclude each other. Thus, Locke shows that not only is it impossible for there to be two gods with all of the same properties and powers, but also that there cannot be two gods of the same kind that share only some properties.

Upon receiving Locke's arguments, Limborch, along with Le Clerc, studied the arguments and wrote to Locke asking that he make some amendments in order not to offend Hudde's Cartesian views concerning God's omnipresence. Locke agreed to leave out the argument based on God's omnipresence since, as he was told, the Cartesians held that God is where he acts – that is, he

is everywhere only in that he can act everywhere; he is virtually present at every place, but is not literally in space. However, as was said earlier, Locke, like Newton, held that God was substantially present everywhere (One might compare Locke's discussion of God at *Essay* 2.13 to Newton's discussion in Queries 28 and 31 of the 1718 edition of the *Opticks* and the debate that followed in the Leibniz-Clark correspondence about the meaning of Newton's term "sensorium"). If God were not everywhere, then he would not be able to act everywhere and know everything. In his reply to Limborch, Locke writes, "If the Cartesians are to be understood concerning Spirit, that it is Thought [Cogitatio] and not a thinking substance, they certainly assert God in words [and] annul Him in deed. For Thought is an action that does not exist of itself but is an action of some substance" (*Corr*. 2413).

The Ladder of Being: Man's Place in the World

Given Locke's general epistemic modesty, his views concerning the plentitude of species of creatures contained in the world might seem surprising. Locke argues that not only are there no "gaps" in nature, but that there is a continual gradual progression from the least perfect of beings all the way up to the infinitely perfect being. Locke writes:

> Observing, I say, such gradual and gentle descents downwards in those parts of the Creation, that are beneath Man, the rule of Analogy may make it probable, that it is so also in Things above us, and our Observation; and that there are several ranks of intelligent Beings, excelling us in several degrees of Perfection, ascending upwards towards the infinite Perfection of the Creator, by gentle steps and differences, that are every one at no great distance from the next to it. …Thus finding in all parts of the Creation, that fall under humane Observation, that there is a gradual connexion of one with another, without any great or discernible gaps between, in all that great variety of Things we see in the World, which are so closely linked together, that, in the several ranks of Beings, it is not easy to

> discover the bounds betwixt them, we have reason to be perswaded, that by such gentle steps Things ascend upwards in degrees of Perfection. (4.16.12)

Locke posits that there is a plentitude of creatures in the world of varying perfections from the lowest to the highest. These creatures are all part of God's creation, and God has given them various faculties of sense and intellect. We discover this truth about the world by analogy. That is, we observe that below us there is a gradual descent in the perfections of creatures that continues until we reach the type of animal (or perhaps plant or mineral) with the fewest possible perfections. By way of analogy, we can then infer that there is probably a gradual upward assent in the perfection of beings that continues upward until we reach the most perfectly perfect being. This upward assent will presumably take us out of the realm of material, or sensible, beings and into the realm of beings that are purely intellectual beings. Locke writes:

> Only this, I think, I may confidently say…that the intellectual and sensible World, are in this perfectly alike; That that part, which we see of either of them, holds no proportion with what we see not; And whatsoever we can reach with our Eyes, or our thoughts of either of them, is but a point, almost nothing, in comparison of the rest. (4.3.23)

Do we at least have experience of all the species of material beings? It seems that Locke's answer is that we do not. The view is that even the sensible world holds beings that are either too minute or too distant (in other parts of the universe) for us to observe. Moreover, Locke is committed to the possibility of the existence of intelligent creatures with better sensory faculties than humans.

> What other simple Ideas 'tis possible the Creatures in other parts of the Universe may have, by the Assistance of Senses and Faculties more or perfecter, than we have, or different from ours, 'tis not for us to determine. But to say, or think there are no such, because we can conceive nothing of them, is no better an argument, than if a blind Man should be positive

> in it, that there was no such thing as Sight and Colours, because he had no manner of Idea, of any such thing, nor could by any means frame to himself any Notions about Seeing. (4.3.23)

Locke thinks that there is good reason to believe that God has created other intelligent and sensitive beings, but given the limitation of our senses and intellect we can form no ideas of these other beings. However, this fact does not make their existence any less likely. It should not be surprising given this view of the varying perfections of creatures, that Locke holds that our place among the hierarchy is fairly low. He writes:

> He that will consider the Infinite Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of the Creator of all Things, will find Reason to think, it was not all laid out upon so inconsiderable, mean, and impotent a Creature, as he will find Man to be; who in all probability, is one of the lowest of all intellectual Beings. (4.3.23)

Far from thinking that human beings on Earth are God's only creation, Locke holds that it is likely that we are not even one of his better efforts. We are "inconsiderable, mean, and impotent" in comparison with the other beings whose perfections we cannot conceive. Given Locke's view of our place in the hierarchy of beings, it is no wonder that he believes we should content ourselves with being able to secure our own continued survival and not concern ourselves with questions about the nature of the world or with metaphysical knowledge. We should concern ourselves with morality, and God "hath furnished Man with those Faculties, which will serve for the sufficient discovery of all things requisite to the end of such a Being" (1.4.12). Of course, given the limitations of human beings, we are faced with an aspect of the problem of evil – why would God create beings that are "inconsiderable, mean, and impotent"? It seems that Locke's answer is that God has created beings with every possible level of perfection. That is, he has created every possible type of being. But this raises a second question: is it consistent with God's goodness and justice to create intelligent

beings that are so limited? This was a problem that Locke was aware of, and one he addressed in several places in the *Essay*.

The Problem of Evil: God's Goodness and Justice and Human Limitation and Knowledge

Locke defines evil as "that which is apt to cause pain in us" (2.21.42), and although he has no specific discussion of what we might call the "traditional problem of evil" he does address issues concerning God's goodness and justice and the provisions he has made, or failed to make, for our well-being.

In a short untitled manuscript from Locke's journal (PE 277-8), he discusses God's goodness and justice in relation to what he provides for his creatures and the extent of his punishment of creatures. Locke begins with the claim that if God is perfect, he must not only be powerful but also good and wise. He argues that unlimited power cannot be an excellency or perfection without being regulated by wisdom and goodness. Locke notes that because God is eternal and perfect, he cannot use his power to change himself, so all his power is directed at his creatures. He then argues that God wills to do "as much as the order and perfection of the whole can allow each individual in its particular rank and station" (PE 277). Locke infers "we cannot imagine he hath made anything with a design that it should be miserable, but that he hath afforded it all the means of being happy that its nature and estate is capable of" (PE 277-8). God makes each individual as happy as he can insofar as it is consistent with doing the best for the whole of creation. It might not be the case that every individual's happiness is maximized, but given the limitations and ends of the individual and the wellbeing of others, God has given each what is necessary for the attainment of happiness.

In the same piece, Locke considers how God's justice is exemplified in the punishment of his creatures. Here, Locke's discussion seems to be directed at traditional conceptions of God as vengeful and the notion that he damns many individuals to eternal pain and misery. Locke, however,

maintains that God does not punish creatures out of vengeance, but only to protect the rest of his creation. He writes:

> For since our actions cannot reach unto him, or bring him any profit or damage, the punishments he inflicts on any of his creatures, i.e. the misery or destruction he brings upon them, can be nothing else but to preserve the greater or more considerable part, and so being only for preservation, his justice is nothing but a branch of his goodness. (PE 278)

Locke argues that God's justice is an implementation of his goodness. So that God's justice with respect to punishment extends only so far as is necessary to bring about or preserve good. Locke argues that to claim that God punishes for other reasons is to make his justice "a great imperfection, and suppose a power over him that necessitates him to operate contrary to the rules of his wisdom and goodness, which cannot be supposed to make anything so idly as that it should be purposely destroyed or be put in a worse state than destruction" (PE 278). Here, Locke implies that God does not create beings in order to damn them. There cannot be any individual who has no chance of salvation. Moreover, God does not sentence beings to eternal damnation because, as Locke notes, misery is worse than annihilation. It may be necessary to annihilate a being if such a being's existence is incompatible with the preservation of the rest of creation. However, Locke claims that God does not create beings just to annihilate them. Thus, Locke concludes that God's justice only extends as far as necessary to preserve his works. Locke's text suggests that for the wicked death is permanent, but that no further punishment is required in order to preserve God's creation nor is further punishment consistent with goodness. In addition to his discussions of God's goodness and justice in his journal, Locke has several discussions in the *Essay* that are worth investigation.

In the *Essay*, during a discussion of whether or not we have an innate idea of God, Locke turns to the following argument: "It is suitable to the goodness of God, to imprint, upon the Minds

of Men, Characters and Notions of himself, and not to leave them in the dark, and doubt, in so grand a Concernment" (1.4.12). Locke rejects this argument because it proves too much. His counter is that if we hold that God has given us an idea of himself because we believe it would be best, then we should expect that God has made us perfect because this would be best as well. He writes:

> For if we may conclude the God hath done for Men, all that Men shall judge is best for them, because it is suitable to his goodness to do so, it will prove not only, that God has imprinted on the Minds of Men an Idea of himself; but that he hath plainly stamp'd there, in fair Characters, all that Men ought to know, or believe of him, all that they ought to do in obedience to his Will; and that he hath given them a Will and Affections conformable to it. (1.4.12)

Locke claims that it would be good for us, in our own estimation, to know everything about God and our duties to him. In addition, it would benefit us greatly if we had the will to always do our duty. However, it clearly is not the case that these things have been given to us. Locke writes, "I think it a very good Argument, to say, the infinitely wise God hath made it so: And therefore it is best. But it seems to me a little too much Confidence in our own Wisdom, to say, I think it best, and therefore God hath made it so" (1.4.12). God has not done everything he could do for us, but that does not mean that he has left us without the means for securing our wellbeing. According to Locke, God "hath furnished Man with those Faculties, which serve for the sufficient discovery of all things requisite to the end of such a Being; and I doubt not but to shew, that a Man by the right use of his natural Abilities, may, without any innate Principles, attain the Knowledge of God, and other things that concern him" (1.4.12).

In another section of the *Essay*, in the midst of his discussion of our ideas of substances, Locke again digresses to consider whether our faculties and senses are well suited to our ends. This

discussion might have been prompted by worries that Locke's claims about our inability to know the natures of things seems inconsistent with our being designed by a wise and powerful maker. After all, it seems that our lives would be better if we were able to more easily discern the natures of things and their related causal powers. Locke writes,

> But it appears not, that God intended, we should have a perfect, clear, and adequate Knowledge of them [the conveniences of Life and the Business we have to do here]: that perhaps is not in the Comprehension of any finite Being. We are furnished with the Faculties (dull and weak as they are) to discover enough in the Creatures, to lead us to the Knowledge of the Creator, and the Knowledge of our Duty; and we are fitted well enough with Abilities, to provide for the Conveniences of living. (2.23.12)

Again, Locke claims that although we are lacking in certain degrees of perfection, God has given us what is necessary for the sort of lives we live. Moreover, Locke argues that if God had given us better faculties, we might have been worse off. He writes, "But were our Senses alter'd, and made much quicker and acuter, the appearance and outward Scheme of things would have quite another Face to us; and I am apt to think, would be inconsistent with our Being, or at least well-being in this part of the Universe, which we inhabit" (2.23.12).

Locke maintains that human beings can barely stand high altitudes and that if our hearing were better we would not be able to rest even in the quietest places. Moreover, he argues that if our sight were 10,000 times more powerful, we might be able to "penetrate father than ordinary into the secret Composition, and radical Texture of Bodies," but this would not help us get to "the Market and Exchange" (2.23.12). Locke claims that seeing the interior workings of things would give us ideas of their internal constitutions, but that it would benefit us very little in practical terms. Since our main concern in this life, according to Locke, is to know God and to obey the dictates of morality, knowledge of the true nature of substances is of very little use to us.

Although our place in creation is fairly low as far as intelligent beings go, Locke maintains that has adequately provided for our wellbeing. God has given us the tools for flourishing. Had we been different beings in different parts of the world, we might have had greater faculties. However, such faculties are not necessary for, and in fact might be detrimental to, the kind of lives we are meant to lead.

Reason and Faith, Revelation and Miracles

Locke claims that although God has not given us innate ideas or senses that can penetrate into the secret natures of things, he has given us faculties sufficient for discovering the existence of God, facts about the nature of the world necessary for our wellbeing, and our moral duty. In discovering these facts, we must make use of our reason in order to ascertain the agreement or disagreement amongst our ideas and to make valid deductions from them. For although Locke does not think we can know much by use of reason alone, he does believe that the proper and careful use of reason is necessary for almost all our knowledge and beliefs. Locke holds that we have knowledge of our own existence through intuition, knowledge of God's existence through demonstration by the use of reason, and knowledge of the external world through our senses and through reasoning concerning our ideas perceived from the senses.

Locke's general epistemological project seeks the limits of our knowledge and reasoning. He is generally quite cautious about the prospect of our faculties discovering the true natures of things. Given his views, one might think that Locke would hold, as many of his contemporaries did, that reason has little or no place in matters of revealed religion. However, we have already seen that Locke holds that reason plays a large role in natural theology. We can attain knowledge – certainty – regarding God's existence and some truths about his nature. Even so, we might think that the truths of revealed religion and Christianity are not compatible with reason. The view that reason and faith are two separate realms of human understanding was not an uncommon view during Locke's

lifetime. Locke makes his views on this matter explicit in a chapter in the *Essay* on reason and faith (4.18). In this chapter, Locke defines reason as "contradistinguised to Faith" as "the discovery of the Certainty or Probability of such Propositions or Truths, which the Mind arrives at by Deductions made from such *Ideas*, which it has got by the use of its natural Faculties, viz. by Sensation and Reflection" (4.18.2). Here we see that Locke defines reason narrowly as our ability to make demonstrations or deductions from ideas attained through sense and reflection. Locke defines faith as "the Assent to any Proposition, not thus made out by the Deductions of Reason; but upon the Credit of the Proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of Communication" (4.18.2). Locke defines faith as the acceptance of revelation. It might appear from these definitions that Locke has defined two distinct realms – one of sense and reflection and the inferences made from them, and the other of revelation. However, Locke thinks that reason has a large role to play in the acceptance of religious beliefs. Locke holds that if something is actually a revelation from God, it is not subject to the dictates of reason. For whatever God has revealed as true is a "Matter of Faith," and is "above reason." However in order to know something is a matter of faith, reason must determine: (1) whether a particular revelation is actually the testimony of God, and (2) the meaning of the revelation. In order to determine whether a particular revelation is actually from God, we must determine whether the person who claims to be God's messenger is really sent by God. According to Locke, the only way to do this is to determine whether God has endowed this messenger with special abilities to prove his supernatural mission. This is shown by the production of miracles (I will return to this shortly). Locke does not specify exactly how one is to interpret the contents of revelation, but he makes it clear that no testimony from God can conflict with the certain knowledge that we have from reason. Locke claims, for instance, that the doctrine of transubstantiation (that the body of Christ is literally in the communion bread) violates the certainly known principle that one body cannot be in two distinct places at once. The violation occurs when

two different churches perform the rite at the exact same time. Locke claims that our certainty that no body can be in two distinct places at once will always outweigh the probability that testimony to this effect is actually from God or that we have understood the revelation correctly (4.18.5).

Locke provides three guidelines for understanding revealed truths. First, he claims that no messenger can communicate any new simple ideas. Even if God were to provide one of his messengers with a vision of the afterlife, the messenger would not be able to convey the simple ideas that constitute such an experience. We simply lack the requisite ideas, which can only come through sensation and reflection, and corresponding words to communicate and understand this experience. Locke does not go so far as to deny that God may miraculously induce such experiences in an individual, but since these experiences go beyond the scope of our natural faculties, they cannot be naturally revealed to others.

Second, although revelation and natural reason might discover and convey the same facts, facts received through natural reason will always be more certain than revelation. For instance, were God to convey some truth about Euclidean geometry, we might believe it based on revelation alone. However, that belief would not be as certain as the belief we would come to if we worked out the deduction ourselves. In addition, Locke claims that we may believe through revelation that a great flood occurred, but our belief that it occurred is not as certain as the beliefs of those who experienced it. So, revelation always produces a lesser degree of assent than our natural knowledge. As was said above, Locke maintains that no revelation can be contradictory to our clear intuitive knowledge, "Because this would be to subvert the Principles, and Foundations of, all Knowledge, Evidence, and Assent whatsoever: And there would be left no difference between Truth and Falsehood, no measures of Credible and Incredible in the World" (4.18.5). God cannot, and would not, provide testimony that is contrary to our certain knowledge. God has provided the faculties necessary for our wellbeing, so we must be able to trust that these faculties are truth-oriented. If a

revelation were to contradict what we take to be our certain knowledge, then we would lose the basis for thinking we have any knowledge at all.

Finally, when things revealed are such that we only have imperfect ideas or concepts of them, or if they concern things of which we can have no knowledge at all because they are beyond the reach of our natural faculties, they are proper objects of faith. Locke claims the fact that some of the angels rebelled against God is one such matter of faith. Of course, a difficulty arises when we say that some things are merely above reason rather than contrary to reason. For how can we ascertain whether a fact is merely beyond our reasoning abilities or whether it is in fact contrary to reason? Here, Locke must maintain that if we have no support from reason (we cannot show that these claims are consistent with reason or contrary to it), we must simply have faith in the content of the revelation. Of course, Locke believes that this is not done completely without a justificatory basis. We are only justified in having faith if we are justified in believing that the messenger is actually sent by God. Here, we must turn to Locke's account of miracles.

Locke defines a miracle as "a sensible operation, which being above the comprehension of the Spectator, and in his opinion Contrary to the established Course of Nature, is taken by him to be Divine" (WR 44). Locke admits that his definition implies that some operations will count as miracles to some and not to others, depending on the degree to which one understands the course of nature. However, he points out that there is no definition of miracles that does not have this problem. In defending this point, he claims that if a miracle is defined as a violation of the laws of nature or an operation that exceeds the powers of any created nature, we will be in the same position. Locke's argument might seem to commit the *tu quoque* fallacy, but his point is one of epistemic modesty. For it seems that most, if not all, people are incapable of understanding what counts as a law of nature. Nor are people able to judge which operations are performable only by divine power, since in order to do so we would have to know that no created being has such powers.

But, according to Locke, we cannot comprehend the abilities of the "good and bad Angels." So, Locke holds that we are not in the epistemic position to judge whether something is strictly a violation of the laws of nature or an operation that exceeds the natural capacities of created things. Locke concludes that there is no definition of miracles that succeeds in avoiding some degree of subjectivity. There may be a metaphysical fact of the matter as to whether something counts as a miracle or not, but no human is in the position of being able to perceive this fact.

The primary function of a miracle is to support the claim of a messenger as being on a divine mission from God. Miracles offer us reasons to believe that a messenger comes with the word of God. Locke writes, "To know that any Revelation is from God, it is necessary to know that the Messenger that delivers it is sent from God, and that cannot be known but by some credentials given him by God himself" (RW 44). Locke maintains that there are only two messengers who have had such credentials: Moses and Jesus. Locke argues that although not every person was convinced by any one miracle that Moses or Jesus performed, the sheer number and power of the miracles they performed were sufficient to show that they were sent by God. Locke claims that we can tell when something is a genuine miracle because it carries with it "the Marks of a greater power than appears in opposition to it" (RW 46). God will never allow a false messenger to produce miracles greater than a true messenger. Nor will God send a messenger with a trifling message or a message that would be inconsistent with God's nature, natural religion, or the rules of morality. However, Locke thinks that should anyone witness what they believe to be a miracle, they are justified in believing it to be so until "a Mission attested by Operations of a greater force shall disprove them" (RW 48). One cannot show someone who believes a miracle has occurred that she is mistaken in her belief unless one can prove that natural forces were at work or that another faith has produced greater miracles. So, belief in miracles is based in part on the degree witnesses' understanding of nature and

each witness is warranted in their belief until evidence can be provided against the authenticity of the event. This account is, of course, consistent with the claim that no actual miracle has ever occurred.

Most of us will not be witnesses to miracles and will have to rely on the testimony of others as to their occurrence. Locke writes, "He that is present at the fact, is a Spectator: He that believes the History of the fact, puts himself in the place of a Spectator" (RW 44). If one is present at the performance, one is one's own judge as to whether a miracle has occurred or not. But, on what grounds is one justified in believing the history of miracles? That is, given that most people were not witnesses to the miracles of Moses or Jesus, what level of credence should we assign to the occurrence of these events? Locke thinks that it is reasonable to deny that certain miraculous events have occurred. He maintains that some did not believe the first or second feats that Moses produced were in fact miracles, and it was only after repeated feats were produced, each escalating in grandeur, that all were convinced. Of course, we who are further from the events have less reason to assent to these claims. Locke writes:

> Because man does not know whether there be not several sorts of creatures above him and between him and the supreme, amongst which there may be some that have the power to produce in nature such extraordinary effects as we call miracles and may have the will to do it for other reasons than the confirmation of truth. For 'tis certain the magicians of Egypt turned their rods into serpents as well as Moses [Exod. 7:11-12] and since so great a miracle as that was done in opposition to the true God and the revelation sent by him, what miracle can have certainty and assurance greater than that of man's reason? (PE 280)

Locke says that the divine influence (he uses the term "inspiration") that a man receives directly, whether accompanied by miracles or not, is at a great disadvantage against the natural reason of man. Moreover, he writes "it has much more so [disadvantage] in him who receives this revelation only from another and that too very remote in time and place" (PE 280). Locke's

hesitancy regarding the level of credence that should be assigned to miracles and revelation is in keeping with his general epistemological views on degrees of assent. Locke writes:

> The difficulty is, when Testimonies contradict common Experience, and the reports of History and Witnesses clash with the ordinary course of Nature, or with one another; there it is, where Diligence, Attention, and Exactness is required, to form a right judgment, and to proportion the Assent to the different Evidence and Probability of the thing; which rises and falls, according as those two foundations of Credibility, viz. Common Observation in like cases, and particular Testimonies in that particular instance, favour or contradict it. (4.16.9)

Locke's general account of the credibility of testimony relies on two factors: (1) what has been common experience in like cases, and (2) the circumstances of the particular testimony. Here, we see that with respect to extraordinary occurrences, such as miracles, the degree of our assent should be relatively low since there is no common experience in like cases and the testimony is relatively sparse and far removed from us in time. Locke provides an account of the probabilistic nature of testimony that is quite refined. He notes that with each successive telling of an event, the level of credence one should assign to its occurrence ought to be lessened because each subsequent retelling provides less direct evidence. Locke claims, "any Testimony, the farther off it is from the original Truth, the less force and proof it has" (Essay 4.16.10). A credible man, present at the event, who vouches for its occurrence is good evidence for the truth of its occurrence, according to Locke. However, if a second man vouches for the knowledge of the first, even if the second man is credible, his testimony is weaker evidence. As Locke says, "each remove weakens the force of the proof" (Essay. 4.16.10). Locke notes that this is true even though most people act as if a long history of some event lends it greater certainty.

What does this mean for revelation? Let's go over the account. First, Locke maintains that there are certain "matters of faith" that we can come to know only through revelation. However, we

must use our reason to ascertain whether the testimony is in fact from God and what the proper interpretation of the testimony is. With respect to interpreting the testimony, if we have reason to believe the testimony is from God, we know it cannot conflict with our certain knowledge, nor can it concern trivial matters, nor be contrary to the good nature of God. Moreover, we know that the contents of any revealed truth can never attain the sort of certainty for us that we can come to through our natural abilities. With respect to determining whether a messenger is sent from God, we must use our reason to determine whether the messenger has credentials that could only be given by God. Miracles, if produced by the messenger, might be such credentials. However, we can never be certain that a feat counts as a miracle since each person will judge them according to his own standards of what constitutes a violation of the natural laws. Moreover, since most of us are not witnesses to miracles, we must rely on the testimony of others if we are to believe that a messenger has produced miracles. But when we try to determine the level of assent to assign to such testimony, we find, because the events are not confirmed by ordinary experience, the testimony of witnesses is scarce and often conflicting, and we are so far removed from the actual events, we cannot assign a very high level of credence at all to the testimony that any miracle occurred.

Conclusion

Locke's views in philosophy of religion have been influential and his arguments concerning the relation between faith and reason are still the subject of much philosophical discussion. It is through Locke's philosophy of religion that we get a glimpse of his metaphysical commitments. It is here that he argues for the first cause of the world, for the variety of beings that exist therein, and for the basis of our moral duty and expected rewards and punishments. In addition, Locke's views concerning the place of humans in the hierarchy of being support his epistemic modesty when it comes to understanding the deep nature of reality and the mysteries of religion.

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