

# Locke's Moral Psychology

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## Abstract

In this chapter, I discuss Locke's contributions to moral psychology. I begin by examining how we acquire moral ideas, according to Locke. Next, I ask what explains why we act morally. I address this question by showing how Locke reconciles hedonist views concerning moral motivation with his commitment to divine law theory. Then I turn to Shaftesbury's criticism that Locke's moral view is a self-interested moral theory that undermines virtue. In response to the criticism I draw attention to Locke's Christian conception of virtue.

John Locke claims that "*Morality is the proper Science, and Business of Mankind in general*" (*Essay* 4.12.11). He makes this claim in Book 4 of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, which draws attention to the limitations of human understanding. Locke does not deny that humans can acquire knowledge, but rather his aim is to show that human knowledge is more limited than several of his predecessors and contemporaries assumed.<sup>1</sup> Due to our limited cognitive capacities, he argues, humans are not able to discover many metaphysical truths such as the real essences of substances. This leads Locke to claim that it is better to devote our time to morality and religion. He believes that we are well suited to focus on morality and religion not only because all humans seek happiness and are concerned for their future happiness, but also because we can acquire moral knowledge (Rossiter, this volume).

Locke comments on the importance of morality throughout the *Essay*, but his remarks tend to be brief. Despite being urged by several friends, including William Molyneux, to develop his moral views further, for instance, by writing a treatise on ethics, Locke does not write a work devoted to ethics (Boeker, "Locke and William Molyneux", this volume). This means that interpreters face the challenge to reconstruct Locke's moral views on the basis of the remarks that are scattered throughout his *Essay*, his manuscript notes, several of which have been reprinted in *Political Essays* (Locke, 1997), as well as his other writings on education, politics, and religion.

The aim of this chapter is to bring to light Locke's contribution to moral psychology. Moral psychology focuses on the psychological aspects of morality (Tiberius, 2014). It examines why we act morally, or why we sometimes fail to do so. Topics discussed in present-day moral psychology include among others the evolution of morality, moral motivation, the role of self-interest and benevolence as well as the role of reason and emotion in moral considerations, moral education, and attributions of moral responsibility. Locke did not use the term 'moral psychology', but since

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Locke believes that we cannot know whether thinking substances are material or immaterial. Thereby he distances his position from other philosophers such as Descartes who claim that we can know that thinking substances are immaterial.

he is not only interested in normative ethical questions, but also in a psychological study of the human mind, he engages with issues that are at the heart of debates in moral psychology. For example, Locke asks how we acquire moral ideas, why we act or fail to act morally, what motivates us to act morally, and what makes us accountable for our actions. This makes it worth examining Locke's stance on issues in moral psychology more closely.

I will proceed as follows: First, I ask how, according to Locke, we acquire moral ideas (section 1). Second, I ask what explains why we act morally (section 2). To address this question, it is important to turn both to Locke's understanding of moral motivation and to his views of what makes morality binding or obligatory.<sup>2</sup> Third, I examine in what sense Locke's moral views leave room for virtue. He has been accused by his contemporary and pupil Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, that his moral theory is self-interested and undermines virtue. In response to this criticism, I examine Locke's Christian conception of virtue.

## 1. ORIGIN OF MORAL IDEAS

How, according to Locke, do we acquire moral ideas? In Book 1 of the *Essay* Locke offers detailed arguments for why there are no innate ideas or principles stamped upon the mind at the time when the mind comes into existence (Atherton, this volume). This means he believes that the human mind comes into existence without any content in it. It is worth noting that Locke's denial of innate ideas and principles does not entail that the human mind comes into existence without mental faculties or capacities. On the contrary, Locke accepts that we are born with mental capacities such as the capacities to have sensations, to reflect, or to reason. By properly using our mental capacities the mind will over time be furnished with ideas, but the important point is that all ideas arise from experience. Initially, we acquire simple ideas by sensation, then we start reflecting on our own mental operations (*Essay* 2.1.1–4). Next, we can form complex ideas by comparing simple ideas, by combining them, and by abstraction (*Essay* 2.11–12).

At an early stage of our intellectual development we acquire the ideas of pleasure and pain, because, as Locke argues, these ideas accompany almost all of our ideas (*Essay* 2.7.2, 2.20.1). He understands “*Pleasure and Pain* ... [as signifying] whatsoever delights or molests us; whether it arises from the thoughts of our Minds, or any thing operating on our Bodies.” (*Essay* 2.7.2). Having feelings of pleasure and pain is first and foremost important for self-preservation. For instance, it is important to learn how we can satisfy hunger or thirst. The pleasure we take in eating or drinking will make us seek food or drink when the unpleasant feeling of thirst or hunger kicks in. To give another example, having touched a hot stove once, will likely prompt us to avoid extreme heat in the future (*Essay* 2.7.4).

Additionally, Locke is convinced that God has wisely created the world and the fact that almost all things that affect us and surround us produce various degrees of pleasure and pain in us has the further purpose that we start seeking greater happiness, which he regards as the end of human agency. Since we often have dissatisfying experiences and encounter imperfection in our daily lives, we are put on a path to enquire how we can reach greater happiness (*Essay* 2.7.5). We are able to do so, because “Nature ... has put into Man a desire of Happiness, and an aversion to

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that several interpreters find it puzzling how Locke's views on moral motivation, which are commonly interpreted as a version of hedonism, can be reconciled with his views about moral bindingness, which have their foundation in natural law theory. For further details, see Sheridan (2016). I will put these worries aside, because I agree with Darwall (1995), Rossiter (2016) and Walsh (2014) that both aspects of Locke's moral thinking can be reconciled and draw attention to Locke's manuscript “Ethica B” as further evidence for this reading.

Misery” (*Essay* 1.3.3).<sup>3</sup>

Locke understands happiness in terms of pleasure and pain:

*Happiness* then in its full extent is the utmost Pleasure we are capable of, and *Misery* the utmost Pain: And the lowest degree of what can be called *Happiness*, is so much ease from all Pain, and so much present Pleasure, as without which any one cannot be content. (*Essay* 2.21.42)

How does the feeling of pleasure or pain arise? There has to be some object, or cause, that triggers the feeling. This means that when certain objects interact with our mind or body they produce pleasure or pain in us (*Essay* 2.21.42).

Once we come to understand the causes of pleasure and pain, we can form the ideas of good and evil. Locke calls things ‘good’ that have the disposition to produce or increase pleasure or to diminish pain and those ‘evil’ that produce or increase pain, or diminish pleasure (*Essay* 2.20.2, 2.21.42).<sup>4</sup>

I can take pleasure in many things. For instance, I can enjoy eating chocolate cake, watching a sunset, or helping a friend. Are all of these pleasures equally worth pursuing? Or, does Locke have resources for prioritizing some pleasures over others and for distinguishing distinctively moral pleasures and moral good from other pleasures and goods?

Although eating chocolate cake is pleasant in the present moment, it is not a lasting pleasure. Once the pleasure of eating cake has vanished, I start to feel uneasy. This realization that some pleasures vanish quickly can prompt me to enquire about long-term happiness, or “true happiness” as Locke calls it. True happiness is “the highest perfection of intellectual nature” (*Essay* 2.21.51). By distinguishing true happiness from the happiness that results from the satisfaction of any kind of desire, Locke can argue that we should prioritize the satisfaction of desires that lead to true happiness. Given the lack of complete happiness in this life, true happiness is a state we hope for in the afterlife (Walsh, “Locke on Power and Freedom”, this volume). When reflecting on the idea of true happiness we ask how we can reach eternal happiness. Thereby we come to realize that God exists and is a superior lawmaker. Thus, according to Locke, the best way to reach true happiness is to act in accordance with the moral rules that God has designed for his creatures.

Locke recognizes a distinction between moral and natural good and evil. Moral goodness or evil presupposes the decisions of a free and intelligent agent. He writes, “that is morally good or evil which, by the intervention of the will of an intelligent free agent, draws pleasure or pain after it, not by any natural consequence, but by the intervention of that power.” (Of Ethic, §8, 301) Locke illustrates the difference as follows: “Thus, drinking to excess, when it produces the headache or sickness, is a natural evil; but as it is a transgression of law, by which a punishment is annexed to it, it is a moral evil.” (Of Ethic, §8, 301)

This means that moral good or evil involve acts of will, which are followed by pleasure or pain. When an agent faces a choice, say to do action *A* or to do action *B*, a rational agent who is concerned about their future happiness will examine whether the actions are in conformity with moral rules. As we will discuss further in the following section, morality for Locke has the form of laws or rules that can be enforced by sanctions. Why, according to Locke, is it important that morality commands or forbids? He writes:

For without showing a law that commands or forbids them, moral goodness will be but an empty sound, and those actions which the schools here call virtues or vices, may by the

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion as to how teleological considerations inform Locke’s moral views, see Bolton (2008) and Rossiter (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Locke’s texts are vague whether good or evil are qualities of things that have dispositions or of the dispositions themselves.

same authority be called by contrary names in another country; and if there be nothing more than their decisions and determinations in the case, they will be still nevertheless indifferent as to any man's practice, which will by such kind of determinations be under no obligation to observe them. (Of Ethic, §9, 302)

## 2. MORAL BINDINGNESS AND MORAL MOTIVATION

Why, according to Locke, do we act morally? To act morally, we need to know the content of moral rules and we need to be motivated to act in accordance with moral rules. As Locke explains in a manuscript note from 1693, titled "Ethica B":

There be two parts of ethics, the one is the rule which men are generally in the right in, though perhaps they have not deduced them as they should from their true principles. The other is the true motives to practise them and the ways to bring men to observe them, and these are generally either not well known or not rightly applied. Without this latter, moral discourses are such as men hear with pleasure and approve of, the mind being generally delighted with truth especially if handsomely expressed. But all this is but the delight of speculation. Something else is required to practise, which will never be till men are made alive to virtue and can taste it. (Ethica B, 319–320)

Locke's point is that understanding the content of a moral rule does not entail that we obey the moral rule and act accordingly. Consider the golden rule, which Locke calls the "most unshaken Rule of Morality," namely the principle "*That one should do as he would be done unto*" (*Essay* 1.3.4). I can cognitively grasp that I should always act in such a way that I would like to be treated by others. Furthermore, I can understand that this principle entails that if I do not want others to steal, I should not steal either. However, it does not follow that I am sufficiently motivated never to steal. For instance, I may have forgotten to take food with me and am hungry. It will take me over an hour to get home. As I walk past a garden I see ripe apples on an apple tree. My hunger increases and I am just tall enough to reach the apples. I understand that I would not want others to steal apples in my garden, but the ripe apples are so tempting. Locke believes that in the absence of sanctions we would not be sufficiently motivated to obey moral rules.

Let us examine more closely how Locke explains the bindingness of moral rules, that is their obligatory nature. Getting a better understanding as to what makes moral rules obligatory is a prerequisite for understanding why humans are generally willing to obey moral rules. Although it is common in present-day debates to distinguish moral matters from legal matters, Locke does not separate morality from legality and understands moral rules in terms of laws. He distinguishes three types of law: (i) divine law, (ii) civil law, and (iii) the law of opinion or reputation, which—following Sreedhar and Walsh (2016)—we can also give the less cumbersome name 'social law'. Each type of law supposes the existence of a superior lawmaker who has the power to enforce the law by rewards and punishments (*Essay* 2.28.5–11). Locke maintains that by comparing our actions to the first type of law we "judge whether [our] Actions are Sins, or Duties; by the second, whether they be Criminal, or Innocent; and by the third, whether they be Vertues or Vices." (*Essay* 2.28.7) With regard to moral matters, divine law has ultimate authority and, as Locke states, "is the only true touchstone of *moral Rectitude*" (*Essay* 2.28.8).

Locke further develops his views concerning the foundation of morality in his manuscript "Of Ethic":

To establish morality, therefore, upon its proper basis, and such foundations as may carry an obligation with them, we must first prove a law, which always supposes a lawmaker: one that has a superiority and right to ordain, and also a power to reward and punish

according to the tenor of the law established by him. This sovereign lawmaker who has set rules and bounds to the actions of men is God, their maker, whose existence we have already proved. The next thing then to show is, that there are certain rules, certain dictates, which it is his will all men should conform their actions to, and that this will of his is sufficiently promulgated and made known to all mankind. (Of Ethic, §12, 304)

Locke is confident that moral agents, who are rational beings, have the capacities to demonstrate God's existence and will come to understand that God is a superior lawmaker who has the power to enforce divine law by means of rewards and punishments.

To return to the example of stealing apples, what, according to Locke, may prevent me from stealing apples? It is important that the moral rules by which my actions are judged are known to me (*Essays on the Law of Nature*, Of Ethic). We come to know divine law either on the basis of reasoning or by divine revelation (*Essay* 2.28.8). As mentioned above, if we accept the golden rule,<sup>5</sup> we can infer from it that stealing is morally wrong. Additionally, a careful reader of the Bible will be aware that "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex 20:15; cf. Dt 5:19) is one of the ten commandments. Thus, divine law prohibits stealing. Locke is a Christian believer, who takes the belief in an afterlife and a divine judgement seriously, though he is explicit that this is a matter of faith rather than knowledge (*Essay* 4.18.7). He believes that God "has Goodness and Wisdom to direct our Actions to that which is best: and he has Power to enforce it [i.e. divine law] by Rewards and Punishments, of infinite weight and duration, in another Life: for no body can take us out of his hands." (*Essay* 2.28.8) While I am contemplating whether or not to steal the apple, Locke would argue that the divine punishment that accompanies violations of divine law will likely move me to refrain from stealing the apple and instead I accept that walking home hungry is the better option.

Additionally, civil law is meant to prevent stealing. Consider the owner of the apple tree. If pedestrians regularly pick apples from the tree, the owner's harvest may be too small to feed their family. The prospect that those who steal the apples will face divine punishment in the afterlife will not be much consolation to the owner of the apple tree. Civil laws are important in addition to divine law to coordinate the functioning of society in this life (*Essay* 2.28.9). Civil laws help protect our property, because the threat of punishment in a human law court diminishes the likelihood that people steal.

Furthermore, by stealing apples I could ruin my reputation in my social circles. If my friends, neighbors, or acquaintances hear about my misdeed they will disapprove of it and blame me (*Essay* 2.28.10–11). To avoid these negative consequences, I should refrain from stealing and act in conformity with social laws.

Although moral rules or laws provide the foundation of morality in Locke's moral thinking, he is clear that the rule by itself does not sufficiently motivate to act in conformity with it. Rather the sanctions attached to the rules are needed to move the will to obey the rules, as he notes in his journal entry "Voluntas":

That which has very much confounded men about the will and its determination has been the confounding of the notion of moral rectitude and giving it the name of moral good. The pleasure that a man takes in any action or expects as a consequence of it is indeed a good in itself able and proper to move the will. But the moral rectitude of it considered barely in itself is not good or evil nor [in] any way moves the will, but as pleasure and pain either accompanies the action itself or is looked on to be a consequence of it. Which is evident from the punishments and rewards which God has annexed to moral rectitude or

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<sup>5</sup> See Rossiter (2016) for further discussion of how we can accept the golden rule on the basis of demonstrative reasoning.

pravity as proper motives to the will, which would be needless if moral rectitude were in itself good and moral pravity evil. (Voluntas, 321)

Interpreters disagree whether sanctions are the only motivation to obey moral rules. While Colman (1983) and Darwall (1995) endorse such a reading, Sheridan (2007) challenges their interpretations and argues instead “that Locke holds a two-tiered account of moral motivation, according to which humans can be motivated to right action by *either* the intrinsic satisfactions of obedience *or*, failing this, the consideration of divine sanctions” (45). I agree with Sheridan that divine sanctions are important, because they motivate people to act in conformity with divine law when they lack other motivation to act morally. I believe further that Sheridan offers good support for the claim that humans can be motivated to obey divine law on other grounds than the expectation of divine reward and punishment. For instance, I may be motivated to help my neighbor due to the pleasure that I take in helping others rather than the expectation of reward in the afterlife. However, I would be reluctant to describe this type of motivation as “intrinsic”. In the manuscript “Voluntas”, cited above, Locke says that the *pleasure* that accompanies the performance of a morally right action or the *pleasure* that we expect as a consequence of performing the action can motivate. Stating that pleasure that accompanies or follows an action can motivate differs from Sheridan’s claim that mere obedience by itself can be motivating for Locke.

It is possible, though, that acting in conformity with moral rules becomes pleasant on the basis of education and habit. Locke argues that it is important to cultivate habits that make it easier for us to act in accordance with moral rules (*Some Thoughts*; Tabb, this volume). He proposes that agents can start to take pleasure in their actions by making them habitual and this can help them to be motivated to act in conformity with moral rules:

You must bring him to practise in particular instances and so by habits establish a contrary pleasure, and then when conscience, reason and pleasure go together they are sure to prevail. Which is the way to do this in particular cases will be easier for the prudent man to find when the case offers them for anyone to foresee and determine before the case happens and the person be known. (Ethica B, 320)

The important point is that Locke cannot explain moral motivation with appeal to innate ideas or principles. Instead the resources he has for explaining moral motivation include external sanctions, appeal to pleasures that we expect as a by-product or as a consequence of acting in conformity with moral rules, and cultivation of habits and the pleasures that accompany habitual actions.

I want to make a further observation. The apple example illustrates our ability to suspend desires, which for Locke manifests freedom (*Essay* 2.21.47, 50–52, 56, 71). Instead of satisfying my hunger immediately, I am able to suspend my desire to eat and examine carefully whether stealing the apple in order to satisfy my hunger contributes to my long-term happiness (Walsh, “Limborch”, “Locke on Power and Freedom”, this volume). While I weigh the consequences of this possible action against my other options in the situation, I realize that the action conflicts with my long-term happiness, and my desire for eternal happiness outweighs the present desire to eat. As Locke writes, “[t]he Rewards and Punishments of another Life, which the Almighty has established, as the Enforcement of his Law, are of weight enough to determine the Choice, against whatever Pleasure or Pain this Life can shew” (*Essay* 2.21.70).

### 3. VIRTUE

As we have seen for Locke morality is grounded in divine law and can be enforced by divine rewards and punishments. In this section I turn to a critical response by Locke’s contemporary,

pupil, and friend Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713). At the time of Shaftesbury's birth, Locke lived in the household of Shaftesbury's grandfather, who later became the First Earl of Shaftesbury. In 1674 Locke became responsible for supervising Shaftesbury's education and we can assume that Shaftesbury's upbringing followed principles that Locke later developed in *Some Thoughts concerning Education*. Shaftesbury's philosophical development was certainly influenced by Locke, but as he develops his own philosophical voice he also distances himself from Locke.<sup>6</sup>

Shaftesbury believes that philosophy should be ethical or practical and help us improve our lives. Broadly speaking he can be said to emphasize the importance of morality, like Locke. However, closer examination reveals important differences between his and Locke's moral thinking. Shaftesbury criticizes moral views that are grounded in the superior power of a divine lawmaker who can enforce moral laws by means of reward and punishment, because he worries that such views undermine virtue. He understands virtue as the promotion of the good of humankind (Shaftesbury, 2001, 2:16–21, 31). If human actions are motivated by expectations of reward or fear of punishment, then, Shaftesbury maintains, humans act out of self-interest, but do not pursue good in its own sake (Shaftesbury, 2001, 2:38). This criticism finds further expression in the following passage:

From whence it appears, that in some respects there can be nothing more fatal to Virtue, than the weak and uncertain Belief of a future Reward and Punishment. For the stress being laid wholly here, if this Foundation come to fail, there is no further Prop or Security to Mens Morals. And thus Virtue is supplanted and betray'd. (Shaftesbury, 2001, 2:39–40)

Although Shaftesbury does not criticize Locke by name in his published works, we can assume that Locke is one of his targets. Indeed, Shaftesbury is even more outspoken in a letter to Ainsworth from 1709:

'Twas Mr. Locke, that struck the home Blow: For Mr. Hobbes's Character and base slavish Principles in Government took off the Poyson of his Philosophy. 'Twas Mr. Locke that struck at all the Fundamentals, threw all *Order* and *Virtue* out of the World, and made the very *Ideas* of these (which are the same as those of God) *unnatural*, and without Foundation in our Minds. (Shaftesbury, 1716, 39)

Shaftesbury believes that humans face a choice between a life of pleasure or a life of virtue.<sup>7</sup> His philosophy offers practical guidance that is meant to help us improve our lives and character and to enter the path of virtue and progress on it.<sup>8</sup>

In light of Shaftesbury's criticism, let us ask whether Locke has resources to respond to the objection that moral views grounded in divine rewards and punishments undermine virtue. To do so, let us look more closely at Locke's understanding of virtue in his manuscript notes:

That virtue is but the name of such actions as are most conducing to the good of society and are therefore by the society recommended by all means to the practice of the people seems to me very plain. (Virtue A, 271)

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<sup>6</sup> Further details about Shaftesbury's life, works, and his relation to Locke can be found in Gill (2016).

<sup>7</sup> This philosophical issue has roots in the ancient story concerning the choice of Hercules. Shaftesbury commissioned a painting on the theme, which now belongs to the collection of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. He prepared detailed notes for the artist, which can be found in Shaftesbury (2001, 3:213–239).

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion, see Boeker (2019).

Virtue, as in its obligation it is the will of God, discovered by natural reason, and thus has the force of a law; so in the matter of it, it is nothing else but doing of good, either to oneself or others; and the contrary hereunto vice, is nothing else but doing of harm. (Virtue B, 287)

These passages bring to light a social dimension of virtuous actions. In this vein, Locke says that the golden rule is the “most unshaken Rule of Morality, and Foundation of all social Virtue” (*Essay* 1.3.4). For Locke, the best way to reach happiness is to follow the Christian ideal of loving our neighbors as ourselves:

If then happiness be our interest, end, and business 'tis evident the way to it is to love our neighbour as ourself, for by that means we enlarge and secure our pleasures, since then all the good we do to them redoubles upon ourselves and gives us an undecaying and uninterrupted pleasure. Whoever spared a meal to save the life of a starving man, much more a friend, which all men are to us whom we love, but had more and much more lasting pleasure in it than he that eat it. The other's pleasure died as he eat and ended with his meal. But to him that gave him 'tis a feast as often as he reflects on it. (Ethica A, 319)

Happiness therefore is annexed to our loving others and to our doing our duty, to acts of love and charity, or he that will deny it be so here because everyone observes not this rule of universal love and charity, he brings in a necessity of another life ... and so enforces morality the stronger, laying a necessity on God's justice by his rewards and punishments, to make the good the gainers, the wicked losers. (Ethica A, 319)

In these passages Locke acknowledges the significance of acts of love and charity and the lasting pleasures that arise from them. Locke's characterizations of virtue may appear similar to Shaftesbury's understanding virtue, but I take it that important differences remain. Shaftesbury contrasts a life of virtue with a life of pleasure, while Locke distinguishes between short-term and long-term pleasures. Locke believes that in order to attain happiness we should pursue long-term pleasures and engage in acts of love and charity. Yet Shaftesbury can still worry that Lockean long-term pleasures are based on self-interest and, thus, reiterate his objection that Locke's view lacks the resources for promoting goodness in its own sake.<sup>9</sup>

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