

THE MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF
JOHN LOCKE

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Doctor of Philosophy
University of Edinburgh

1973

ABSTRACT

Locke's commentators have almost unanimously concluded his moral philosophy to be vitiated by contradictions. In this thesis an attempt is made to discover a consistent moral theory in Locke's writings. One theme unifies his widely scattered remarks on morality: the problem of moral knowledge. For Locke this problem is summed up in the question of how men are to know the moral law of nature. His conception of a moral law set over mankind by God is first defended against the objection that it reduces moral distinctions to arbitrary commands. The moral law must be the commands of God if there is to be such a thing as moral obligation. However, the content of moral obligation derives not from arbitrary commands, but from the facts of human nature. The question is, how is reason to derive the content of the law from a consideration of human nature? In order to answer this, it is necessary to examine Locke's general epistemological position. Locke is defended against the criticism that he confines all cases of knowing within the framework of ideas. Locke's conception of idea is examined and criticized; and it is then argued that his account of the special class of ideas (i.e. moral notions) which are used in ordinary moral discourse yields a cognitive theory of moral judgements. The account of moral notions also suggests Locke's project for a quasi-mathematical science of morality. This project cannot be carried through. However, even if the demonstration of morality were possible, it would be of no worth unless we were sure that our moral notions truly reflected the objective law of nature. How, then, is this to be known? Locke argues against the common view that we can be intuitively aware of moral truth. Rather, the validity of moral notions is to be decided in the light of man's desire for happiness. Finally, the theory of moral judgements developed from Locke's account of moral notions is examined against the background of certain standard objections against any cognitive theory of morality.

At least I think this is due to everyone.
that his words should be understood in the
most favourable and most consistent
meaning (which) could be put upon them.

John Locke: Answer to Mr. Norris's
Reflections. MS. c 28, Fol. 108

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PREFACE

John Locke has suffered much at the hands of his interpreters. Even so sympathetic a critic as Peter Laslett views him as, "perhaps the least consistent of all the great philosophers".¹ The charge of inconsistency and self-contradiction is by no means new. It has been common in Lockean criticism and scholarship from the seventeenth-century onwards. Indeed the kind of judgement voiced by Laslett may be said to have hardened into an orthodoxy. This is particularly the case among scholars who have concerned themselves with Locke's moral philosophy. Locke does say a great deal about morality. However, it has been almost universally agreed that what he says is vitiated by contradictions; so that, in the words of Professor Aaron, "it is in vain that we search in his pages for a consistent ethical theory".²

Yet the alleged inconsistencies quoted from Locke's pages come so fast one upon the heel of another, that it is difficult to see how a writer of average intelligence, much less 'a great philosopher', could have ignored them. If Locke really does contradict himself with such abandon as is commonly pretended, how is it that he never rectified the intellectual chaos he left behind him? After all he was not an author who hurried himself into print. All his published writings belong to the period of his maturity, and are the products of long reflection. Furthermore, he revised his most complex work, the Essay concerning Human Understanding, quite extensively after

1 Introduction to Two Treatises of Government, p. 95.

2 John Locke (3rd. ed.), pp. 266 - 267.

its original publication; and some of these revisions are clearly intended as answers to his critics. Locke, then, was quite prepared to correct and clarify his own thought when he saw that the occasion warranted it. His inconsistencies, therefore, cannot be put down to a dogged refusal to correct his published works. The simple solution to this problem is that the orthodox view of Locke is, to say the least, highly exaggerated.

Certainly, in the expression of his thought, Locke is repetitious and mercilessly verbose, especially when engaged in controversy. This trait can, I believe, be partly ascribed to the persona he deliberately adopts. In opposition to what he considers the unnatural formalism of argument in the scholastic mould, Locke likes to present himself as expressing the thoughts of the common man, in the way of the common man. Indeed, as Professor Ryle once remarked, Locke may lay claim to the invention of common sense philosophy. However, we cannot forgive all on the grounds of Locke's persona. It must be admitted that he is at times a very careless philosopher. But carelessness is not to be identified with inconsistency. This thesis is an attempt to present a consistent John Locke.

To be exact, what I have attempted is to discover a consistent moral philosophy in Locke's writings. And here, a further difficulty makes itself felt. With the exception of his youthful Essays on the Law of Nature, Locke wrote no treatise specifically concerned with morality. Nevertheless, there is one problem in moral philosophy which appears in Locke's earliest works, and which, in my opinion, remains in his mind throughout the rest of his life.

This is the problem of the epistemology of morals. It is the question of how men are to know moral truth that gives unity to Locke's thoughts on morality.

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The errors of fact and deficiencies of judgement which no doubt remain in this thesis are entirely my own responsibility. On the credit side, however, I would like to mention my supervisor, Dr John Jenkins, whose criticism has been unfailingly constructive and whose encouragement has been indispensable; Mr Christopher Kirwan of Exeter College, Oxford, who allowed me to read his unpublished paper on Locke's moral philosophy and patiently replied to my objections; and Mrs Hilary Fieller, who carried the burden of typing with remarkable equanimity. Finally, I would like to acknowledge a considerable debt to my former teacher Professor S. A. Grave of the University of Western Australia, who, although he has had no hand in the present thesis, first aroused my interest in the history of philosophy.

A Note on Quotations

Locke's major works are available in a number of editions. In the present Thesis quotations have been taken from the following editions:

The Conduct of the Understanding, ed. Thomas Fowler.
(3rd. ed.) Oxford, 1890.

The Educational Writings of John Locke, ed. James L. Axtell. Cambridge, 1968.

Epistola de Tolerantia, ed. Raymond Klibansky, trans. J. W. Gough. Oxford, 1968.

An Essay concerning Human Understanding, ed. John W. Yolton, 2 Vols. London, 1961 (revised 1967).

Two Treatises of Government, ed. Peter Laslett. Cambridge, 1960. (revised, 1963).

The Works of John Locke, in Ten Volumes (11th. ed.) London, 1912.

Place references for passages cited are to be found in square brackets at the end of each quotation. The Essay is indicated by Book, Chapter and Section numbers only. The first two drafts of the Essay, edited by Aaron and Gibb and by Rand respectively, are indicated as Draft A and Draft B. Locke's Journal entries included in the published edition of Draft A are indicated as Aaron and Gibb. Unpublished MSS in the Lovelace Collection are indicated by the Bodleian Library Shelfmarks.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION: LOCKE VERSUS BAGSHAW

Locke's first extended essay in moral philosophy dates from the early 1660's and remained unpublished till the present century. It consists of two papers; the first written in English, the second in Latin. The English work is a polemic, consisting in a rather wearisome refutation of a pamphlet by Edward Bagshaw.¹ In the Latin work, obviously with Bagshaw still in mind, Locke pursues his argument at a more theoretical level. These papers have now been edited by Dr Philip Abrams under the title of Two Tracts on Government.

In themselves the Two Tracts are of slight philosophical worth. Locke's arguments show little originality. It is also true to say that they carry no conviction for the modern reader. Moreover, they very soon ceased to convince Locke; for the conclusions he draws concerning political power in this first work are in sharp contrast to his later, published views. Nevertheless, the Two Tracts are important for an understanding of Locke. They are not simply a false start to his career, but contain the framework within which much of his subsequent thought develops. This is the doctrine that there exists a law of nature which embodies the moral duties of mankind. Although he expands and modifies this framework, and arrives at conclusions startlingly different from those in the Two Tracts, Locke never rejects it.

1 The Great Question concerning Things Indifferent in Religious Worship (1660)

Further, the Two Tracts, because of the unsatisfactory nature of their arguments, highlight a problem which occupies Locke, more or less, throughout his philosophical career. This is the problem of how men are to know the duties they have under the law of nature.

The Two Tracts are Locke's contribution to what was, at the beginning of the Restoration and during the previous century, the 'Great Question'; whether the civil ruler could legitimately impose a set form of dress and ceremony in religious worship. The complexities of this antique debate have been admirably dealt with by Abrams and need not detail us.² It is what lies behind the particular controversy which is important. The question of religious worship was only one aspect of a conflict between two views of morality and government. It is by no means easy to characterize the two sides in this conflict, but, very broadly, it may be seen as a clash between those who maintained the autonomy of private conscience and the sufficiency of the morality revealed in the New Testament, and those who emphasised the existence of an objective realm of moral truth knowable without revelation. The former view was the inevitable consequence of the individualism which characterized so much of the Reformation; (An individualism which was not always favoured by the Reformers). The latter view was in the tradition of Christian humanism; a humanism which found its most complete medieval expression in

2 See Abram's Introduction to the Two Tracts, esp. Ch. II.

the Thomist synthesis of faith and reason, and which was carried over into Anglicanism pre-eminently by Richard Hooker. The humanist view did not deny the paramount importance of conscience as a moral guide for the individual. But conscience was defined in terms of reason, and rationality was taken as a defining characteristic of man. Therefore, moral truth being accessible to reason, could be known by all men whether or not they had heard the Gospel. Nor, was it thought that the morality knowable apart from revelation had any sort of priority over revealed morality. Reason and revelation were looked on as two ways to knowledge of the one moral law set by God to the conduct of mankind.

'Protestant' individualism did not always mean a complete break with this tradition. Nevertheless, the emphasis placed on the perfect morality of scripture tended to restrict moral knowledge to those fortunate enough to be Christians. More importantly the thesis that moral knowledge is founded on revelation made it very difficult to argue against the contention that private revelation, or inspiration, is the most fundamental source of moral knowledge. For the line dividing the general revelations given in the Bible from particular revelation, which might be claimed by any individual, is exceedingly thin. Locke's Two Tracts may be seen as primarily a defence of the traditional rationalist view of morality.

Bagshaw's pamphlet is a plea for toleration in the matter of religious ceremonies. His arguments are, in the main, based on

scriptural texts. While Locke does attempt to meet Bagshaw's scriptural arguments his reply is conducted at a philosophical level which sets the local controversy in the widest possible context. At the outset Locke expounds a legalistic theory of morality and moral obligation. If there were no law there could be no moral significance in men's actions and they would be free to act in whichever way they pleased. Thus, he conceives the moral rightness or wrongness of actions to be a function of their conformity or non-conformity to a law. God is the source of the moral law, and the law is both accessible to human reason and revealed in the Scriptures. However, not every action falls under the moral law. There exists a broad class of 'indifferent things' which, as they are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, are morally neutral. Within this sphere men are naturally free to do as they please. [1st. Tract, pp. 124 - 125] Moral truth, then, consists in the correct classification of human actions according as they are in fact forbidden or enjoined by God's law, or left indifferent.

The problem which engages Locke and Bagshaw arises because, although there is a definite class of indifferent things, men are sometimes mistaken as to what falls within that class. In religious matters, for instance, some believe themselves morally bound to practice one form of ceremonial worship, some to practice another. Locke and Bagshaw agree as to the moral neutrality of the minutia in religious ceremony. Both agree that men in civil society cannot retain the freedom they enjoy when bound

solely by the moral law. However, Bagshaw, while granting the civil ruler, or magistrate, the power to legislate concerning indifferent things, holds that there is a special sub-class of religious indifferent things with respect to which the citizen's natural freedom is inalienable. It is, he claims, contrary to the liberty Christians enjoy under the Gospel that the conscience of the individual should be imposed upon in matters of religion by the civil authorities.³

Locke's move is to deny that things indifferent in religion can be distinguished from civil indifferent things. 1st. Tract, p. 126, p. 139; 2nd. Tract, p. 229⁷. This distorts Bagshaw's position and allows Locke to argue against him as if he denied civil authority any sphere of legislative competence. Although it is unfair to his opponent, the move fits Locke's broad conception of the point at issue. While Bagshaw restricts himself to the question of religious ceremonies, from Locke's side what is under discussion is the general question of whether the magistrate can have legitimate authority over the conscience of the individual. Locke maintains the thesis of absolute authority.

3 What Bagshaw argues for is the liberty which has been revealed and granted to Christians. It is not at all clear that he would want to argue such liberty for all men: "Our religion is styled the perfect law of liberty, which liberty I understand not wherein it consists if in things necessary we are already determined by God, and in things indifferent we may still be tied up by human ordinances and outside rites at the pleasure of our Magistrates". The Great Question, p. 4⁷

There are, according to Locke, two reasons why the authority of the magistrate must embrace things which are in themselves morally neutral. Firstly, if this were not the case there could be no such thing as civil authority. The magistrate could only reiterate the moral law, and this any private citizen may do.

[2nd. Tract, p. 228] Second, although the moral law set by God is complete, its precepts are not meant to cover all the contingencies which arise in the life of a civil society. Therefore, "God left many indifferent things untrammelled by his laws and handed them to his deputy the magistrate as fit material for civil government, which, as occasion should demand, could be commanded or prohibited, and by the wise regulation of which the welfare of the commonwealth could be provided for". [2nd. Tract, p. 223]

Having established this, Locke deploys two different arguments for the absolute authority of the magistrate over all things indifferent. The first is a pragmatic appeal to consequences. The pragmatic argument (which is most prominent in the first Tract) emphasises the dangers of civil anarchy. Men, Locke argues, are so in love with their own opinions that they will go to any lengths to maintain them. The majority are not concerned with objective truth, but with the defence of views which are more often than not the product of ignorance and passion. The peace and order of society is in constant danger from those who are themselves within society. Thus, the rational, responsible citizens live under conditions of siege, encircled by the mass of the people who are every ready for violence in the name of their own arbitrary prejudices. The absolute authority of the government

and the absolute competence of civil law is the only possible barrier against this force. Absolutism is a small price to pay for the security of the commonwealth:

Nor will the largeness of the Governor's power appear dangerous or more than necessary if we consider that as occasion requires it is employed upon the multitude that are as impatient of restraint as the sea, and whose tempests and overflows cannot be too well provided against. 1st. Tract, p. 158

Toleration, as it limits civil law in deference to the conscience, or private opinion, of individual citizens, must weaken and finally dissolve the hold which it is necessary for government to maintain over the mob.⁴ True, the tender conscience of the individual should, whenever possible, be gently handled. However, the laws of the state applying equally to all men, it is impossible but that some should be offended; "some being as conscientiously earnest for conformity as others for liberty, and a law for toleration would as much offend their consciences as of limitation others". 1st. Tract, p. 140

The picture Locke presents, on the persuasiveness of which this argument depends, is that of the wise, knowing ruler faced with the violent, ignorance mob. But at this level the debate between him and Bagshaw ends in a stalemate. While he depicts the dangers of civil anarchy, his opponent, with equal force,

4 For an account of Locke's view of human nature and its relation to his political conservatism, see Abrams; Op.Cit. pp. 63 f.

depicts the dangers of civil tyranny.⁵ Thus, the debate over toleration, while limited to an appeal to consequences degenerates into a sterile and irresolvable clash of attitudes. Locke, however, claims that his case does not rest on an appeal to consequences:

Principles ought to be of unalterable verity and therefore are not to be established upon our uncertain and commonly partial judgement of their consequences, which are usually so many, so various and cross, that nothing then could stand firm, if every little inconvenience could shake it. The question being of lawful or unlawful we are to be judged by some law . . . /1st. Tract, p. 155/

In the first Tract this passage is followed by a series of rhetorical questions which do in fact appeal to consequences. It is only in the second Tract that Locke attempts to give substance to his second argument from the 'order of things'.

In the second Tract Locke expounds a four-fold division of law: divine law, human law, the law of charity, and private law. These are ordered in a strict hierarchy, each law having as its proper province the area left free (those things left indifferent) by the law immediately above it. Divine law is the rule of morals. Whatsoever it enjoins or prohibits is morally right or wrong, whatsoever it passes in silence is, in itself, morally

5 Cf. Bagshaw: "I shall clearly prove that many more Absurd and more Destructive and Total Consequences attend the Doctrine of Imposition, then /sic/ the Doctrine of Christian liberty. As 1. The first Inconvenience is, the Impossibility to fix a point where the Imposer will stop. For do but once grant, that the Magistrate hath power to impose, and then we lie at his mercy, how farre he will go". /The Great Question, p.10/ Bagshaw however places less weight than Locke on this point, but bases his argument on the Special liberty Christians enjoy under the Gospel.

neutral. Divine law, as it is made known by revelation, is positive law; as it is discovered by reason, it is the law of nature. The difference between revealed morality and the law of nature is, therefore, a difference in the manner each is promulgated to men, not a difference in content.

Human law is always positive. Although he is concerned primarily with the laws of civil society, Locke includes under this concept the commands of parents to children and masters to servants. The obligation men are under with respect to civil law depend directly on the divine law; "nor are we bound to obey magistrates for any other reason than that the Lord has commanded it." [2nd. Tract, p. 226] The divine law and the civil law constitute the objective rules of men's conduct, both as they are moral beings and citizens. The law of charity derives from the Pauline injunction not to scandalize a 'weak brother'. That is, those things which are in fact indifferent are to be refrained from if their use offend the erroneous conscience of another. Lastly, Locke distinguishes two aspects of what he terms private law: the law of contract and the law of conscience. The former is the law a man places himself under when, by a promise or vow, he binds himself to the performance of an action which would be otherwise indifferent. (Although the 'law of contract' plays a role of major importance in Locke's later political thought, in the Two Tracts he avoids discussing it in any detail.) The latter he defines as, "that

fundamental judgement of the practical intellect concerning any possible truth of a moral proposition about things to be done in life". [2nd. Tract, p. 225]

In the first Tract Locke notes the subjectivity of conscience. It is, "nothing but an opinion of the truth of any practical position, which may concern any action as well moral as religious, civil as ecclesiastical" [1st. Tract, p. 138] In the second Tract he lays emphasis on the function of conscience as the ultimate moral authority over the actions of the individual:

God implanted the light of nature in our hearts and willed that there should be an inner legislator (in effect) constantly present in us whose edicts it should not be lawful for us to transgress even a nail's breadth . . . [so that] it may be taken as certain that we do indeed lack that liberty we think we lack. [2nd. Tract, p. 225]

These two characterizations of conscience are quite compatible with one another and consistent with Locke's general definition. Understood as an opinion of the rightness or wrongness of an action, conscience can either be true or false. That is, the action conscience declares wrong is in fact either wrong or not wrong. Yet, if understood as a moral guide, it cannot be gainsaid that a man is, at least in some sense, morally culpable if he acts against his own sincere moral convictions, or what his conscience dictates. Hence, the paradox that a man may be bound because of his erroneous conscience to do that which is objectively wrong; that which he is in fact under a moral obligation not to do. So long as conscience is understood as having these two aspects it must be considered the final arbiter of moral action, yet it

cannot be taken as the final criterion of moral truth.

Locke's argument for the subordination of conscience to the civil law turns on the characterization of conscience as opinion:

. . . the subordination of these laws one to another is such that an inferior law cannot in any way remove or repudiate the obligation and authority of a superior. For this would be to overturn the order of things . . . To appeal from the divine tribunal to man is not lawful, nor can a subject's vow or a private error of conscience nullify the edicts of the magistrate, for, if this is once granted, discipline will be everywhere at an end, all law will collapse, all authority will vanish from the earth, and, the seemly order of affairs being convulsed and the frame of government dissolved, each would be his own lawmaker and his own God. /2nd. Tract, pp. 226
- 227/

In his evocation of the 'seemly order of affairs', Locke is taking over a notion, deeply rooted in scholasticism, which was axiomatic in the intellectual inquiry of his generation. Very briefly the doctrine may be summed up as follows: There is a cosmic order, expressed as a system of laws, which embraces all of creation. It is the task of the intellect to discover and expound the eternal and immutable principles of this order.⁶ The universal order is not 'seemly' in any mere aesthetic sense. It is both the highest value and the pre-condition of all value. As it proceeds from God the order of the universe must be good. More than this, its value is evident in that the only alternative to order is chaos, which precludes the possibility of value. 'Chaos' here does not mean simply a large scale confusion of things, but

6 The classic Anglican exposition of the order of things expressed in terms of law is contained in the first book of Hooker's Laws of Ecclesiastical Policy.

the primordial disorder to which the universe would return if God were to relax the laws which He has set.⁷

The moral law to which man is subject is part of the overall order and is conceived as analogous to the laws governing the operations of inanimate creation. However, there is an important difference between law as it applies to men and law in the purely physical world. Material bodies operate as they do of necessity. This does not mean simply that their activity is determined by a nexus of causes. The necessity involved is logical, such that a thing could not be that which it is unless it followed the laws of its nature.⁸ Men, on the other hand, conform their own actions to the moral law. That is to say, men are voluntary agents. As their conformity to the law is voluntary, it is possible for men to disobey the law of their nature without ceasing thereby to be men. Whereas the dissolution of the physical world could come about only as a result of the relaxation of Providence, men can themselves reject the order set over them. Hence, the moral order, though as an expression of the eternal law of God it is immutable, is fragile insofar as it is in the

7 Cf. E M W Tillyard's The Elizabethan World Picture, p. 13
See also, Abrams, p. 52.

8 Cf. Hooker: "Whereas therefore things natural which are not in the number of voluntary agents . . . do so necessarily observe their certain laws, that as long as they keep their forms which give them their being, they cannot possibly be apt or inclinable to do otherwise than they do". Op.Cit. Bk. I, iii, 4/

keeping of mankind. It is moral chaos which Locke envisages if the law of conscience were elevated above the civil law.

Behind Locke's argument from the 'axiom of order' stands what has been called the 'axiom of knowledge'.⁹ Men follow the moral law in a voluntary manner, and they can so follow the law only because they have the capacity to know its precepts. If the law were unknowable it could not be a law set to human action. As St Thomas Aquinas puts the matter: "to have binding force, which is an essential property of a law, it has to be applied to the people it is meant to direct. This application comes about when their attention is drawn to it by the fact of promulgation. Hence this is required for a measure to possess the force of law".¹⁰ If the moral law exists it logically must be known to men. This must be so despite the erroneous opinions men sometimes form as to its content. These errors can only be the result of ill custom or some other factor which perverts man's natural understanding.¹¹

9 See Herschel Baker: The Wars of Truth, pp. 4 - 6.

10 Summa Theologiae, 1a, 2ae, 90, 4.

11 Cf. Hooker: "If then it be here demanded, by what means it should come to pass (the greatest part of the Law moral being so easy for all men to know) that so many thousands of men notwithstanding have been ignorant even of principal moral duties, not imagining the breach of them to be sin: I deny not but lewd and wicked custom, beginning perhaps at the first amongst few, afterwards spreading into greater multitudes, and so continuing from time to time, may be of force even in plain things to smother the light of natural understanding; because men will not bend their wits to examine whether things wherein they have been accustomed be good or evil. Op. Cit. Bk I, viii, 117.

Initially, the debate over indifferent things did not call the axiom of knowledge into question (the use of the term "indifferent things" presupposes that some things are known to be indifferent). The question to which it did immediately give rise was that of where moral knowledge is to be located. Men do sincerely differ as to what things are morally right and morally wrong. The opinions of some men are, therefore, false. But who has the moral truth?

In the Two Tracts Locke grants a privileged position of knowledge to the magistrate. He knows what things the moral law binds, and thereby knows what things are left indifferent and within his sphere of authority. It is only in contrast to the magistrate's knowledge that Locke can talk of the citizen's moral opinion as a 'private error of conscience'. But this, is to sidestep the crux of the problem. The dictates of private conscience (private moral opinion) appear to the individual as moral truths. When the individual's conscience conflicts with the civil law, he cannot but conclude the magistrate to be in error. In these circumstances, it is empty rhetoric to evoke a notion of universal moral order, according to which the magistrate has legislative power under the moral law. The obvious reply is that the magistrate, being himself a man, is just as likely to mistake the moral law as is the private citizen. Conscience, as it is an opinion of what the moral law dictates, must take precedence over the civil law, and lay the most stringent obligation on the

individual.¹²

Granted that the moral law is, by definition, knowable, the problem raised by the fact that men sincerely differ in their moral opinions should present no great difficulty. It should be no hard thing to show the truth to those afflicted with an erroneous conscience. The task is simply one of setting up a criterion, or set of criteria, in accordance with which the individual can decide whether his conscience directs him aright. The obvious way of achieving this would be to exhibit the law in a plain and easy fashion. This would constitute a kind of 'whole duty of man' which could be read by all. Such solutions were quite common in the seventeenth century.¹³ However, at this point the problem becomes much more serious. The exhibition of the law must be performed by men. What they take to be the content of the law is what their private consciences dictate. Therefore, a further criterion of moral truth is needed. But what criterion can there be outside of conscience?

12 The only consolation Locke is prepared to grant the individual derives from the scholastic distinction between obligatio materialis and obligatio formalis. Only the divine law places men under an obligation both to judge the action morally good or evil in itself (material obligation) and to will or refrain from the action (formal obligation). In binding indifferent things the magistrate can impose only formal obligation. The citizen must do what is commanded but he need not judge the action to be of moral value. It is this tiny gap that Locke locates liberty of conscience. In the context of the Two Tracts, this distinction represents scholasticism at its most decadent. To say that a man is bound only formally by the civil law, and that his conscience is still free means nothing when the man believes himself bound, both materially and formally, to act contrary to the civil law.

13 The most popular work of this kind was the Richard Allestree's
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A number of responses are possible in the face of this epistemological crises. The most radical solution to the problem assumes both the supremacy and the inescapable subjectivity of conscience. The individual's conscience must be his final guide in moral action. As in the nature of the case there is no means of telling a true from a false conscience, we can only conclude that the dictates of a man's conscience are 'true' for him. The contrary conscience of another man represents a different moral view and constitutes a different moral 'truth'. This moral subjectivism is not to be confused with moral scepticism. The latter, if it is to make sense, must assume the existence of an objective realm of moral values and distinctions. The sceptic's claim is that we can never be sure in our opinions concerning those values and distinctions.¹⁴ Moral subjectivism, on the contrary, entails the denial of any objective moral realm. Moral truth is not something external to man, but is to be found by each individual within himself.¹⁵

13 /cont'd

The Whole Duty of Man, which remained in print into the nineteenth-century. Samuel Puffendorf wrote a similar treatise entitled De Officio Hominis et Civis. This latter Locke recommends in Some Thoughts concerning Reading and Study for a Gentleman. Works, 3, p. 272/

14 Concerning the sceptic's need to assume an objective standard of truth, see W.von Leyden: Seventeenth Century Metaphysics, pp. 75 f.

15 Needless to say, this is not intended as a characterization of all forms of moral subjectivism.

The type of subjectivism outlined here is faced with a serious objection. The starting-point of the subjectivist argument is the binding force of conscience. However, it is only because the dictates of conscience appear to the individual as the embodiment of objective moral truths that he considers them compelling with respect to moral conduct. If subjectivism is correct the binding force of conscience is an illusion. Therefore, to accept the subjectivist conclusion is to reject the premise from which it is derived. (Whether this argument is conclusive against all forms of moral subjectivism is, of course, another question).

A second, far less radical, solution lays similar emphasis on the role of conscience as moral guide. It is argued that the function of conscience is to put the individual in touch with the objective moral realm. Of two contradictory dictates of conscience at least one is false. When moral disagreement arises the parties must 'look again' in order to discover the true dictates of conscience. The difficulty here is that this solution merely internalizes the problem of how we are to distinguish a true from a false conscience. Assuming that conscience does reflect an objective moral realm, how can the individual be sure he is reading his conscience correctly? Unless an answer can be found to this question (and an answer would involve going beyond conscience), the second solution is in danger of collapsing into the subjectivism of the first.

A third response consists in a downgrading of conscience.

It is argued that the existence of civil society is of paramount importance. The only alternative is the horrors of social anarchy. To forestall this, it must be granted that any government is better than none. To elevate private conscience above civil law is to overthrow the principles of order and authority necessary for the existence of government. Therefore, the individual must, notwithstanding his private moral opinions, accept the civil law as morally correct. This, in essence, is Locke's pragmatic argument.¹⁶ But the acceptance of this pragmatism is tantamount to a rejection of the moral foundation of government. Locke has argued that the civil magistrate is empowered to bind things left free by the moral law. If he oversteps his proper sphere of authority and contravenes this law, he legislates unjustly. Yet, if everything the magistrate enacts is to be treated as if it is within his proper sphere he can never be said to act unjustly. Whatever may be the case in theory, in practice the civil law, by virtue of being enacted, will be just.¹⁷

16 A somewhat similar argument is to be found in Hocker: "Howbeit, the corruptions of our nature being presupposed, we may not deny but that the Law of Nature doth now require of necessity some kind of regiment; so that to bring things unto the first course they were in, and utterly to take away all kind of public government in the world, were apparently to overturn the whole world". Op. Cit., Bk 1, x, 47

17 Locke does maintain that the magistrate can act unjustly. Nevertheless, if he does the subject is still bound to passive obedience 1st. Tract, p. 152, 2nd Tract, pp. 220-221/. Therefore, the authority of the magistrate is inviolable. In an extreme case he might act with complete disregard for the moral law. It is difficult to see how this degree of
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Finally, there remains the most heroic response to the crisis. This consists in the attempt to meet the problems raised by individual differences in the dictates of conscience, and place moral knowledge on a new, unshakeable foundation. The task involved here does not fall solely within the sphere of epistemology. As is often the case with problems of knowledge, it is also a problem of ontology. We have seen that moral subjectivism denies the existence of any moral realm independent of the opinions of men. Moral scepticism, on the other hand, was said to presuppose a moral ontology. Whether or not moral scepticism is a coherent doctrine, it is clearly not compatible with the doctrine of moral law which Locke accepts. For promulgation is essential to the law. If men cannot (as the sceptic claims) attain moral knowledge, then, logically, the law cannot exist. In the face of the challenge put by subjectivism and scepticism what first needs to be established is the existence of the law. Only then can the epistemological problem of moral knowledge be guaranteed as a real problem. Within a few years of writing the Two Tracts Locke does attempt this final response. In his next major work, the Essays on the Law of Nature, he endeavours to prove that there is an objective moral law accessible to human reason.

17 cont'd

absolutism is compatible with Locke's hierarchy of laws. For if the magistrate's authority really is circumscribed by the moral law, how can he be said to retain the right to any kind of obedience if he rule with complete disregard for the moral law?

Although subsequent to the Two Tracts, Locke does turn his attention to the problem of moral knowledge, the direction in which his investigation takes him is not obvious. The conclusions Locke reaches in the unpublished Two Tracts are very different from those he chose to publish in the Epistola de Tolerantia and the Two Treatises of Government. In his first work he maintains the absolute authority of the magistrate over all indifferent things and preaches passive obedience on the subject's part in all circumstances. In the Second Treatise he argues the people's right to rebellion if the civil ruler betray his trust. In the Epistola (and in the earlier, unpublished Essay On Toleration)¹⁸ he agrees with Bagshaw in distinguishing classes of indifferent things, and argues that civil authority embraces only those things which have to be regulated for the good of society. Dr Abrams has argued that Locke's metamorphosis from defender of political absolutism to defender of civil liberty can, in great part, be explained as the result of his, "new sense of the ubiquitous subjectivity of all actual moral knowledge".¹⁹ But, as Abrams admits, Locke does not give up his belief in the objective moral order expressed in the law of nature. So long as he retains this belief he cannot consistently accept the subjectivity of moral

18 The Essay exists in four drafts, one of which is published in H. R. Fox Bourne: The Life of John Locke, Vol. 1, pp. 174-194.

19 Abrams: Op. Cit., p. 102.

knowledge.

Certainly, Locke's thought developed after the Two Tracts. But this is not to say that he abandoned one intellectual position for another. There is no room here for an examination of the continuities between Locke's early and mature writings.²⁰ It need only be said that most of the conceptual apparatus which Locke uses throughout his published work is to be found in the Two Tracts. Some concepts, like that of the contract theory of government, attain considerably more prominence. Others, such as the concept of indifferent things, are further elaborated. There is, however, one quite indisputable change in Locke's thought; he rejects the pragmatic argument for political absolutism. Sometime in the 1660's Locke came to realize that the danger of tyranny was greater than the danger of mob violence. This realization in itself suffices to explain the contrasting conclusions found in the Two Tracts and the later writings.

Before we commence an examination of Locke's moral epistemology it is important to note the way in which he conceives moral knowledge. For Locke, moral truths are general truths, forming the content of a law. The question of how men are to know these truths is distinct from what might be termed the question of particular moral truths. Philosophers have sometimes

20 See Abrams: Op. Cit., Ch. IV, and J. W. Gough's Introduction to the Epistola de Tolerantia (ed. Raymond Klibansky)

asked whether, in the concrete situation, a man can know where his true duty lies. It is often answered that this cannot be known because it is impossible for the individual to be certain that he has considered all the facts relevant to a moral decision in any particular case.²¹ This type of scepticism is not at variance with the thesis that men can know general moral truths, such as are the precepts of the law of nature. In a letter to Denis Grenville Locke argues at some length against scepticism with respect to particular moral truths. The major premise of the sceptical argument is false. It is not the case that, "there is always some action so incumbent upon a man, so necessary to be done, preferable to all others, that if that be omitted, one certainly fails in one's duty". Rather, when it comes to particular moral actions, "God, out of his infinite goodness, considering our ignorance and frailty, hath left us a great liberty". Locke, then, is concerned with knowledge of the general content of the law of nature, which commands and forbids kinds of actions. When men know this they know their duties. Their further task is to act within the bounds of those duties.

21 See, for example, Sir David Ross: The Right and the Good, pp. 30 - 33.

22 Locke to Denis Grenville, 23 March 1677-8. This letter is published in full in Fox Bourne: Op. Cit., pp. 390 - 393.

Chapter II

THE LAW OF NATURE

We have seen that the problem of moral knowledge, as it arises for Locke, falls within the ambit of ontology as well as epistemology. Locke postulates a moral law, or law of nature, accessible to human reason. This is said to emanate from God and to constitute the objective standards of morality. The ontological problem is to prove that there is such a law, and the closely connected epistemological problem is to show the way in which it is known by men. However, there is a prior problem; for it is often argued that the law of nature cannot constitute an ontology of morals. Hence, it cannot be the object of moral knowledge.

The objection against a natural law ontology of morals takes a somewhat different form according to whether criticism is directed against the legal or the natural aspect of the doctrine. First, it is argued that, if God has commanded men to do certain things and refrain from others, the only moral, as distinct from prudential, reason for obedience is that the things God commands are morally worthy. That is, God's commands must themselves measure up to a moral standard. If this is so it is the standard external to the law set by God which constitute the true criterion of right and wrong. God's law can be no more than a statement of that standard. As far as an ontology of

morals is concerned the law is redundant.¹ Secondly, if the term 'nature' is emphasised, the law of nature may be understood as expressing the order which in fact holds in the universe. The law of nature with respect to mankind will then be an account of how men actually behave.² But no moral 'ought' can be derived from such a factual account. To say that an action accords with the law will mean only that it conforms to the general pattern of human behaviour; to say that an action is against the law will mean only that it is out of the general run of things. Understood thus, vice is at least as natural, or in conformity with the law, as is virtue. Therefore, the law of nature cannot constitute a standard of moral right and wrong. Whether it be taken as the commands of God or as an account of the way things are, the law of nature cannot explain moral obligation. Therefore knowledge of the law cannot be knowledge of what we

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- 1 This argument derives ultimately from the discussion of piety in Plato's Euthyphro. It is used by Locke's elder contemporary Ralph Cudworth A Treatise concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality, Bk. I, Ch. ii, § 3/, and is given trenchant expression by Locke's former pupil Lord Shaftesbury: ". . . whoever thinks there is a God, and pretends formally to believe that he is just and good, must suppose that there is independently such a thing as justice and injustice, truth and falsehood, right and wrong, according to which he pronounces that God is just, righteous, and true. If the mere will, decree, or law of God be said absolutely to constitute right and wrong, then are these latter words of no significancy at all". Characteristics, ed. Robertson, Vol. I, p. 264/
- 2 The law of nature will be what John Stuart Mill calls an empirical law: "Scientific inquirers give the name of Empirical Laws to those uniformities which observation or experiment has shown to exist, but on which they hesitate to rely in cases varying much from those which have been actually observed, for want of seeing any reason why such a law should exist". A System of Logic, Bk. III, ch. xvi, § 1./

morally ought to do. That is, it cannot be moral knowledge.

Like the Two Tracts, Locke's detailed treatment of the law of nature remained unpublished up to the present century.³ It consists of eight Latin essays, which most probably formed the basis of the lectures Locke delivered during his term as Censor of Moral Philosophy at Christ Church in 1664. In the Essays Locke tries to show: first, that the law of nature exists; second, that it is neither innate nor known from the general consent of men, but can be discovered by reason through sense experience; third, that the obligation imposed by the law extends universally, and does not depend upon individual self-interest.

In Essay I Locke presents five arguments for the existence of the law of nature. The first is taken over directly from Aristotle. All things are designed to fulfil a specific function. Man's distinctive characteristic is his rationality. Therefore, his proper function is to act in accordance with reason. Moreover, besides the laws which differ from society to society, we suppose there to be laws which have validity everywhere. These must make up a universal law of nature.⁴ To the objection that

3 See John Locke: Essays on the Law of Nature, translated and edited by W. von Leyden.

4 The passages Locke quotes are from the Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. 1 1098a 7, and Bk. V, 1134618.

most men live as if there were no rational basis to life Locke gives two answers. First, from the assertion that men are by nature rational and that the law is knowable by reason, it does not follow that men must know the law. There are many things which can disturb the natural operation of reason in the individual. Secondly, even if in following reason men disagree as to what the law of nature dictates, this fact goes to establish the existence of the law. For disagreement as to the content of the law presupposes that there is an objective law which does have a specific content. [Essays, pp. 113 - 115]

Locke's second argument is based on the phenomenon of conscience insofar as it is the source of guilt feelings. Even those who acknowledge no positive laws accuse themselves of wrong doing. Therefore, they must consider themselves bound by some law. The law acknowledged by conscience can only be the law of nature. Thirdly, everything in the world operates according to law. In a passage which strongly echoes Hooker, Locke defines law as, "that which prescribes to everything the form and manner and measure of working". [Essays, p. 117]⁵ It would be contrary to the wisdom of God to create man without giving him a function in the scheme of things. Therefore, there is a law of nature which prescribes man's proper function.

5 Cf. Hooker: "That which doth assign unto each thing the kind, that which doth moderate the force and power, that which doth appoint the form and measure, of working, the same we term a law". [The Laws of Ecclestial Polity, Bk. I, ii, 1] Locke has already quoted this passage, with an acknowledgement of its source, in his Latin tract on government. [2nd. Tract, p. 221]

Fourthly, if there were no law of nature there could, properly speaking, be no such thing as human society. Society, so Locke argues, depends on the institution of a form of government and on the fulfilment of contracts. Without the law of nature the civil ruler could enact any positive laws he liked. Yet, although he may be able to compel obedience by brute force, he could not impose any obligation on the private citizen. For, "positive civil laws are not binding by their own nature or force or in any other way than in virtue of the law of nature, which orders obedience to superiors and the keeping of public peace".

[Essays, p. 119]⁶ The other basis of society consists in the keeping of compacts; and, "it is not to be expected that a man would abide by a compact because he has promised it, when better terms are offered elsewhere, unless the obligation to keep promises was derived from nature, and not from human will".

[Ibid.]⁷

Finally, the law of nature is conceptually necessary if terms such as 'virtue' and 'vice', 'moral rewards and punishment' are to

⁶ Cf. 2nd. Tract, p. 226

⁷ Whereas in the Two Tracts Locke explicitly refuses to decide between the contract and divine right theories of government [1st. Tract, p. 122]; he here adopts the position he was to develop in the Second Treatise on Government. It is noteworthy that he has not abandoned the doctrine of natural law which provided the framework for the argument of the Two Tracts. Clearly, natural law is vital to the contract theory as Locke conceives it. Abrams, however, appears to see in it an alternative to the doctrine of natural law. [Introduction to the Two Tracts, p. 25]

have any meaning. For, "there is no fault, no guilt, where there is no law. Everything would have to depend on human will, and, since there would be nothing to demand dutiful action, it seems that men would not be bound to do anything but what utility or pleasure might recommend, or what a blind and lawless impulse might happen perchance to fasten on". Essays, pp. 119 - 121⁸

Although this is presented as a separate argument for the existence of the law of nature, it really does no more than spell out Locke's basic premise that morality is a matter of law. What Locke's other arguments have shown is a certain ambiguity in his use of the term 'law'. In the first and third arguments law appears to mean primarily the rule according to which things, including men, operate. In the second and fourth argument law is that which imposes an obligation on man. It is likely, therefore, that Locke's doctrine is open to both the objections mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. However, any pronouncement on this would be premature. First of all something must be said about Locke's general theory of law and obligation.

In Essay I, Locke lists three conditions which must be fulfilled by any law. These, he claims, are fulfilled by the law of nature:

⁸ Cf. 1st. Tract, p. 124

. . . in the first place, it is the decree of a superior will, wherein the formal cause of a law appears to consist . . . Secondly, it lays down what is and what is not to be done, which is the proper function of a law. Thirdly, it binds men, for it contains in itself all that is requisite to create an obligation. [Essays, p. 113]

Later he adds what may be taken as a fourth condition; the necessity of sanctions for law:

. . . there is no law without a law-maker, and law is to no purpose without punishment. [Essays, p. 173]

Locke reiterates this point in several of his later works. Although sanctions are essential to law, it should not be thought that in Locke's conception laws are primarily threats. Rather, he supposes that, without sanctions, pronouncements, which are law according to the first three conditions, would have no force against those who disobeyed them. This is brought out in The Reasonableness of Christianity where he discusses Christ's commands:

. . . if (Christ) did not expect obedience to them, his commands would be but mere mockery; and if there were no punishment for the transgressors of them, his laws would not be the laws of a king, and that authority to command, and power to chastise the disobedient, but empty talk, without force, and without influence. [Works, 7, p. 114]

Now it is a moot point whether we should call commands 'without force and influence' laws (or even commands), but certainly Locke does not rule out such a use of the term.⁹

9 Cf. Locke's paper Of Ethics in General, Sect. 9 [Published in Lord King: The Life of John Locke, Vol. 2, pp. 122 - 133]; Essay concerning Human Understanding, I, iii, 12, and II, xxviii, 12.

With respect to the law of nature, the superior will is the will of God and what is laid down by the law is the moral duties of mankind. The obligation men are under, "seems to derive partly from the divine wisdom of the law-maker, and partly from the right which the Creator has over His creation . . . we are bound to show ourselves obedient to the authority of His will because both our being and our work depend on His will . . . moreover, it is reasonable that we should do what shall please Him who is omniscient and most wise". Essays, p. 183] Locke's theory of obligation, then, gives weight to both the authority of God's will and to the wisdom of what God commands. However, there is a certain tension between these two aspects. If moral obligation is said to arise, even in part, from the wisdom of what God wills, it would seem that if God willed something which was not wise no obligation could be created. If this is so, the fact that the law of nature is an expression of God's will seems, at best, of secondary importance. The primary source of obligation will lie with the content of the law. In other words, men ought to act according to the law because its precepts are morally good or right, not because they are expressions of the divine will. This means that God's will is itself circumscribed by the rectitude of the law. As men cannot legitimately act contrary to the precepts of the law, so God cannot legitimately command them to act contrary to those precepts. The aspect of will in the theory of obligation appears to be displaced by the aspect

of wisdom.

Locke's editor, Dr. Von Leyden, has argued that we have here not two aspects of a single theory, but two alternative, and not always consistent, theories of moral obligation. According to the so-called 'voluntarist' theory, law is an expression of God's will and as such it places men under an obligation.

However, Locke tempers this radical position by introducing elements from the 'intellectualist' theory, according to which law and obligation are founded, not in will, but in the 'order of things'.¹⁰ Thus, Locke's doctrine falls between two stools.

At times in the Essays Locke's position is thoroughly 'voluntarist', in that, "he regards natural law as a set of commands proceeding from the will of God and that it is on this account that this law is righteous and binding . . . Yet . . . his position shifts and inclines towards the 'intellectualist' theory . . . according to which law has its foundations in a dictate of Right Reason, in the essential nature of things, and is thus independent

10 The 'voluntarist' and 'intellectualist' theories are, as Von Leyden points out, clear-cut alternatives. The former is represented in Calvin's assertion that, "The Lord in delivering a perfect rule of righteousness, has reduced it in all its parts to his mere will". Institutes of the Christian Religion, Bk. II, viii, 5/ The latter stands behind Hugo Grotius's assertion that the law of nature would still exist and be binding, "though we should grant . . . that there is no God, or that he takes no care of human affairs". The Rights of War and Peace, proleg. § 11/ A brief but thorough general account of the controversy can be found in Otto Gierke's Political Theories of the Middle Age, Note 256, pp. 172 - 174.

of will".¹¹

This 'shift' is most apparent in Essay VII. Here Locke distinguishes between the unchanging law of nature and those laws which are created to meet contingent circumstances. In contrast to the latter, the law of nature is "firmly rooted in the soil of human nature". Human nature being the same everywhere and at all times, it follows that the law of nature is universal:

Since . . . all men are by nature rational, and since there is a harmony between this law and the rational nature, and this harmony can be known by the light of nature, it follows that all those who are endowed with a rational nature, i.e. all men in the world, are morally bound by this law. . . . In fact, this law does not depend on an unstable and changeable will, but on the eternal order of things. For it seems to me that certain essential features of things are immutable, and that certain duties arise out of necessity and cannot be other than they are. Essays, p. 199

According to Von Leyden, the notion of a harmony (convenientia) between the law of nature and human reason is introduced by Locke in an attempt to arrive at a non-voluntarist, purely rational foundation for morality. In terms of the alternative theory it is not will (not even the supreme will of God) which is the source of moral obligation, but human reason insofar as it

11 Introduction to the Essays, p. 51. Similarly, Dr Abrams interprets Locke in the Two Tracts as leaning heavily towards the 'voluntarist' position, yet restrained, "by his nagging, countervailing concern that what passes for law shall also be just". Abrams: Op. Cit., p. 81

comprehends the laws of human nature.¹²

However, in Essay VII Locke is not dealing with the concept of moral obligation. He has already devoted Essay VI to this topic, and there, his analysis is 'voluntarist'. In the later essay Locke is concerned to argue an affirmative answer to the question, "Is the binding force of the law of nature perpetual and universal?"¹³ His argument for the universality of obligation proceeds from a consideration of the matter, or content, of obligation. Locke's view is that, as the law of nature is set by God to the actions of men, what it dictates must be determined by the facts of human nature, or the way which God has made man. As human nature is assumed to be constant, it follows that all men at all times are under the same moral obligations (or bound to live according to the same norms); and this is so notwithstanding the diverse and contradictory moral practices to be found in the world. In this sense the content of the law does not depend on 'an unstable and changeable will' which varies according to circumstances. The universality and immutability of the law and of its binding force is not, Locke is careful to add, because, "God . . . could not have created men differently. Rather, the cause is that, since man has been made such as he is, equipped with reason and his other

12 Op. Cit. p. 52

13 Locke explicitly distinguishes the topic of moral obligation from the subject dealt with in Essay VII: "We have already proved that this law is given as morally binding, and we must now discuss to what extent it is in fact binding".
Essays, p. 193

faculties and destined for this mode of life, there necessarily result from his inborn constitution some definite duties for him, which cannot be other than they are". [Essays, p. 199] Moreover, God will not abolish the law of nature. To do so He would have to "create a new race of men, who would have another law and moral rule". [Essays, p. 201] This, Locke holds, God certainly would not wish to do.

There is nothing in Locke's argument for the universality of obligation under the law of nature to suggest that he is putting forward a theory in which obligation is completely divorced from God's will. From the assertion that what men are obliged to do is determined by their human nature and discoverable by human reason, it does not follow that their obligation to act is a function solely of nature and reason. Von Leyden's interpretation pays insufficient attention to an important distinction Locke makes during his discussion of obligation in Essay VI; the distinction between that which binds 'effectively' and that which binds 'terminatively':¹⁴

That thing binds 'effectively' which is the prime cause of all obligation, and from which springs the formal cause of obligation, namely the will of a superior. For we are bound to something for the very reason that he, under whose rule we are, wills it. That thing binds 'terminatively', or by delimitation, which prescribes the manner and measure of an obligation and of our duty and is nothing other than

14 Cf. John W. Lenz's review of Von Leyden's edition of the Essays in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 1956/57 pp. 105 - 113.

the declaration of that will, and this declaration by another name we call law. We are indeed bound by Almighty God because He wills, but the declaration of His will delimits the obligation and the ground of our obedience; for we are not bound to anything except what a law-maker in some way has made known and proclaimed as his will. [Essays, pp. 185 - 187]

For an obligation to exist both these elements are necessary. God's will is the formal cause of moral obligation. However, just as there can be no such thing as an empty will, but in every case there must be something which is willed; in the same manner there can be no such thing as purely formal obligation. Obligation is always an obligation to do, or refrain from, something; it must be delimited. It is in this way that human nature enters into Locke's doctrine of moral obligation. As the content of the law of nature is determined by human nature, the latter provides the necessary 'terminative', or delimiting, element in moral obligation. Far from God's will and man's nature being the centres of alternative theories of obligation, they are complementary facets of the one doctrine. We will now look at this doctrine in more detail, and attempt to assess it in the light of the objections raised against a natural law ontology of morals.

The formal cause of the law of nature and of moral obligation is God's will. But obligation does not arise simply from the fact that God has the power to punish any disobedience to His commands. To suppose this would be to confuse what Locke terms 'a liability to pay dutiful obedience' with 'a liability to punishment'. [Essays, p. 183] Sanctions are essential to

the law if it is to have force; men incur the force of the law when they fail in their obedience. That is, liability to punishment arises if men neglect their prior obligation to act in accord with the law of nature. If obligation involved nothing more than the liability to punishment it would be no different from the coercion men are under as captives in the hands of pirates or robbers. But obligation is quite distinct from coercion:

Indeed, all obligation binds conscience and lays a bond on the mind itself, so that not fear of punishment, but a rational apprehension of what is right, puts us under an obligation, and conscience passes judgement on morals, and, if we are guilty of a crime, declares that we deserve punishment. [Essays, p. 185]

So that it is not man's fear of punishment which is the basis of moral obligation, but his apprehension of a "superior power to which he is rightly subject". [Essays, p. 151]

God's right to command men is, for the most part, a function of His status as creator; "for who will deny that the clay is subject to the potter's will, and that a piece of pottery can be shattered by the same hand by which it has been formed?"

[Essays, p. 157]¹⁵ Locke's analysis of God's right to command bears an interesting affinity to the account he gives, in the Second Treatise of Government, of the individual's right to

15 This is a conscious echo of Jeremiah, xviii, 6-7 and Romans ix, 20-21. In his commentary on the relevant text from St Paul, Locke interprets the passage as a reference to God's dealings with nations. He holds that it is not to be taken as supporting the doctrine of arbitrary predestination respecting individual persons. [A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul, 3rd ed. pp. 301 - 302]

private property. Here Locke is concerned to explain how private property can arise from an original situation in which all things are the common property of all men; and he wants to explain this without recourse to the traditional doctrine of an "express Compact of all the Commoners". 2nd. Treatise, § 25¹⁶ Locke's solution is that an individual acquires a right to the possession of a thing, when, "he hath mixed his Labour with, and joyned to it something that is his own". 2nd. Treatise, § 27 Also in the Second Treatise, Locke talks of men as God's property:

For Men being all the Workmanship of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wise Maker . . . 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 anothers Pleasure. 2nd. Treatise, § 6

Obviously God does not acquire property in mankind. He does not mix His labour with something already existing; for men are utterly and completely the product of God's labour. It is because the labour involved is the labour of creation, that men cannot but be God's property.¹⁷ God's right with respect to mankind is a unique property right which Locke calls the 'right of creation'; "as when all things are justly subject to that by which they have first been made and also are constantly preserved". Essays, p. 185

16 Cf. John Yolton: Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding, p. 187.

17 Locke's theory of private property depends upon the thesis that, "every Man has a Property in his own Person". 2nd. Treatise, § 27 But this does not contradict the thesis that all men are also God's property. It is because all men are equally God's property that one individual does not have property in the person of another, i.e. the each man has property in his own person.

This right like the right men have in their own property, is distinct from the 'right of contract'; "as when someone has voluntarily surrendered himself to another and submitted himself to another's will. [Ibid.] It is the latter right which, in the Second Treatise, forms the basis of political obligation. Thus, the parallel drawn between Locke's account of God's moral authority and man's right to property throws into relief the difference between moral and political obligation.

This parallel also helps to illustrate the way in which God's right to command is 'limited'. In Locke's political scheme the individual's right to property does not mean a right to acquire goods in an unlimited and arbitrary fashion. Similarly God's right to command is not one of arbitrary dominion. We have seen that the matter of the law of nature is determined by the nature of man. Human nature and the laws which arise from the facts of human nature are expressions of God's infinite wisdom. God's wisdom entails that everything in the universe, including man, is created for some end. In consequence the law of nature does not simply bind men to act in specific ways, but to act in ways conducive to "a gracious divine purpose". [Essays, p. 157] Thus, the facts of human nature determine the content of the law, and these facts are themselves determined by the purpose for which men have been created. Locke's conception of morality is, therefore, thoroughly teleological. God's right of creation, from which the moral law takes its origin, is absolute, but this does not mean it is arbitrary.

The way in which God exercises His right necessarily reflects His wisdom.

To sum up: We can say that Locke's doctrine is 'voluntarist' in that he sees the will of a superior as essential to law and obligation. Will stands as the formal cause of law and obligation. However, as well as form there must be matter, and the latter is provided by human nature as it is the product of God's wisdom. Human nature is therefore the source of the content of the law; but it is a mistake to think of it as a source of obligation. From the facts of human nature considered in themselves no law or obligation can be derived. Locke, it is true, does temper his 'voluntarist' position with 'intellectualist' elements, to the extent that he does not hold the extreme view that the binding will is arbitrary in its dictates. But this in no way means that law and obligation can be divorced from will.

As his doctrine has so far been interpreted, Locke does have an answer to the first formulation of the objection urged against a natural law ontology of morals. Human nature constitutes the basis of the standard against which man's actions are to be measured. The fact that God commands conformity to this standard constitutes its moral relevance. If there were no God, or if He issued no commands to His creatures, the facts of human nature would have no place in morality. Men might still use these facts in creating standards for actions. But men cannot create moral obligation. In the absence of God's commands it cannot be said

that men morally ought to do anything, no matter what the facts of human nature. The law of nature, considered as the commands of God, is, therefore, far from redundant. Without it there could, on Locke's account, be no moral 'ought'.

Nevertheless, there is a variation on the first objection which has not as yet been considered. It was remarked earlier that, in Locke's theory, moral obligation depends in part on God's wisdom. Subsequent discussion has shown only that God's will is as important for moral obligation as is His wisdom. It might be argued that, as God exercises the right of creation in accord with wisdom, His will is limited by His wisdom. In the first place, it cannot be objected that God is limited by the right of creation. It is law alone which can be said to set a limit to what can be willed or performed, Locke makes this clear when he differentiates between law and right:

. . . right is grounded in the fact that we have the free use of a thing, whereas law is what enjoins or forbids the doing of a thing. Essays, p. 111

Therefore, it is not intelligible to talk of a right imposing a limitation on those who have it. In the case of most types of right it will make sense to talk of the individual failing to have, or losing his right. But, as God is by definition the creator of the universe, He has the 'right of creation' necessarily; He could not lose it without ceasing to be God. Neither does the fact that human nature determines the content of God's commands impose any limitations on God. He creates everything for His own wise

purposes, and the laws he prescribes must suit these purposes. Otherwise God would frustrate His own intentions. For Locke, infinite wisdom also belongs to God by definition. Thus, a creator who prescribed laws which were contrary to the nature of what he had created would not be God. As infinite wisdom necessarily belongs to God, it cannot be said to impose restrictions on God; in no way does it limit God's freedom. Locke makes this quite explicit in the Essay concerning Human Understanding:

And if it were fit for such poor finite creatures as we are to pronounce what infinite wisdom and goodness could do, I think we might say that God himself cannot choose what is not good: the freedom of the Almighty hinders not his being determined by what is best.
 [II, xxi, 49]¹⁸

In consequence, the question of whether men would be bound to obey God's if His commands were not wise is, for Locke, a nonsense question. It is as if one were to ask what properties triangles would have if they were bounded by four straight lines.

18 The thesis that, as wisdom is just as essential to God as is will, He has absolute sovereignty and freedom without having an arbitrary will, is orthodox Thomism. Hooker expresses it thus: "All things therefore do work after a sort according to law: all other things according to a law, where of some superior, unto whom they are subject, is author: only the works and operations of God have him both for their worker, and for the law whereby they are wrought; for that perfection which God is, giveth perfection to that he doth". [Op. Cit., Bk. I, ii, 2] It is also a common place in the philosophical theology of the Cambridge Platonists. See, for example, Nathanael Culverwel: An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature (ed. Brown) p. 50, and Ralph Cudworth: Op. Cit., Ch. iii, 7. Descartes, on the other hand, appears to adopt an extreme 'voluntarist' position. Cf. his reply to Gassendi's objections, Reply, VI, 8. [Works, ed. Haldane and Ross, Vol. II, pp. 250 - 251]

The objection against a natural law ontology of morals in its second formulation states that no law describing the way in which men actually behave can serve as a guide to how they ought to behave. Locke also has a partial reply to this second objection. In discussing Locke's proofs for the existence of the law of nature we noted an ambiguity in the term 'law'. In some arguments 'law' appeared to mean the rule according to which things operate, while in others it appeared to mean that which puts men under an obligation. There is an ambiguity here, but it is one of which Locke is fully aware. He uses the word 'law' in referring both to the content, or matter, of a law and to its form. Law considered as to its form is the command of a superior will. This binds 'effectively' and is the prime cause of obligation. Considered as to content, law is what is prescribed by a superior will, i.e. that which men are under an obligation to do. In this sense law binds 'terminatively' and is the declaration of the authoritative will. In his arguments from conscience and from the existence of positive laws binding in civil society Locke is referring primarily to law as it binds 'effectively'. That is, he is concerned with the form of law. In the other two arguments Locke is much more interested in law as it binds 'terminatively'; and the content of law may be generally characterized as a rule set to the operation of a thing, suitable to the ends for which God has created them.¹⁹ There is

19 It should be noted that, although he is aware of a difference between the law of God applying to inanimate creation and the

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no question of any obligation following solely from the way creation, including man, actually operates; for obligation must be formed by will. The facts of human nature are relevant to moral obligation because they determine what men (according to God's will) ought to do. They are the basis from which the content of the law of nature derives. Both meanings of law are encompassed by Locke's general definition of the law of nature as, "the decree of the divine will discernible by the light of nature and indicating what is and what is not in conformity with rational nature, and for this very reason commanding or prohibiting". Essays, p. 111²⁰

19 cont'd

moral law of nature applying to voluntary agents, it is doubtful that Locke would have accepted the distinction between scientific laws which merely describe statistical regularities and laws which prescribe what ought to be done. For Locke the physical order of the universe and the moral order to which man is subject are equally manifestations of God's will. Cf. Hooker: "God's commanding those things to be which are, and to be in such sort as they are, to keep the tenure and course which they do, importeth the establishment of nature's law". Op. Cit., Bk. I, iii, 2.

20 Von Leyden sees in the phrase 'for this very reason' an indication that, even in this passage, Locke holds the rectitude of God's commands, rather than the fact that they are expressions of His will, to be the prime source of obligation. Op. Cit., pp. 56 - 57. But, as Lenz points out the passage is ambiguous. It may be read as meaning that men are under an obligation 'for the very reason' that they are commanded by God. Op. Cit., pp. 110 - 111. This, in view of what Locke says elsewhere, is the more plausible reading. Further, a similar, but unambiguous, passage appears in Locke's Common-Place Book, dated 1681: "Virtue, as in its obligation it is the will of God, discovered by natural reason, and thus has the force of a law". Quoted in King: Op. Cit., Vol 2, p. 94.

Nevertheless, the above provides no more than a partial answer to the second objection. Locke does not fall into the error of supposing that a moral 'ought' can be derived solely from a consideration of what is the case regarding human nature. Yet he does believe that the facts of human nature somehow indicate what ought and ought not to be done. We know that men are God's creatures and that they are made to fulfil some purpose. As God is wise we know that He has endowed His creatures with capacities suitable to the function He wills them to perform. Therefore, a consideration of the capacities of human nature must show what God wills men to do. Unfortunately men have capacities for moral evil as well as moral good. How, then, it is to be decided which capacities in human nature indicate the content of the law of nature? Unless this can be settled no amount of reflection on human nature will tell men what they ought to do.

This problem is not solved in the Essays and a full discussion cannot be entered into until we have considered Locke's general epistemology as it is worked out in the Essay concerning Human Understanding. In the last part of the present chapter we will discuss only what Locke has to say about moral knowledge in the Essays. Finally we will consider the assertion that the law of nature is not based on self-interest.

The law of nature is, Locke insists, completely rational in its precepts; but this, he is careful to point out, does not mean the law is identical with the dictates of human reason. It is God alone

who establishes and pronounces the law. Reason, as it is a faculty of the human mind, discovers and interprets what God dictates. [Essays, p. 111] In talking of human reason as the source of moral knowledge Locke employs the traditional metaphor of the 'light of nature'. But men do not know their duties by some kind of internal illumination:

Rather, by saying that something can be known by the light of nature, we mean nothing else but that there is some sort of truth to the knowledge of which a man can attain by himself and without the help of another, if he makes proper use of the faculties he is endowed with by nature. [Essays, p. 123]

The faculty of reason is not self-sufficient. It needs material to work upon. Leaving aside divine revelation, which is a supernatural source of knowledge, there are three ways whereby men may acquire the primary data of knowledge: by 'inscription' (innate ideas); by 'tradition' (information and instruction); by 'sense-experience'. [Ibid.]

Essay III is devoted to a refutation of the hypothesis that the law of nature is known innately. As Locke's arguments here foreshadow the detailed polemic in Book I of the Essay concerning Human Understanding, they can be left aside for the present. Something should, however, be said about Locke's attitude to tradition as a source of moral knowledge. Locke does not deny that men learn moral principles from others. Nor does he think this necessarily an inadequate way of learning what the law of nature demands. Nevertheless, those who take

their morality at second hand from the opinions of others do not, strictly speaking, know the law of nature:

For what we take over from other people's talk, if we embrace it only because others have insisted that it is good, may perhaps direct our morals well enough and keep them within the bounds of dutiful action, yet it is not what reason but what men tell us. Essays, p. 129

Further, tradition must itself spring from some non-traditional source. If those who originated the tradition discovered the law by reason, this means of discovery must still be open to men. If the tradition arose from an original divine revelation, the law it proclaims is positive, and not the law of nature. Essays, p. 131 Similarly, Locke argues in Essay V, that the general consent of men cannot be the means whereby the law is known. Even if general consent in moral matters were to be found among men, this would presuppose a knowledge of the law derived from some other source. Tradition, then, can sometimes be a safe guide to moral duty, but it is not the original source of moral knowledge.

As the beginning of moral knowledge cannot be assigned to either innate ideas or to tradition, there is only one possibility left; it must originate in sense experience. However, prior to knowing what their moral duties are men must know that they in fact have duties. As we have seen, this prerequisite is fulfilled once they know there to be a God who wills them to act according to the end for which He has created them. This is the knowledge of moral obligation.

Locke's proof of God's existence combines two standard arguments; the argument from design and the anthropological argument. We learn from sense-experience that there exists a world in which objects follow regular patterns of movement. From this primary data reason proceeds to enquire into the cause of the ordered universe, "for it is surely undisputed that this could not have come together casually and by chance into so regular and in every respect so perfect and ingeniously prepared a structure". Essay, p. 153] In this way reason reveals the existence of "A powerful and wise creator". Man also must be a product of this creator's activity; for man cannot have made himself. If man had created himself he would have bestowed upon himself all those perfections which he manifestly lacks. He would, for instance, have given himself eternal duration.²¹ Thus, beginning from the evidence of our senses, "reason lays down that there must be some superior power to which we are rightly subject, namely God who has a just and inevitable command over us and at His pleasure can raise us up or throw us down, and make us by the same commanding power happy or miserable." Essays, pp. 153 - 155] Evidence gathered from sense experience reveals not only that there is a God who has the right to command men but also that God is

21 The anthropological argument is developed in greater detail by Descartes, Cf. Meditation III, in Works, Vol. I, p. 168.

infinitely wise. For the order and beauty of the universe must originate from wisdom as well as power. As it would be contrary to supreme wisdom to do anything without some end in view, it follows that all things in the universe are governed by final causes:

Hence it is quite evident that God intends man to do something, and this was the second of the two things required for the knowledge of any and every law, namely, the will on the part of a superior power with respect to the things to be done by us; that is, God wills that we do something. Essays, p. 157.

In this way the knowledge which is a necessary precondition for the strictly moral knowledge of right and wrong is built up by reason working on the materials gained by the senses.

Reason has yet to arrive at a knowledge of the content of the law of nature. In the Essays Locke's arguments are sketchy and unsatisfactory. Locke selects three dispositions which he takes to be observable properties of human nature. First, men have an inclination to contemplate the works, wisdom and power of God, and to praise Him. Second, all men desire to live in society with their fellows, and this inclination goes beyond any self-centered desire for personal comfort. Men are also admirably fitted for society by the gift of speech. Third, all men have a strong instinct of self-preservation. According to Locke, these natural dispositions broadly indicate, "all that men owe to God, their neighbour, and themselves". Essays, p. 159. That is, they embrace the entire range of moral

action.²² Whether or not these dispositions are agreed to be observable properties of human nature Locke has said nothing to solve the problem mentioned previously. Indeed his list of natural inclinations brings this problem to the fore. Why should these, and not other dispositions, indicate what God has commanded? Even if this question can be satisfactorily answered, it is by no means clear how the details of moral duty are to be derived from such data.

In Essay VIII Locke argues at some length against the thesis that the individual's inclination to pursue his own interest is the 'basis of the law of nature'. What he says in the course of the argument does not constitute a solution to the above problem; however it does serve to clarify his position.

Locke defines the basis of the law of nature as, "some sort of groundwork on which all other and less evident precepts of that law are built and from which in some way they can be derived, and thus they acquire from it all their binding force in that they are in accordance with that, as it were, primary and fundamental law which is the standard and measure of all the other laws depending on it". Essays, p. 205²³ If self-interest provides this

22 Similarly, St. Thomas Aquinas derives the main precepts of the law of nature from tendencies inherent in human nature. In common with all substances men have a tendency to preserve themselves. With other animals they have certain appetites such as the sexual appetite. By virtue of their rational faculty they wish to know God and to live in society. Cf. Summa Theologiae, 1a 2ae. 94, 2.

23 The 'binding force' referred to here is, of course, 'terminative' obligation.

groundwork, the fundamental law will be that each man ought do that which in the particular circumstances he judges to be of advantage to himself.

Locke puts forward three arguments against this thesis. First, it is evident that self-interest (or utility) is not the fundamental law from which other, less universal, precepts are derived.

. . . for if you should run over all the dutiful actions of human life, you will find none that arises out of mere utility and is binding for the sole reason that it is advantageous. In fact a great number of virtues, and the best of them, consist only in this: that we do good to others at our own loss. Essays, p. 207

Secondly, if self-interest were the fundamental law it could seldom be properly obeyed. The goods of the earth being limited, the achievement of one man's interest would mean the non-achievement of the interests of others. Moreover, a law commanding the individual to follow his own interest would place each man in a constant state of war with his fellows. Human society would, if such a law were obeyed, be quite impossible. Finally, self-interest cannot be the basis of the law of nature, for if it were each man would be morally bound to act only for himself. Thus "all justice, friendship, and generosity are taken away from life". Essays, p. 213 But it is quite unreasonable to suppose these things morally wrong. Locke does grant that there is some truth in the thesis that utility and the law of nature are closely connected. He stresses that it is in accord with human happiness, in general, that all men should follow the precepts of the law.

What this means is that, "Utility is not the basis of the law or the ground of obligation, but the consequence of obedience to it".

Essays, p. 215

The point to be noted at present is that Locke does not hold the various precepts of the law of nature to be derivable piecemeal from a consideration of certain aspects of human nature. Rather, he believes there to be one fundamental law from which the details of man's duties somehow follow. Yet the Essays contain no positive information concerning this fundamental law. They tell us neither what it is nor how it is to be derived.²⁴

The Essays on the Law of Nature, therefore, represent an incomplete moral philosophy in that they culminate in a vital problem. Locke has a partial defence against the objection that the law of nature cannot constitute a moral ontology, and hence cannot be the object of moral knowledge. However, this defence is incomplete pending a solution to the problem of moral knowledge; how are men to know what God has commanded? Locke, we shall see, does return to the task of establishing a fundamental law of nature, which will serve as a basis for the detailed precepts of morality. But before this he embarked on an even larger task; that of determining the limits of human understanding and thereby the extent of human knowledge. Some six or seven years after he wrote the Essays, Locke began work on what was to become An Essay concerning Human Understanding.

24 Locke does, however, refer in passing to justice as "that chief law of nature and bond of every society". Essays, p. 169



Chapter III

KNOWLEDGE IN THE 'STATE OF MEDIOCRITY'

A great deal has been written about Locke as a philosopher of science and epistemologist for the Royal Society. Certainly, in the Essay concerning Human Understanding he does see himself laying an epistemological foundation for the experimental practice of the Royal Society. But the famous self-image of Locke as an underlabourer clearing the ground so that the Newtons and Boyles might work unimpeded should not obscure the fact of his interest in moral knowledge.¹ Indeed, if the Essay is taken as a work concerned solely with the knowledge of natural phenomena it must appear a rather odd performance. We would expect an account of how the scientist (or, in Locke's terminology, the natural philosopher) gains a knowledge of the physical world. What we would not expect is Locke's contention that the study of nature yields hardly anything which can properly be called knowledge.

It takes no very careful reading of the Essay to notice the emphasis Locke places throughout on the limitations of knowledge:

He that knows anything knows this in the first place: that he need not seek long for instances of his ignorance. The meanest and most obvious things that come in our way have dark sides that the quickest sight cannot penetrate into. The clearest and most enlarged understandings of thinking men find themselves puzzled and at a loss in every particle of matter. [IV, iii, 22]

1 As Locke's friend James Tyrrell reports, the Essay itself grew out of a discussion about, "the Principles of morality and reveal'd Religion". [Marginal note in Tyrrell's copy of the Essay, kept in the British Museum]

Man's ignorance is not a matter of chance; nor can it be dissolved by attention to the proper method of discovering truth. Ignorance is ineluctably part of the human condition. In this world men dwell in what Locke calls a 'state of mediocrity'. This he describes in a letter to Grenville as a state, "which is not capable of extremes, though on one side there may be great excellency and perfection".²

Locke does not arrive at the notion of the state of mediocrity as a result of his investigation of the extent of human knowledge. The view of man as a limited creature stands at the starting point of his epistemology rather than at the conclusion of his arguments. To a quite large extent the Essay is a polemical work, aimed against what Locke takes to be the empty pretensions of human understanding. The extremes of knowledge which are beyond man's capacity fall under the general heading of metaphysics.³ In his polemical mood, Locke has particularly in mind the attempt to construct a metaphysical

2 Locke to Denis Grenville, 23 Mar. 1677 - 8. [Fox Bourne: The Life of John Locke, Vol. I, p. 393] A detailed discussion of the Lockean 'state of mediocrity' is contained in D. G. James: The Life of Reason, pp. 63 - 114.

3 Locke's contemporaries often read the Essay as a sceptical work. However, as John Sergeant realized, it is not knowledge but metaphysical knowledge which Locke attacks: "I am a little apprehensive, from some Words in his Introduction, expressing his Dis-like that Men let loose their Thoughts into the vast Ocean of Being; and his Conceit that this brings Men to Doubts and Scepticism, that he has taken a Prejudice against METAPHYSICS; whose proper Object is, those Notions of the Thing which abstract from Matter and Motion, and concern Being only". [Solid Philosophy Asserted, p. 114]

system of the natural world. Of course, the Essay is much more than a polemic against metaphysical ambitions. Locke's intentions are far from destructive:

. . . were the capacities of our understandings well considered, the extent of our knowledge once discovered, and the horizon found which sets the bounds between the enlightened and dark parts of things . . . men would perhaps with less scruple acquiesce in the avowed ignorance of the one, and employ their thoughts and discourse with more advantage and satisfaction in the other. [I, i, 7]

Thus, the exhibition of human ignorance in one sphere throws into relief that 'excellency and perfection' of knowledge attainable in another sphere. As we shall see, the other sphere is that of moral knowledge.

Locke several times reminds his readers that his subject is human understanding. He is convinced that man's position on the Great Chain of Being is a lowly one, and that there are innumerable creatures above man whose powers of understanding are correspondingly greater. [III, vi, 12; IV, iii, 6 and 23]. It is not only futile for men to seek to know beyond their powers; it is a kind of hubris. It is salutary that they be brought to the realization of their intellectual limits:

Therefore, as God has set some things in broad daylight, as he has given us some certain knowledge, though limited to a few things in comparison, probably as a test of what intellectual creatures are capable of, to excite in us a desire and endeavour after a better state: so, in the greatest part of our concernment, he has afforded us only the twilight, as I may so say, of probability, suitable, I presume, to that state of mediocrity and probationership he has been pleased to place us in here; wherein to check our over-confidence and presumption, we might by

every day's experience be made sensible of our short-sightedness and liability to error; the sense whereof might be a constant admonition to us to spend the days of this our pilgrimage with industry and care in the search and following of that way which might lead us to a state of greater perfection. IV, xiv, 2⁴

In this passage two themes which run throughout the Essay can be seen side by side. First, the doctrine that probability, as distinct from knowledge, is the guide to life. This is often cited as the moral of the Essay. Second, and less frequently noted, the doctrine that man's life is a pilgrimage and period of probation. In Locke's opinion it is for life under this religio-moral aspect that the human understanding is properly fitted. Man is first and foremost a being bound by the moral law. The reward for obedience to the law, and the end of man's journey through life, is heaven. Speculative knowledge concerning the workings of natural phenomena is very largely beyond man because it is outside the range of his requirements. For the needs of everyday life in the physical world, what Locke terms probability is all that is needed. Men, therefore have no cause to complain against the narrowness of their understandings in matters of pure speculation; "it yet secures their great concerns, that they have light enough to lead them

4 During his stay in France in the 1670's Locke translated three of Pierre Nicole's Essais de Morale including 'Of the Weakness of Man', which displays human ignorance in order to chasten human pride. Discourses: Translated from Nicole's Essays by John Locke, ed. Thomas Hancock. A strikingly similar attitude to human knowledge is to be found in Pierre Gassendi. See his "Lettre sur le Livre de Lord Edouard Herbert, Anglais, De La Vérité" trans. Bernard Rochot in Actes du Congrès du Tientenaire de Pierre Gassendi

to knowledge of their Maker and the sight of their own duties".

[I, i, 5] Provided moral knowledge is attained, the knowledge of speculative truth is of little importance.

Locke contrasts nature philosophy, or the study of physical substances, with morality. In the case of the former we can know by observation only and this sets severe limitations to our knowledge:

This way of getting and improving our knowledge in substances only by experience and history . . . makes me suspect that natural philosophy is not capable of being made a science. We are able . . . to reach very little general knowledge concerning the species of bodies and their several properties. Experiments and historical observations we may have, from which we may draw advantages of ease and health, and thereby increase our stock of conveniences for this life; but beyond this I fear our talents reach not . . .

On the other hand, there is reason to believe that moral philosophy can achieve the status of a science:

For it is rational to conclude that our proper employment lies in those inquiries, and in that sort of knowledge which is most suited to our natural capacities and carries our greatest interest, i.e. the condition of our eternal estate. Hence I think I may conclude that morality is the proper science and business of mankind in general. [IV, xii, 10 - 11/

As Locke more usually states the dichotomy, morality is capable of demonstration, while natural philosophy is not.

For Locke 'science' and 'knowledge' are synonymous terms. His conception of science, and consequently of knowledge, is far narrower than ordinary English usage suggests. There are a number of uses of the words 'know' and 'knowledge', and different

epistemological problems arise according to which uses are selected for scrutiny. To take two examples: I can be said to know mathematics, meaning that I understand a body of knowledge. Or I can be said to know that there is a desk in front of me. To know the latter is to have knowledge of a fact. It is not an example of knowing in the sense of understanding. Natural philosophy and morality, as Locke contrasts them, are bodies of knowledge. They are known in the sense of being understood. As he tells us on the first page of his introductory chapter, his purpose is to enquire into the human understanding. In view of this purpose he selects one sense of the word 'knowledge'; the sense in which we have knowledge when we understand.

Locke's main concern is not only clear from his introductory chapter. He reiterates his interests in the last chapter of the Essay. Here we would hope to find some kind of summary drawing together the diffuse threads of argument which have gone before. In a way, this is what we do find. The final chapter lays down three, "most general objects of the understanding", or sciences: natural philosophy, ethics and logic,⁵ Reading the Essay from the stand-point of this division it can be seen as a work concerned with bodies of knowledge.⁶ Locke's main question is, how, and to

5 The division of the sciences was an intellectual pastime going back to the Stoics. In the seventeenth century it was indulged in, among others, by Pierre Gassendi. Locke's classification is simpler than most.

6 This approach to the Essay via the book's final chapter has been used with considerable success by Professor Yolton in his book, Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding.

what extent, do these putative sciences really fall within the compass of human understanding.

At this point a considerable difficulty in the interpretation of Locke must be faced. Critics have generally agreed that his main concern is with the knowledge we have in abstract sciences such as mathematics, and that he formulates his theory of knowledge with this paradigm constantly in view. The difficulty is that this interpretation seemingly leaves Locke no room for the knowledge of facts. Yet we must be able to know facts about the world. Otherwise all our knowledge will be but a play of abstractions; something which might or might not bear a relation to reality, but which can never be known to bear such a relation.

Locke is well aware that real knowledge must somehow 'hook onto' the world. Yet Locke's commentators have almost unanimously concluded that his endeavours to introduce knowledge of reality within his general scheme have led to incoherence and inconsistency. Professor Aaron's judgement may be taken as exemplifying the orthodox interpretation:

[Locke] opens Book IV of the Essay with a theory of knowledge applicable . . . merely to knowledge of relations between abstract ideas, a universal, hypothetical, and highly abstract knowledge, best typified in mathematics. Another theory becomes necessary for knowledge of particular existences. Consequently, Locke's whole account of knowledge is far from consistent, for he does not even try to remove this dualism or to relate the two theories . . . Thus we must conclude that Locke's theory of knowledge is defective in being both incomplete and incoherent.⁷

7 John Locke (3rd ed.), pp. 246 - 247

Because they have considered the Essay a work dealing in the main with knowledge of the natural world, Locke's critics have seen the flaw in his epistemology as centered on his supposed inability to account for our knowledge of physical objects. However, the difficulty involves all knowledge of reality, whether it be physical reality or not.⁸ If his general scheme of knowledge allows only hypothetical, highly abstract knowledge, moral reality must be equally beyond men's reach. The law of nature is as much external to the human mind as is the physical world. The propositions of the law do not state physical facts, but they state facts nonetheless. It is the case that certain types of action are right and certain types wrong. These moral facts are expressed in categorical, not in hypothetical, propositions. To know the moral law, then, is not to possess purely hypothetical knowledge.

What then is Locke's general scheme of knowledge? And why have his commentators so often found him inconsistent? The answer to the first question serves equally as an answer to the second. Locke's general scheme may be said to consist in two major parts. First, he equates knowledge and certainty. In his second reply to his critic Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, he writes:

. . . with me, to know and be certain, is the same thing;
 what I know, that I am certain of; and what I am certain

8 See James Gibson: Locke's Theory of Knowledge, pp. 166 - 168.

of, that I know. What reaches to knowledge, I think may be called certainty; and what comes short of certainty, I think cannot be called knowledge. Works, 4, p. 145

Secondly he defines knowledge, as, "nothing but the perception of the connexion 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".

[IV, i, 2] There is nothing exceptional in the equation of knowledge with certainty. However, in the light of the second quotation, it appears that certainty resides solely in the perception of relations between ideas. Locke's term 'idea' is notoriously ambiguous. It will be discussed in the next chapter, but for the present it can be assumed that at least very often, Locke means by an idea what is now more commonly called a concept. Now the relations holding between concepts are necessary and universal. We know them a priori, provided we understand the concepts involved. For example, once we understand the concepts, 'red' and 'blue' we know that necessarily anything which is red is not blue, and we know this to be true for every possible world. Given that certainty and knowledge are one and the same, and certainty belongs only to cases of the above type, it follows that knowledge consists entirely in necessary, universal truths. Further, in view of the contrast Locke draws between 'knowledge' and the verbs 'fancy', 'guess' and 'believe', it is natural to assume that the second quotation is a definition not only of knowledge, but of

the cognitive act of knowing. This is the way it has generally been understood. If this is Locke's meaning he is committed to the thesis that, whenever we know we perceive a connexion between ideas. Hence, we are left with the daunting conclusion, that according to Locke, we know only necessary a priori truths.⁹

Locke distinguishes four possible sorts of connexions between ideas: 1) Identity, or diversity; 2) Relation; 3) Co-existence, or necessary connexion; 4) Real existence [IV, i, 3] Although he places knowledge of relation in a separate category, Locke realizes that, on his definition, all knowledge is of relations between ideas:

Though identity and co-existence are truly nothing but relations, yet they are so peculiar ways of agreement or disagreement of our ideas that they deserve well to be considered as distinct heads and not under relation in general. [IV, i, 7]

How much knowledge then can be found in these four categories by the perception of the relations between ideas?

Knowledge of identity and diversity is a prerequisite of all knowledge; for, if the mind could not tell one idea from another it obviously could not perceive relations between different ideas. However, in itself, knowledge in the first category is of little

9 However in a Journal entry Locke talks of two sorts of knowledge: "There are two sorts of knowledg in the world generall and particular founded upon two different principles, i.e. true Ideas and matter of fact or history. All generall knowledg is founded only upon true Ideas and soe far as we have these we are capable of demonstration or certain knowledg". Sund. Jun. 26, 1681. [Aaron and Gibb, p. 116]

worth. It is expressed by propositions such as 'red is red', 'red is not white'. These Locke calls 'trifling propositions' as they do not increase our stock of knowledge. [IV, viii] While this knowledge is trifling, knowledge of co-existence (by which Locke means the co-existence of qualities in a physical object) is hardly to be had at all:

Indeed some few of the primary qualities [of bodies] have a necessary dependence and visible connexion one with another, as figure necessarily supposes extension, receiving or communicating motion by impulse supposes solidity . . . [Nevertheless] For all the qualities that are co-existent in any subject, without this dependence and evident connexion of their ideas one with another, we cannot know certainly any two to co-exist any further than experience by our senses informs us. Thus though we see the yellow colour and upon trial find the weight, malleableness, fusibility, and fixedness that are united in a piece of gold: yet, because no one of these ideas has any evident dependence or necessary connexion with the other, we cannot certainly know that where any four of these are, the fifth will be there also, how highly probable soever it may be: because the highest probability amounts not to certainty, without which there can be no true knowledge. [IV, iii, 14]

It is on these grounds that natural philosophy cannot achieve the status of a science. We are left with the categories of relation and real existence.

Knowledge of relation does give certainty, and it is instructive. In mathematics we have an actual example of knowledge within this category, and Locke is confident that the methods of mathematics can be used to extend knowledge in other fields, especially in morals. Nevertheless, he holds that the objects with which mathematics deals are purely ideal constructions of the mind. [IV, iv, 6 and 8] We know for certain that, 'Two triangles

upon equal bases between two parallels are equal'. This proposition is true whether or not triangles actually exist in the world. It is because its truth is independent of the world that it is certain. No fact about the world could possibly refute it. With respect to reality the proposition can be no more than hypothetical. The most that can be said is that if there are any triangles in the world they will have certain properties. Such a proposition conveys no information as to what is the case. As Locke himself stresses, there is no way we can argue from an idea (or concept) to any corresponding reality [IV, xi, 17].¹⁰ Therefore, if knowledge is to be anything more than a mere play of ideas, there must be some way in which the mind knows beyond its ideas.

There is no doubt that Locke is aware of the need to break out of the circle of ideas to which he has confined knowledge. He devotes a chapter of the Essay to the 'reality of knowledge'. There he attempts to rebut the objection that, "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. It is no

10 Cf. Locke's paper on Descartes' ontological proof of God's existence: "By ideas in the mind we discern the agreement or disagreement of ideas that have a like ideal existence in our minds, but that reaches no farther, proves no real existence, for the truth we so know is only of our ideas, and is applicable to things only as they are supposed to exist answering such ideas. But any idea, simple or complex, barely by being in our minds, is no evidence of the real existence of any thing out of our minds answering that idea". [Lord King: The Life of John Locke, Vol. 2. p. 138/

matter how things are: so a man observe but the agreement of his own imaginations and talk conformably, it is all truth, all certainty". [IV, iv, 1] Locke replies that, "It is evident the mind knows not things immediately, but only by the intervention of the ideas it has of them. Our knowledge, therefore, is real only so far as there is a conformity between our ideas and the reality of things". [IV, iv, 3] It appears that Locke's fourth category, the knowledge of real existence, must go beyond ideas if any knowledge is to be real. However, according to Locke's general definition, all knowledge is of relations between ideas.¹¹ Thus it appears that the category of 'real existence' must, in consistency, remain empty. Knowledge is by definition restrained within the circle of ideas.

In Professor Aaron's opinion, Locke sees the difficulties arising from the restriction of knowledge to ideas and his endeavours to meet them result in a second theory of knowledge contrary to the first. Yet, as the chapter on the 'reality of knowledge' shows, he saw the difficulties with particular clarity.

11 As the definition stands it does not state that the perceived agreement must be between ideas. There is room for the view that the agreement might be between ideas and something else. Locke is thus interpreted by Yolton (Op. cit., pp. 111f). However, passages such as the following from The Conduct of the Understanding make Locke's position quite clear: ". . . knowledge consists only in perceiving the habitudes and relations of ideas one to another". [Sect. xxxi] Cf. A. D. Woozley: "Some Remarks on Locke's Account of Knowledge". [The Locke Newsletter, 1972]

Moreover he revised parts of the Essay right up to the time of his death. If there is such a glaring inconsistency in Locke's thought, as Aaron and other critics have presumed, why did he not revise his general scheme of knowledge? Before Locke is judged inconsistent the final category of knowledge should be re-examined.

Locke supposes there to be three examples of the knowledge of real existence: the existence of God, our own existence, and the existence of external things [IV, ix, 2]. We know the first by demonstration, the second by intuition and the third by sensation. As we shall see, intuition and demonstration are ways in which the mind perceives relations between ideas. Whether or not the first two examples of existential knowledge do fit within Locke's general scheme is a problem which can be safely ignored. We will take the knowledge of external objects by sensation as a test case. Is this type of knowledge consistent with Locke's general scheme?

Locke usually refers to the knowledge of external objects gained by means of the senses as sensitive knowledge. This he defines as knowledge, "of the existence of particular external objects, by that perception and consciousness we have of the actual entrance of ideas from them". [IV, ii, 14] Now it is quite obvious that when I know of the existence of an object by means of the senses my knowledge cannot be construed as a perception of a relation between ideas. Let us suppose I know by sense experience that there is a desk in front of me. Even if this could, on some

logical Procrustean bed, be stretched into an example of perceiving some sort of relation, it could not be a relation between ideas. Provided the idea of a physical object is not conflated with the object itself, it is obvious that in order to know that there is a desk in front of me I must somehow be in touch with the desk, not merely with the idea of the desk. Therefore, even if there is a perceived relation, one of the terms related must be the physical object. Locke does not conflate ideas with the objects of which they are ideas. For him, the function of ideas is to represent things other than ideas.¹² Therefore he cannot construe sensitive knowledge as a perception of a relation between ideas.

Can Locke consistently maintain that there is such a thing as sensitive knowledge? It would appear not. Sensitive knowledge is a sub-category of the knowledge of real existence. But Locke

12 Locke's doctrine of sensitive knowledge is considerably complicated by the fact that he sometimes uses 'idea' in a way which suggests that ideas are some kind of reified sense-data 'standing in' for objects in the external world. (See, for example, his definition of sensitive knowledge). Thus he has often been understood to hold a crude representative theory of sense perception, according to which all we ever directly perceive are 'pictures' of reality. Needless to say such a theory makes scepticism of the senses inescapable. For how can we know that our 'picture' matches the external world, or even that there is an external world? Whether or not Locke holds this theory, has been much debated. (See, for example, Reginald Jackson: "Locke's Version of the Doctrine of Representative Perception" [in Martin and Armstrong]; A.D. Woozley's Introduction to his edition of the Essay; Yolton: Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding, pp. 38f.) But the problem belongs more to the philosophy of perception than to epistemology. We are concerned here to discover the connexion (if there is one) between Locke's general scheme of knowledge and his doctrine of sensitive knowledge.

has distinguished the knowledge of real existence as one of the categories of knowledge falling under his general definition. Surely, all types of knowledge within this category must conform to the general definition, i.e. they must all be examples of the perception of agreement or disagreement between ideas.

In his second reply to Stillingfleet, Locke does attempt to place knowledge of the real existence of external objects within his general scheme . His argument is worth quoting at some length:

. . . your lordship argues, that because I say, that the idea in the mind proves not the existence of that thing whereof it is an idea, therefore we cannot know the actual existence of any thing by our senses: because we know nothing, but by the perceived agreement of ideas. But if you had been pleased to have considered my answer, . . . to the sceptics . . . you would . . . have found that you mistake one thing for another, viz. the idea that has by a former sensation been lodged in the mind, for actually receiving any idea, i.e. actual sensation; which, I think, I need not go about to prove are two distinct things . . . Now the two ideas, that in this case are perceived to agree, and do thereby produce knowledge, are the idea of actual sensation (which is an action whereof I have a clear and distinct idea) and the idea of actual existence of something without me that causes that sensation. And what other certainty your Lordship has by your senses of the existing of any thing without you, but the perceived connexion of those two ideas, I would gladly know. When you have destroyed this certainty . . . your lordship will have well assisted the sceptics in carrying their arguments against certainty by sense. Works, 4, p. 360

This passage has been taken as an ad hoc attempt to solve a problem which Locke himself has made insuperable.¹³ Yet Locke's reply is

13 Cf. H. G. Van Leenwen: The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630 - 1690, p. 129, n. 18. Yolton criticizes Locke's reply as, "misleading even on his own account of thinking, perceiving, etc." Op. cit. p. 112.

unusually precise and polished. He carefully states the thesis he wishes to refute: that we cannot know the existence of external objects from sense experience (this may be termed the sceptical thesis). Stillingfleet's error is to confuse particular sensory ideas which are lodged in the mind, with the idea of sense experience itself. It is true that, from an idea in the mind we cannot argue to the existence of an object corresponding to the idea. For example, from the idea of a centaur it does not follow that any such creature exists. However, if we compare the idea of actual sensation (i.e. the process whereby the mind acquires ideas) with the idea of an external cause of sensation we do perceive a connexion between them. This knowledge (which clearly comes within the terms of Locke's definition of knowledge) may be expressed broadly by the proposition: 'sense experience must be caused by things external to the mind'.¹⁴ That is to say, sense experience does put us in touch with the external world. The conclusion reached in Locke's reply to Stillingfleet is that the sceptical thesis is false; and that it is known to be false 'by the perceived agreement of ideas'.

14 Of course this proposition expresses Locke's thesis in a rather unsatisfactory fashion. Sense experience is understood as veridical experience of external objects. It would have to be defined as such in order to escape the objection that pseudo-sensations, such as hallucinations, are not in fact caused by external objects. But it is difficult to arrive at a definition which does not beg the question by making it an analytic truth that sense-experience has an external cause.

There are several things to be noted about Locke's argument in this passage. In the first place, it assumes the causal principle. Given the fact of a sensation there must be something which caused it. Locke does accept the causal principle as a necessary truth (See, for example, Draft A, Sect. 16; Draft B, Sect. 140; Essay, IV, x, 3). Secondly, it assumes that the mind cannot be the cause of all its own ideas. Locke does argue this in the Essay. Simple ideas, he holds, cannot be produced by the mind. II, ii, 27. Thirdly, and most important, all that Locke purports to prove against Stillingfleet is the thesis that, 'we do know the existence of things by our senses'. This is proved from a consideration of ideas. However, it is not itself an example of our knowing the existence of an external object by sense experience. That is, it is not an example of sensitive knowledge. If we are to take Locke's reply to Stillingfleet seriously (and there is no reason why we should not) the knowledge we have of the real existence of external objects, by the perceived agreement of ideas, consists in the proposition asserting there to be external causes of our sense experiences. It is, therefore, not particular examples of sensitive knowledge that make up a sub-category of the knowledge of real existence, but simply the one fact that there is an external world which can be known by means of the senses. What then are we to say of particular examples of sensitive knowledge, of those cases when I know there is a desk in front of me because I see it, or know there is a fire in the grate because I feel it? How do

these fit into Locke's epistemology?

The doctrine of sensitive knowledge is introduced in a discussion of the degrees of certainty of which the human mind is capable. This takes up the second chapter of Book IV of the Essay. It is in the preceding chapter that Locke gives his general definition of knowledge and distinguishes the four categories of knowledge. In the later chapter he is intent on giving an account of the ways in which the mind knows.

The highest degree of certainty is said to belong to intuition, in which the mind immediately perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas. The great part of what we know by intuition is trivial, expressible in propositions such as, 'a circle is not a triangle'. What Locke calls demonstration produces knowledge of far greater importance, though of less certainty. Demonstration is required when the agreement or disagreement between two ideas cannot be immediately ascertained. It is then necessary for the mind to bring in intervening ideas, which Locke calls proofs, in order to make the relation holding between the initial ideas perspicuous. The possibility of demonstration depends on intuition in that the connexions between each proof must be intuitively certain. However, there is an element of fallibility in demonstration due to the fact that each step in a demonstrative argument must be held in the memory till the conclusion is reached, and memory is fallible.¹⁵

15 It has often been noted that Locke's account of intuition and

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Both intuition and demonstration are concerned with connexions between ideas. The knowledge we gain by intuition falls mostly within Locke's first category; the knowledge of identity, or diversity.¹⁶ Demonstration yields knowledge of relation; the category to which Locke presumes most knowledge belongs. The smallest degree of certainty is found at the point where knowing breaks through the circle of ideas:

. . . intuition and demonstration, are the degrees of our knowledge; whatever comes short of one of these, with what assurance soever embraced, is but faith or opinion, but not knowledge, at least in all general truths. There is, indeed, another perception of the mind, employed about the particular existence of finite beings without us, which, going beyond bare probability and yet not reaching perfectly to either of the foregoing degrees of certainty, passes under the name of knowledge. [IV, ii, 14]

Professor Woozley has recently drawn attention to the hesitation with which Locke admits 'sensitive knowledge'. He seems to regard it as something of a poor relation in the family of intuition and demonstration. It goes beyond 'bare probability' and therefore 'passes under the name of knowledge'.¹⁷ Further, whereas Locke

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demonstration closely resembles the doctrine developed by Descartes in the Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii. However, the influence of the Regulae on Locke's thought has recently been questioned. Cf. Thomas O'Kelly: "Locke's Doctrine of Intuition was not Borrowed from Descartes". [Philosophy, 1971]

16 However, it is to be remembered that, according to Locke, we know our own existence by intuition.

17 See, "Some Remarks on Locke's Account of Knowledge".

simply presents intuition and demonstration as two ways in which the mind gains knowledge, he finds it necessary to justify the credentials of knowledge gained by the senses. That is, he argues against the sceptical thesis that we can never know by sense experience. IV, ii, 14 and xi, 7 - 8 It is to these arguments against scepticism of the senses that Locke refers Stillingfleet.¹⁸

It is not difficult to see why Locke should hesitate over 'sensitive knowledge'. He is aware that knowing the existence of

18 Although not strictly germane to our present purpose, Locke's arguments against scepticism of the senses deserve attention. For they are more than merely an expression of common sense realism or a cavalier attitude towards the sceptic. The objection he sets out to refute is the standard one; in dreams I am deceived as to the existence of external objects. How then can I be sure of any of my perceptions? How can I know they are not all really dream deceptions? Locke's answer is in three parts: 1) If the sceptic does suppose life to be a dream, any proof of the external world will carry no weight with him. He is bound in consistency to dismiss all such arguments as dream deceptions; 2) There is a, "manifest difference between dreaming of being in the fire and being actually in it". 3) We know that some objects are sources of pleasure and some sources of pain for us. We know this whether or not these objects are really external or only dreamed to be so; and "this certainty is as great as our happiness or misery, beyond which we have no concernment to know or to be". (3) is in part an expression of Locke's general attitude to knowledge in the 'state of mediocrity'. However, if put together in a slightly modified form Locke's arguments do constitute a persuasive refutation of the type of dream scepticism he considers. In this life there manifestly is a significant contrast between dreaming and waking. It is this contrast which gives the terms their meaning. The sceptic assumes his position to be rational and meaningful. However, the proposition that, 'all life (including what we call dreaming and waking) is a dream' is strictly meaningless. For it robs 'dreaming' of any possible contrast. As this proposition is meaningless, so is the sceptic's assertion that, 'all life might be a dream'. His position is, therefore, meaningless and irrational.

a particular external object by means of the senses does not amount to a perception of the connexion between ideas. It follows that what we gain when we know by the senses cannot, in accordance with Locke's definition, be properly characterized as knowledge. Nevertheless, Locke has proved in his argument against the sceptics that sense experience is a genuine way of knowing, and it is a fact of English linguistic usage that to know something is to have knowledge. However, English usage is not sacrosanct. It was remarked earlier that there are a variety of ways in which the words 'know' and 'knowledge' can be used. We may now add that it is a mistake to assume that all these ways can be covered by a single definition. It is rather that the various uses are linked by what Wittgenstein calls 'family likenesses'.¹⁹ There is not one concept of 'knowledge' and 'knowing', but a family of related concepts. Any definition of knowledge is, therefore, sure to be restrictive. It will encapsulate one concept of knowledge at the expense of others. Therefore, it cannot but interfere with the ordinary connexion between 'knowing' and 'knowledge'. Locke does not attempt a systematic revision of the way in which we commonly use the words 'know' and 'knowledge'. Nevertheless, there is no reason to suppose him unaware of the fact that his own definition of knowledge is restrictive. It is simply that he is content to abide by the

19 The Blue Book, p. 17.

linguistic rule which allows the name of knowledge to that which is known whatever sense of the verb 'to know' may be involved. Indeed he is wise to refrain from linguistic revision here; for it is likely that an alternative terminology would be impossibly cumbersome.²⁰

On the foregoing interpretation of Locke's doctrine there is no need to conclude that, in his endeavour to reach the world outside ideas, he developed a second theory of knowledge inconsistent with his first, general theory. Rather he might be said to have developed a theory of knowledge and a theory of knowing. According to the former we have knowledge only when we perceive the connection between ideas. We have knowledge when we know something in the restricted sense of understanding it. For Locke, the understanding rests only with the apprehension of necessary truths. Therefore, the objects of the understanding (which constitute knowledge in the strict sense) are universal, apodeictic propositions. What counts as a body of knowledge is a system of these propositions. Mathematics stands as the paradigm of such a systematized body of knowledge. What falls

20 As Woozley notes, Locke sometimes talks of 'being sure' rather than 'knowing' when knowing beyond the circle of ideas is involved. For example, at IV, iv, 18; "Whenever we perceive the agreement or disagreement of any of our ideas, there is certain knowledge; and wherever we are sure those ideas agree with the reality of things, there is certain real knowledge". Again, at IV, xi, 3, he says of sensitive knowledge that, "it is an assurance that deserves the name of knowledge".

below this paradigm is, on Locke's account, not strictly knowledge at all.²¹

Locke contrasts the certainty of propositions constituting knowledge with the probability belonging to propositions expressing truths discovered by experience:

Probability. . . is always conversant about propositions whereof we have no certainty, but only some inducement to receive them for true Thus, that fire warmed a man, made lead fluid . . . that iron sunk in water and swam in quicksilver: these and the like propositions about particular facts, being agreeable to our constant experience . . . we are put past doubt that a relation affirming any such thing to have been or any predication [sic] that it will happen again in the same manner is very true. [IV, xv, 4 and xvi, 6]

The contrast Locke draws is, in effect, the familiar distinction between a priori and a posteriori propositions.²² A priori propositions go to make up knowledge while those which are a posteriori fall within the broad area of probability. Locke

21 Locke's 'knowledge' is closely related to what Aristotle terms episteme and the Scholastics called scientia. That is, a body of propositions derived from evident premises in such a way that their truth is guaranteed. Both Aristotle and the scholastics assumed what Locke calls natural philosophy to be such a rigorous science. (See, for example, Aquinas: Summa Theologiae, 1a, 84, 1). A similarly restricted conception of knowledge is to be found in Descartes, who maintains that, "in our search for the direct road towards truth we should busy ourselves with no object about which we cannot attain a certitude equal to that of the demonstrations of Arithmetic and Geometry". [Regulae in Works, Vol. I, p. 5]

22 Cf. R. S. Woolhouse: Locke's Philosophy of Science and Knowledge, p. 17.

does not think that, because a proposition is only probable, we can always doubt its truth. Probability, (or, at least, the highest degree of probability); "naturally determines the judgement and leaves us as little liberty to believe or disbelieve, as a demonstration does, whether we will know or be ignorant" [IV, xvi, 9, cf. IV, xvi, 67]²³ So far as the knower is concerned, then, the feeling of assurance generated by probability is no different from that generated by knowledge. The difference between knowledge and probability is not psychological, but logical. On the one hand, the propositions which form part of knowledge are necessary. They are true for every possible world in the sense that their negations are self-contradictory, or entail self-contradictions. On the other hand, although we can feel assured (and be justified in our assurance) of the truth of probable propositions, it is always logically possible that what they assert is false.

Locke's theory of knowing may be said to cast a wider net than his theory of knowledge. The mind knows first and foremost by intuition. Intuition is a necessary condition for demonstration. Both intuition and demonstration, consisting as they do in the

23 This degree of probability was often termed 'moral certainty'. See, for example, the passage quoted from Chillingworth in Robert R. Orr: Reason and Authority, pp. 51 - 52. Locke, however, does not use this term. His aim is to divorce as far as possible the certainty of knowledge from felt conviction in the knower. For a general survey of the concept of certainty in seventeenth-century thought, see Van Leenwen: Op. Cit. passim.

mind's perception of connexions between ideas, yield what is properly knowledge. The third way of knowing distinguished in the Essay does not yield knowledge. The mind knows by means of the senses, but what is thus gained is expressed in propositions which are only contingent, stating what happens to be the case. The greater breadth of Locke's theory of knowing in comparison with his theory of knowledge might be summed up thus: whereas there can be no knowledge a posteriori, we can know a posteriori.²⁴ Thus we can know whether or not our ideas have counterparts in the real world. It is true that our knowledge derives solely from the consideration of ideas; but the reality of knowledge is guaranteed by our capacity to know beyond our ideas.

What, then, is the relevance of our interpretation of Locke's general epistemological position for the specific problem of moral knowledge? We have seen that Locke believes moral philosophy, unlike natural philosophy, to be a sphere in which demonstration is possible. But even if morality can be demonstrated (or made a science) there must be something more to Locke's moral epistemology. The demonstration of morality is a problem for the moral philosopher.

24 It should be noted that, according to Locke, we can strictly only be said to know by the senses at that time when we actually experience the external object. So-called sensitive knowledge, "extends as far as the present testimony of our senses, employed about particular objects that do affect them, and no further". [IV, xi, 9; cf. IV, iii, 21]. On this account the propositions expressing sensitive knowledge will be something like the Protocol Sentences on which the Logical Positivists sought to base knowledge.

The ordinary moral agent does not have to wait upon the solution of this problem in order to discover what he ought to do. If he did his situation would be unfortunate in the extreme. For Locke does not claim that morality ever has been successfully demonstrated; and it is well known that he himself never produced such a demonstration. Yet, as he does not doubt the existence of the law of nature which binds all men, he must accept that the law has been promulgated. That is, he must suppose men capable of discovering the content of the law for themselves.

Locke's belief that men can know the law of nature in what might be called an everyday sense, as distinct from the esoteric sense of demonstration, is quite explicit in the Essay. The 'candle of the Lord' is set up in the minds of men and gives all the light they need for following the paths of virtue. I, i, 5; IV, iii, 207.²⁵ The demonstration of morality would not create knowledge of moral truths. Rather it would make perspicuous, and place beyond the possibility of doubt, what men, in some sense, already know. It would exhibit the law of nature in such a way that the rational man could no more doubt where his duties truly lie than he can now doubt the truths of mathematics, once he has followed the proofs involved. This would not eradicate evil doing, but it would eliminate moral error. The 'axiom of knowledge' in

25 The 'candle of the Lord' and the 'light of nature' were common metaphors in the seventeenth-century. In the context of moral philosophy they both may be defined as 'reason applied to questions of right and wrong'. Cf. The Reasonableness of Christianity, in Works, 7, p. 133.

morals would be completely unassailable just as it is in mathematics. In order to understand Locke's moral epistemology, therefore, we must answer two questions: How does Locke suppose men come to know their duties? and, how does he suppose their duties can be demonstrated? Strictly speaking the first question belongs to Locke's theory of 'moral knowing'; his theory of 'moral knowledge' being concerned only with demonstration. However, for the sake of convenience, we will follow Locke in allowing the name of knowledge to whatever is known.

With respect to the first of these questions; it has been noted that the law of nature has an objective existence outside the mind of men. Therefore moral knowledge, in order to be real, must go beyond ideas. So far the only way of knowing beyond ideas which we have considered is sense experience. But sense experience hardly appears an appropriate means of discovering the law of nature. Surely my knowing what I ought to do is quite a different matter from knowing that there is a desk in front of me, or that iron sinks in water. In a subsequent chapter it will be argued that Locke does develop an account of how man came to know the law of nature. Very roughly they can be said to know it through experience. But, of course, the term 'experience' covers far more than the rather limited kind of experience which is the awareness of physical objects.

With respect to the second question; Locke's failure to produce a 'demonstration' of morality has sometimes been taken as

an indication that in the end he, at least implicitly, gave up the belief in a demonstrable morality. It has been argued by Dr Abrams that Locke's final position is a kind of moral fideism.²⁶ Men cannot know the law of nature, they can only know the divine positive law revealed in the Gospels. It is faith, not reason, which teaches men their duties. If Abrams is correct, Locke's end is the direct opposite of his beginning. In his refutation of Bagshaw he counters the puritan reliance on nothing but revelation with the rationalist premise of a morality knowable by reason alone. On Abrams' fideistic interpretation he finally transfers to the opposite camp. It is true that Locke's letters reveal him as being luke-warm on the subject when pressed by his friend William Molyneux to carry out a demonstration of morality. Yet his comments show that he has the project still in mind. What he urges is the difficulty of carrying it out. Further, he remarks that, as the Gospel provides a perfect set of morals, reason may be excused the task of demonstration.²⁷ But the view that the demonstration of morality is difficult, and that revelation is an adequate substitute presupposes the belief that such a demonstration is in principle possible. We may conclude that if the project of a demonstrative science of morality is a wild goose chase, Locke never realized that it was.

26 Abrams: Introduction to Two Tracts, esp. pp. 98 - 107, Cf. Yolton's comments [Op. cit., pp. 178 - 180.].

27 See Locke's Letters to Molyneux, 20 Sept., 1692; 30 Mar., 1696. [Works, 9, pp. 294 - 295; p. 377]

Chapter IV

IDEAS

The key term in Locke's epistemology is 'idea'. For, "We can have knowledge no further than we have ideas". [IV, iii, 2] We have intuitive knowledge when "the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately by themselves, without the intervention of any other". [IV, ii, 1] Demonstration, which is much the more considerable source of knowledge, "is the showing the agreement or disagreement of two ideas by the intervention of one or more proofs which have a constant, immutable, and visible connexion one with another". [IV, xv, 1] There are two major infelicities to which the human understanding is subject, and which severely limit the scope of demonstrative knowledge. First, "between two different ideas we would examine, we cannot always find such mediums as we can connect one to another with an intuitive knowledge in all the parts of the deduction; and wherever that fails, we come short of knowledge and demonstration". [IV, iii, 4] Secondly, a great many of our ideas are inadequate; "such which are but a partial or incomplete representation of those archetypes to which they are referred". [II, xxxi, 1] The second of these two factors limits demonstration absolutely. Where we lack adequate ideas, there demonstrative knowledge is impossible. However, where our ideas are adequate demonstration is a possibility, provided we can discover the proper intervening ideas. The first limiting factor, therefore, serves as a challenge. Our know-

ledge is to be increased by seeking out ideas which will exhibit connexions between the adequate ideas we do have. It is because Locke believes our ideas of physical substances to be inevitably inadequate that he denies the possibility of a demonstrative science of nature. Conversely, he believes our moral ideas to be all adequate. It is this latter belief which forms the basis of his view that morality can be made a science.

The central importance of ideas is not confined to Locke's theory of intuition and demonstration, i.e. to the ways in which the mind acquires what is strictly knowledge. We have said that sensitive knowledge cannot be construed as a perception of relations between ideas, and we have argued that Locke does not so construe it. However, even examples of sensitive knowledge involve ideas. For instance, my knowing that there is a desk in front of me involves the idea of a desk. If I did not have this idea I could not know what the object was. 'Idea', then, is at the centre of Locke's entire epistemology; it dominates both his theory of knowledge and what we have called his 'theory of knowing'. An understanding of Locke's 'idea' is, therefore, essential for an understanding of his epistemology.

At the beginning of the Essay Locke defines 'idea' as, "Whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks . . . whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species, or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking". [I, i, 8]

This definition, capacious as it is, does not fully cover all the

ways 'idea' is used in the Essay. As defined here Locke's 'idea' appears equivalent in meaning to the more modern, although equally vague, term 'concept'. However in the second book of the Essay, Locke introduces a somewhat different definition:

Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call idea; and the power to produce any idea in our mind, I call quality of the subject wherein that power is. Thus a snowball having the power to produce in us the ideas of white, cold and round, the power to produce those ideas in us as they are in the snowball I call qualities; and as they are sensations or perceptions in our understanding, I call them ideas. [II, viii, 8]

Despite the obvious similarities between the two definitions, in the second 'idea' appears to be equivalent in meaning to 'sense-datum'. As such it would be more at home in the philosophy of perception than in a theory of knowledge.

Faced with this ambiguity the commentator seems forced to one of two conclusions. On the one hand, Locke might be interpreted as using the one term, 'idea' to cover both concepts and sense data. In which case there arises the problem of why Locke should use the term thus. On the other hand, he might be interpreted as holding that ideas, (concepts) are quasi-sense-data, or mental images. Historically, it is the latter thesis which has been most frequently attributed to Locke.¹ Locke is understood as maintaining

1 For example, Berkeley's attack on Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas assumes that for Locke such ideas are images. [See the

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that to have an idea, or a concept, of a thing is to have a mental image, or at least to have the ability to conjure up a mental image, of that thing. This interpretation is highly uncongenial, for it means that Locke holds a doctrine which is patently false. The thesis that concepts are mental images is false for the simple and obvious reason that we can think and talk intelligibly about things which cannot be imaged. But as we can think of these things we must have concepts of them. Even if there is some faint plausibility in the supposition that having the concept (say) 'red' consists solely in having a mental image of red, there is no plausibility in the supposition that having the concept (say) 'number' in any way consists in having a mental image. We can, of course, conjure up mental images of numbers (or numerals), but the attempt to conjure up a mental image of number itself is clearly absurd.

Locke does cite a great many ideas of things which cannot be imaged: for example, ideas of mental operations such as willing and perceiving; ideas such as 'unity' and 'existence', and, most notoriously, the idea of pure substance in general. Yet there are

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Introduction to The Principles of Human Knowledge / More recently Professor Jonathan Bennett has argued that Locke's double use of idea is more than a piece of terminological ambiguity, but, "it embodies his substantive mistake, shared with Berkeley and Hume and others in the empiricist tradition, of assimilating the sensory far too closely to the intellectual".
/Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes, p. 25/

passages, particularly in the second book of the Essay, which suggest that Locke does conceive of ideas as mental images simpliciter.

The two passages following are fairly typical of those in which ideas are presented as images:

. . . our ideas do, whilst we are awake, succeed one another in our minds at certain distances, not much unlike the images in the inside of a lantern, turned round by the heat of a candle. /II, xiv, 9/

And, talking of the difference between clear and obscure ideas, he writes:

The perception of the mind being most aptly explained by words relating to the sight, we shall best understand what is meant by clear and obscure in our ideas by reflecting on what we call clear and obscure in the objects of sight. Light being that which discovers to us visible objects, we give the name of obscure to that which is not placed in a light sufficient to discover minutely to us the figure and colour which are observable in it, and which, in a better light, would be discernible. In like manner, our simple ideas are clear, when they are such as the objects themselves from whence they were taken did or might, in a well-ordered sensation or perception, present them . . . so far as they either want anything of the original exactness, or have lost any of their first freshness and are, as it were, faded or tarnished by time, so far are they obscure. /II, xxix, 2/

It is not difficult to see what Locke is doing in these two passages. In the first he is resorting to simile as an aid to explanation. The train of thought in a person's mind is said to be something like the passing of images. The first few words of the second passage may be understood as a justification for the use of this type of simile or metaphor in an account of the mental. The language of visual sense perception is, Locke maintains, the

most suitable terminology for describing the intellectual operations of the mind. However, in neither passage is it asserted that any ideas are in fact mental images. Far less is it asserted that all ideas are mental images. An examination of other passages which suggest the assimilation of ideas to images reveals the same pattern. That is, they are mainly metaphorical in intent. Thus, at II, x, 5 ideas fading in a man's memory are likened to tomb inscriptions effaced by time. At II, xi, 17 the understanding is compared to a dark room, the senses being windows which let in views, or ideas, of external things. At II, iii, 1 much the same metaphor is applied, the brain being likened to the mind's presence-room in which ideas entering via the senses are first received. Admittedly there are other passages in which metaphor is not so evident. At II, xxix, 8, for example, Locke talks of, "our ideas which are, as it were, the pictures of things". Yet, given the important qualification expressed in the phrase 'as it were', this can hardly be taken as a statement that ideas are pictures, or images.

The most that can be concluded from the passages we have cited is that Locke considers talk of images, pictures and so on to provide useful metaphors in an account of mental operations involving ideas. However, if Locke's image/idea talk is metaphorical, then he is not suggesting that ideas are images. On the contrary, the suggestion is that, literally speaking, ideas are not images. When,

in the Conduct of the Understanding, Locke comes to discuss the use of similes and metaphors, he explains that such expressions, "always fail in some part, and come short of that exactness which our conceptions should have to things if we would think aright". It is true, that, "Figured and metaphorical expressions do well to illustrate more abstruse and unfamiliar ideas which the mind is not yet thoroughly accustomed to; but then they must be made use of to illustrate ideas that we already have, not to paint to us those which we yet have not". [Sect. xxxii] A metaphorical assertion is therefore quite distinct from the assertion of a literal truth.

There is, then, ample room for the first interpretation of Locke's account of 'idea'. That is, he uses the one term to cover concepts and sense-data. The question now arises; how is it that Locke thinks himself justified in using 'idea' with such a broad area of reference? The answer to this question lies in Locke's empiricism; his thesis that all the mind's ideas, or concepts, (no matter how complex, or seemingly remote from our ordinary perceptions) derive ultimately from experience, i.e. from sensation and reflection:

. . . even the most abstruse ideas, how remote soever they may seem from sense, or from any operation of our own minds, are yet only such as the understanding frames to itself, by repeating and joining together ideas that it had either from objects of sense, or from its own operations about them: so that those even large and abstract ideas are derived from sensation or reflection, being no other than what the mind, by the ordinary use of its own faculties, employed about ideas received from objects of sense or from the operations it observes in itself about them, may and does attain to. [II, xii, 8]

It is this thesis concerning the origin of ideas that Locke is at pains to establish in the second book of the Essay.

We can see from the above passage that some ideas are built up by the mind working with materials originally obtained in experience. What Locke calls simple ideas (for example, the idea of red) are furnished by experience; and from these basics the mind constructs its entire range of complex ideas. [II, ii, 2] Locke, then, holds that, while some ideas derive from experience and nothing more, others are the product of experience plus the activity of the mind. Further, he holds that in the acquisition of simple ideas the mind is passive; at least, it is passive in comparison with the activity needed for the construction of complex ideas. [II, xii, 1]²

Locke's empiricism is open to two slightly different interpretations. In the first place, it may be taken as the thesis that, whatever ideas the mind possesses, they are all causally dependent on the mind's experience; either in that they are the direct effects of experience, or that they are framed by the mind from materials which are the direct effects of experience. Thus, if a man possess the idea of red, this is the result of his having seen red coloured objects. If he had been born blind he would not possess the idea of red. This will apply, mutatis mutandis, to all

2 This is not to say that the mind is wholly and completely passive even in the reception of simple ideas. Cf. John Yolton: "Locke's Concept of Experience" in Martin and Armstrong.

of a man's ideas, whether they be simple or complex. Understood in this way, the empiricist thesis says something about the origin or cause of ideas, but it does not say anything about the nature of ideas themselves. So long as the concept of experience is not closely defined this thesis is about as uncontentious as it is possible for a philosophical thesis to be. Through a large part of the second book of the Essay Locke is content with a vague concept of experience. Having in the first book argued the negative thesis that the mind has no innate ideas, he wishes to show that those ideas which seem plausible candidates for innateness can in fact be traced back to what may, in a rather indefinite manner, count as experience. Thus, he concludes his account of the ideas of duration, space, number and infinity with the remark: "I pretend not to treat of them in their full latitude: it suffices to my design to show how the mind receives them, such as they are, from sensation and reflection; and how even the idea we have of infinity, how remote soever it may seem to be from any object of sense or operation of our mind, has, nevertheless, as all our other ideas, its original there". [II, xvii, 22]

At times, however, Locke does endeavour to tighten up his concept of experience (to be exact, his concept of sense experience). His attempt lead to a much stronger empiricist thesis. On the second interpretation, Locke's empiricism may be taken as the thesis that the mind's simple ideas of sensation are quite literally reified

sense-data, or mental images. It is easy to see how the move from the first to the second version of empiricism might come about. If it is granted that some ideas (i.e. ideas of sensation, such as the idea of red) are directly dependent on sensation, and that the mind is passive in the acquisition of these ideas, it is tempting to suppose such ideas caused by sensation in the sense of being directly given in sensation. However, what the mind is directly given in sensation is sense-data. When I see a red patch what I have (the content of my experience) is a sense-datum of a red patch. (Although, from this it does not follow that what I really see is a red-patch-sense-datum). On this interpretation of the relation between ideas and sense-experience, a man's having the idea (say) of red would in fact consist in his having a mental image of red, either present in his mind, or at least stored at the back of his mind from whence it could be summoned when occasion arose to think of red things. On the first, weak empiricist thesis it is left an open question as to whether the mind's simple ideas of sensation are different in kind from their experiential causes. The idea of red might be as different from its cause as a pain is different from its cause. The second thesis does not leave this open. The idea of red in the mind is the exact counterpart of the sense-datum given in sensation.

If Locke holds the first empiricist thesis, his broad use of 'idea' may be put down as a piece of carelessness. The term is

confusingly used to cover both what are properly speaking ideas and what are properly speaking the causes of ideas.³ If he embraces the second thesis, he might defend his use of 'idea' on the grounds that some ideas (concepts) are quite literally reified sense-data. It is doubtful that Locke consistently embraced either one of these theses. It is more likely that his use of 'idea' is not only confusing, but reveals a confusion in his own mind. It is, therefore, probable that his empiricist position cannot be set forth without ambiguity. In fairness, however, it should be pointed out that he does appear to have some inkling of the dangers inherent in his use of 'idea'. For at one stage he introduces the word 'impression', seemingly as a term for the immediate content of experience:

These simple ideas, when offered to the mind, the understanding can no more refuse to have, nor alter when they are imprinted, nor blot them out and make new ones itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the images or ideas which the objects set before it do therein produce. As the bodies that surround us do diverseley affect our organs, the mind is forced to receive the impressions; and cannot avoid the perception of those ideas that are annexed to them. [II, i, 25]

But this passage is hardly a model of lucidity. Moreover, even if Locke's intention here is to distinguish impressions, or sense-data,

3 Locke adds to the confusion by sometimes using 'idea' to refer to the powers existing in physical bodies which cause sense-data. For example, ". . . we cannot observe any alteration to be made in . . . anything, but by the observable change of its sensible ideas, nor conceive any alteration to be made but by conceiving a change of some of its ideas". [II, xxi, 1]

from ideas, he very soon slips into his broad use of 'idea' and the distinction is lost.

One thing has clearly emerged from the discussion so far: Locke's belief that the terminology of sensation can provide illuminating similes and analogies in an account of mind's ideas. We might say that it is at the level of analogy rather than the ontological level that Locke assimilates the intellectual to the sensory. While he gives no clear answer to the question of the nature of ideas, his view that ideas can be usefully likened to sense-data is made quite explicit.⁴

The analogy drawn between ideas and sense-data, or images, can be seriously misleading; and the errors which it suggests are far more intractable than those involved in the thesis that concepts are literally mental images. The mistake in the latter thesis soon becomes apparent once we consider concepts other than the concepts of those things which are the objects of sense experience. For it is only the objects of sense experience which can be mentally imaged. Locke does not hold sensation to be the sole source of the mind's ideas. What he calls reflection is

4 In fact Locke avoids answering the ontological question of the nature of ideas even when it is put to him directly. In reply to John Norris he remarks first, that as all men have ideas they can tell for themselves what ideas are. Second, he misinterprets the question as one concerning the psycho-psychological processes whereby ideas are produced in the mind. Remarks upon some of Mr Norris's Books, Sect. 2. Works, 10, p. 243/. Needless to say both Locke's remarks are no more than evasions of Norris's question.

an equally important aspect of experience. Reflection supplies the ideas the mind has of its own operations; ideas such as, "perception, doubling, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing."

[II, i, 4] Even though Locke understands reflection as closely parallel to sensation (so that reflection consists in the mind peering within itself), he could not miss the absurdity of the view that these ideas of reflection are literally mental images. On the other hand, the much milder view that all ideas may be usefully considered as analogous to images is not obviously absurd.

We can therefore say that, notwithstanding his confusing use of the term, for Locke ideas are primarily concepts, and that he understands concepts to be in some way analogous to images.⁵ To say that Locke's ideas are concepts means no more than that they carry out tasks which recent philosophers have assigned to concepts. Locke's ideas perform three main functions; they make thought possible, they serve as the meanings of words, and they are the criteria whereby we classify particular things into kinds.

As Locke defines them, ideas are 'the objects of the understanding when a man thinks'. This does not imply that all we ever think about are ideas as distinct from things. It is rather that we think about things by means of our ideas, and this is the

5 Bennett, on the other hand, concludes that "Locke's 'ideas' are, first and foremost, sense-data". [Op. cit., p. 31] However he no more than acknowledges the fact that Locke talks of 'ideas of reflection' as well as 'ideas of sensation'.

only way we can think about them. For ideas serve as representations of things. They are the signs of reality. As Locke explains to Stillingfleet:

. . . since . . . in all your lordship's knowledge, you will allow, that you have some immediate objects of your thoughts, which are the materials of that knowledge, about which it is employed, those immediate objects, if they are not . . . the very things themselves, must be ideas. Not thinking your lordship . . . persuaded, that as often as you think of your cathedral church, or of Des Cartes's vortices, that the very cathedral church at Worcester, or the motion of those vortices, itself exists in your understanding . . . I conclude, your lordship has immediate objects of your mind, which are not the very things themselves existing in your understanding; which if, with the academics, you will please to call representations . . . rather than with me ideas, it will make no difference. Works, 4, pp. 390 - 391/.

Here Locke stretches the spatial metaphor, 'in the understanding' beyond its limits. The supposition that when one thinks of an object, such as a cathedral, the object itself is present in one's understanding is clearly nonsensical. However, the fact that this supposition is nonsense does not support the conclusion that there is some other kind of entity 'in the understanding' which goes proxy for the object in the external world.

Despite the weakness of his argument, Locke's explanation to Stillingfleet does contain an important truth. We do need ideas in order to think. For instance, if I think about 'the grass outside my window', what I am thinking about is a patch of grass in rebus. Nevertheless, my thinking about the grass is dependent on my having ideas. Suppose I think that the grass is green; I

am able to form this thought only by virtue of having the ideas, 'grass' and 'green'. It is true that a man might, in some circumstances, be correctly described as 'thinking about the grass' even if he lacked the idea of grass. Having never heard of grass he might simply be wondering what the patch of vegetation outside his window was. But the important point is he could not be thinking at all if he did not possess some ideas.

Granted that we cannot think without ideas, it might be concluded that ideas themselves are some kind of entities the possession of which gives us the ability to think. Locke does accept this conclusion. To be exact, he assumes that ideas are some kind of entities lodged in the mind. Now the entity theory of ideas encounters a great variety of difficulties. For the present purpose it will suffice to give a brief account of one of these difficulties: idea-entities (whatever their specific nature may be) cannot serve in an explanation the human ability to think. Here an analogy might be drawn between thinking and playing chess. Both are things that we do. In order to play chess we need chess-men, just as we need ideas in order to think. However if a man acquires a set of chess-men he does not thereby acquire the ability to play chess. The ability to play chess is something he must learn. Similarly, if ideas are conceived as entities of some kind, the mind's acquisition of these entities cannot account for the human ability to think. Moreover, the analogy between thinking and chess breaks down at an important point. The pieces with which

chess is played are observable entities. If it is accepted that ideas are mental images, it goes without saying that they are observable entities. But, as we have seen, the doctrine that ideas are mental images is false. Now in the absence of this doctrine it is difficult to find any support for the view of ideas as observable entities. In defence, it might be argued that, although not observable, ideas are entities none the less. They are entities which we must postulate in order to explain the observable phenomenon of human thinking. However, idea-entities do not explain our ability to think. It is true that we think with ideas, just as we play chess with chess-men; but neither thinking nor the playing of chess can be explained in terms of entities. Idea-entities, therefore, are not observable entities, nor does there appear any reason to postulate them as unobservable entities.

As the entity theory of ideas is inevitably subject to difficulties such as the above, it would be an achievement if the whole theory could be abandoned. Happily, there is a much more tenable alternative theory waiting in the wings. Given that there is an intimate connexion between having ideas and the ability to think, why not construe this connexion as one of identity? On the new theory of ideas, to have ideas is to have the ability to think. To be more precise, to have ideas is to have the ability to do a whole complex of things which can be grouped under the vague heading of 'thinking'. For example, 'having the idea of' a horse involves being able to recognize horses; being able to

distinguish them from cows; knowing that horses are animals, not vegetables, and so on. (It might even be the case that the possession of some ideas, for example, ideas of colours, does involve the ability to conjure up mental images.) This theory has been termed the dispositional, or capacity, theory of ideas.⁶

The most friendly critic could not pretend that Locke came to any clear realization of the problems facing the entity theory of ideas; much less that he made any decisive move towards a dispositional theory. He always remains wedded to the belief that ideas are some kind of entities somehow existing in the mind or in the understanding.⁷ The best that can be said is that there are passages in the Essay in which the idea-entity appears less important than the human ability to 'do things with ideas':

Neither would it carry any imputation of falsehood to our simple ideas if . . . the same object should produce

6 For accounts of the dispositional theory of ideas see, Peter Geach: Mental Acts, esp. Ch. 5; and Jonathan Bennett: Kant's Analytic, § 17.

7 Douglas Greenlee, on the other hand, has argued that Locke at least comes close to rejecting the entity theory of ideas. "Locke's Idea of 'Idea'" in Theoria, 1967. Greenlee bases his argument largely on the following passage: "For if these words (to be in the understanding) have any propriety, they signify to be understood. So that to be in the understanding and not to be understood, to be in the mind and never to be perceived, is all one as to say: anything is and is not in the mind or understanding". [I, ii, 5] However, when read in its context (Locke's polemic against innate ideas) what Locke is saying amounts to this; the child cannot be said to be born possessing innate truths which he is "yet wholly ignorant of". If these truths really are innately in the understanding' then the child must know them. In this passage Locke is not, as Greenlee assumes explicating the meaning of the phrase, 'in the understanding'.

in several men's minds different ideas at the same time: v.g. if the idea that a violet produced in one man's mind by his eyes were the same that a marigold produced in another man's, and vice versa. For, since this could never be known . . . neither the ideas hereby, nor the names, would be at all confounded, or any falsehood be in either. For all things that had the texture of a violet producing constantly the idea which he called blue, and those which had the texture of a marigold producing constantly the idea which he as constantly called yellow, whatever those appearances were in his mind, he would be able as regularly to distinguish things for his use by those appearances, and understood and signify those distinctions marked by the names blue and yellow, as if the appearances or ideas in his mind, received from those two flowers, were exactly the same with the ideas in other men's minds. [II, xxxii, 15]

Yet even this passage serves as an illustration of Locke's ambiguous use of 'idea', and of the muddle to which the entity theory of ideas gives rise.

The second function performed by Locke's ideas is that of providing meanings for words. According to Locke, the difference between words as mere articulate sounds and as meaningful components of a language consists in the fact that, in the latter case, words are signs of ideas. As God designed men to live in society, it is necessary that they should communicate their thoughts one to another. To this end men are endowed with a natural capacity to frame sounds. Men make use of this capacity to develop a medium in which the ideas private to the mind of the individual can be given public expression. In this way words are made signs of internal, invisible ideas, and language comes into being.

[III, i, 1 - 2; III, ii, 1].

This theory of meaning is a complete failure. It is

vitiated by Locke's entity theory of ideas. According to Locke, what makes the utterance of words (which in their public aspect are no more than sounds) meaningful is their relation to ideas in the mind of the speaker. The presence of these ideas is absolutely necessary for meaningful discourse. To illustrate this Locke cites the fact that parrots can be taught to frame words, but what parrots say is not meaningful. The trouble is that the ideas necessary for meaning are completely private to the individual. It is quite impossible for one man to 'see' the ideas in the mind of another. Therefore, the only person who can be acquainted with both the uttered words and the ideas which give them meaning is the speaker himself. Any other person has only the uttered words to serve as an indication that there are ideas in the speaker's mind. But the example of the parrot shows this to be a very poor indication. On Locke's theory we simply can never be sure whether the utterances of other people have any more meaning than the 'language' of parrots. However, in the great majority of cases, we have no difficulty whatsoever in being sure of this; and the basis of our knowledge that an utterance is meaningful is utterly remote from a perception of ideas in the speaker's mind. The theory that words have meaning because they signify ideas internal to the mind of each speaker, is therefore, false.⁸

⁸ My argument here is borrowed from Bennett: Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes, pp. 4 - 6.

It should be noted, however, that what Locke expounds in the third book of the Essay is not so much a theory of meaning as a theory of words and of language. Locke sees language as essentially a system of signs. Thus, ideas as well as words constitute a language. Whereas words signify ideas, ideas themselves signify things. The outline of Locke's theory of language just given suggests that he considers ideas to constitute a complete language; one which is merely paralleled by verbal language. It is only because the individual wishes to communicate his thoughts to others that words are necessary. In themselves, words are no more than arbitrary signs applied to internal ideas. If individuals gave up communicating with each other the public language of words would be redundant, while the private language of ideas would remain intact and be self-sufficient. Locke does assume that ideas have autonomy with respect to words. In discussing truth he distinguishes between mental and verbal propositions, according, "as there are two sorts of signs commonly made use of, viz. ideas and words". [IV, v, 2] Nonetheless, he admits that in practice the distinction cannot be a hard and fast one. We cannot talk about a mental proposition, for when we state such a proposition we immediately convert it into its verbal form. More importantly, Locke realizes that, except at a very rudimentary level, men cannot think without using words. But this he considers a contingent misfortune due to the imperfections in our ideas. [IV, v, 3 - 4]

Notwithstanding these reservations (which suggests that words

are something more than merely external signs applied to ideas) Locke does hold the language of ideas to be the fundamental language. This language we have seen to be private to each individual. There are good reasons for supposing the concept of a private language, such as is the language of ideas, to be incoherent. One thing is plain; even if a private language is a possibility, its existence cannot explain the phenomenon of public, verbal language. Locke's account of verbal language, like his account of the meaning of words, comes to grief over the entity theory of ideas. If ideas are entities in the minds of individuals, it is logically possible that, by some remarkable chance, each individual has affixed what are qualitatively the same words (or public sounds) to what are qualitatively the same ideas. However, the important point is, that, even if this were the case, it could never be known to be the case. In the discussion of Locke's theory of meaning it was argued that, merely from the occurrence of verbal utterances we have no right to conclude the existence of ideas in the mind of the speaker. A fortiori, we have no right to conclude that the ideas the speaker signifies by certain words are the same as the ideas we signify by those words. Therefore, Locke fails to explain how language can serve as a vehicle of human communication. That is, he fails to explain what he grants to be the fundamental feature of verbal language.

Locke does have some awareness of the difficulties attendant

upon his theory of ideas. The following passage illustrates the direction in which he might have escaped the entity theory of ideas, and the consequent theory of language:

But though words . . . can properly and immediately signify nothing but the ideas that are in the mind of the speaker, yet they in their thoughts give them a secret reference to two other things.

First, they suppose their words to be marks of the ideas in the minds also of other men, with whom they communicate: for else they should talk in vain and could not be understood, if the sounds they applied to one idea were such as by the hearer were applied to another, which is to speak two languages. But in this, men stand not usually to examine whether the idea they and those they discourse with have in their minds be the same, but think it enough that they use the words as they imagine in the common acceptation of that language, in which they suppose that the idea they make it a sign of is precisely the same to which the understanding men of that country apply that name.

Secondly, because men would not be thought to talk barely of their own imaginations, but of things as really they are, therefore they often suppose their words to stand also for the reality of things. /III, ii, 4 - 5/.

Reading this passage one cannot but wonder what job Locke can find for idea-entities. He concedes that communication between men involves publicly agreed rules of linguistic usage. Further, although his theory demands that words signify ideas in the mind, he concedes that men use them to signify things in the world. It would appear that the two 'secret references' (which, strictly within the terms of Locke's theory, men cannot justify) are of primary importance, while the absence of ideas in the mind might well never be noticed.

In an explanation of the relation between language and ideas,

the dispositional theory of ideas has a considerable advantage over the rival entity theory. If 'having an idea' is understood to mean, not the possession of an entity, but 'having a complex of abilities' there is every reason why linguistic ability (the capacity to use words meaningfully) should be included as part of the meaning of 'having an idea'. Indeed there is every reason why linguistic ability should be taken as central to the meaning of 'having an idea'. For, as Locke admits, it is in fact impossible for men to think above a primitive level without words.⁹ On this analysis the problem of how public language (which must be related to ideas) can possibly be related to ideas dissolves. Thought and language are not separate from each other; they are two aspects of the one thing, which, for convenience sake, may be termed 'thinking'.¹⁰

Locke does not develop a dispositional theory of ideas but always retains the view of ideas as entities lodged in the mind. That he should retain this view is hardly surprising. The dispositional theory arises from reflection on phenomena such as

9 Cf. Geach: "The central and typical applications of the term "having a concept" are those in which a man is master of a bit of linguistic usage; we can then reasonably extend the term to cases sufficiently like these". Op. cit., p. 18

10 It should be noted that the dispositional theory of ideas does not entail a behavioural analysis of intellectual processes. Ideas are definable in terms of capacities for doing things. However, these capacities may well turn out to be irreducibly mental.

language. But Locke does not develop his theory of ideas to explain language or meaning, or even to explain thought. On the contrary, he endeavours to explain these within the terms of an already developed theory. This overall theory is shaped in accordance with a picture which Locke accepts without question. The picture may be dubbed that of the Cartesian Solitary, for if Descartes was not the first to draw it, he is its great popularizer. Descartes sees man as an essentially isolated being. That is to say, according to Descartes, the individual can intelligibly suspend belief in the existence of an external world and of other minds. Moreover, from the one indubitable fact of his own existence the individual can, as it were, rebuild the world around himself.

We saw in the previous chapter that Locke does not entertain any doubts concerning the existence of the external world. He holds that our senses put us in touch with reality, and presumably reality includes other mind-endowed persons. Nevertheless, he accepts the second, more important, feature of the Cartesian picture. He holds that each individual builds up the world for himself out of the material provided by experience. The simple ideas acquired by the mind are grounded directly in experience, and from these the mind constructs complex ideas. Once acquired, ideas serve as the means whereby the mind classifies and orders its subsequent experience of the world. It would be going too far to say that the Cartesian picture entails the view that ideas are entities in the mind functioning as tools for the classification of experience. Yet it

certainly does strongly suggest this view. The individual is conceived as primarily an observer of the world, rather than one who is engaged in the world and with his fellows. What we would expect from such an aloof observer is a classification of the particular things he experiences. Again, it is easily seen that anyone holding the dispositional theory of ideas is likely to find the Cartesian picture of man highly uncongenial. On this theory the acquisition of ideas is the acquisition of abilities, or capacities to do things. Typically this will mean the mastering of rules. Rules are interpersonal. Any number of individuals can comply with, or fail to comply with, a given rule. Rules develop because men are engaged with the world and with one another and consequently need rules in order to regulate their behaviour and to achieve common purposes. However, we think of the classification of things as involving the application of standard patterns, and a typical pattern (for example, a colour chart) is an entity.

In the third place, then, Locke's ideas are the criteria in accordance with which we classify particular things into kinds. To be exact, this is the function Locke assigns to general ideas; those ideas which are signified by general terms. Language, Locke explains, would be of little use if each word uniquely signified one particular thing. Men therefore invented general terms, which, because they directly signify general ideas, can

be used to refer to an indefinite number of particulars. General terms make up the vast part of the words in any language. The general ideas they signify are the ideas which enter into demonstration, yielding knowledge, "which, though founded in particular things, enlarges itself by general views, to which things reduced into sorts, under general names, are properly subservient".

[III, iii, 4] General ideas are patterns, and the words signifying them name patterns.

Patterns are always 'of' something; they represent those things which conform to them. Herein lies the cash value of Locke's metaphorical use of words like 'picture' and 'image' when talking about ideas. General ideas are not images inside a person's head, but, like images, they picture (i.e. represent) things.¹¹ Patterns may either be prior or posterior to the things they represent. For instance, before any motor-cars were actually produced a pattern of the motor-car was drawn up. The machines which were constructed in conformity with this pattern were, by virtue of their conformity, motor-cars. Such a prior pattern logically must provide an adequate representation of the thing. Now that there are innumerable motor-cars in existence, a man might set himself the task of drawing up a

11 To say that something pictures something else is not necessarily to say that it pictures it in the manner of a visual image. Even things which cannot be seen can be pictured. Cf. Wittgenstein's use of the verb 'to picture': "The gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand, to one another in that pictorial internal relation, which holds between language and the world". Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 4.014.

pattern embodying all the essential features possessed by the actual machines. This would be a posterior representation, and, as it is posterior, it could be an inadequate representation. The man might, through ignorance, faulty observation and so on, leave out of his pattern certain features which are essential to the actual motor cars. It is much the same with Locke's ideas. These may be adequate or inadequate. On the one hand, he holds moral ideas to be always adequate. As we shall see, their adequacy is due to the fact that they are logically prior to what they represent. On the other hand, he argues that ideas of physical substances, which are posterior representations, are always inadequate. In Locke's terminology, an idea is adequate if it expresses the real essence of the thing it signifies; an idea is inadequate if it expresses only the nominal, as distinct from the real, essence of the thing it signifies.

The distinction between real and nominal essence is one of the most important pieces of Locke's conceptual apparatus. He develops the distinction with respect to ideas of physical substances, and for Locke the idea of a physical substance is the paradigmatic idea.

Locke cites two meanings of the word 'essence': First, "Essence may be taken for the being of anything whereby it is what it is . . . in this sense it is still used, when we speak of the essence of particular things, without giving them any name".

[III, iii, 15] This Locke terms 'real essence'. Secondly, in its more familiar use, 'essence' means the genus and species in which particular things are classified. Locke considers genus and species artificial constructions of the human mind; "it being evident that things are ranked under names into sorts or species, only as they agree to certain abstract ideas to which we have annexed those names, the essence of each genus or sort comes to be nothing but that abstract idea which the general or sortal . . . name, stands for". [Ibid.] Essence in this sense Locke terms 'nominal essence'.

Concerning the real essence of physical bodies there are two opinions:

The one is of those who, using the word essence for they know not what, suppose a certain number of those essences, according to which all natural things are made and wherein they do exactly every one of them partake, and so become of this or that species. The other and 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 them one from another, according as we have occasion to rank them into sorts, under common denominations. [III, iii, 17]

The opinion which Locke rejects is the doctrine of hypostatized universals, or substantial forms. The 'more rational opinion', which he endorses, is the corpuscular theory of matter. According to the latter theory the macro-bodies of the physical world are composed of minute corpuscles, or atoms, in different configurations. Certain properties of bodies, such as figure and motion, are

objectively present in the bodies themselves; while others, such as colour and taste, are dependent on a perceiving subject. Physical objects are not really coloured, but they have the power to produce colour sensations in the perceiver. This power is due to nothing more than the arrangement and motion of the bodies' constituent corpuscles. Considered as an account of the ultimate nature of matter, the corpuscular theory is, Locke stresses, no more than a likely hypothesis [IV, iii, 16]. However, the theory is also important because, as it is expounded by Robert Boyle in The Origin of Forms and Qualities, it provides a theory of universals which does not violate Locke's fundamental ontological principle: "All things that exist [are] particulars". [III, iii, 1]

Philosophers have called upon universals to solve two different problems. The first may be summed up in the question, 'what makes a particular thing to be what it is?'; the second in the question, 'how are particular things distinguished into kinds?'. The doctrine of substantial forms provides an answer to both questions. A particular thing is what it is because it partakes in a universal real essence, or form, which exists independently of the particulars it shapes. A particular thing is of a specific kind by virtue of its form, which is the genus or species to which the thing belongs. Boyle answers both questions in terms of the corpuscular theory. What makes a particular thing to be what it is, i.e. have the qualities it does have, is its particular internal atomic

structure.¹² A particular thing is of a specific kind because men, noticing that many particular things exhibited similar qualities, agreed to distinguish things into kinds according to those similarities.¹³

The theory of universals which Locke takes over from Boyle is primarily a theory of classification (and thus an answer to the first question). Nevertheless, Locke takes for granted the intelligibility of the problem of what makes a particular thing to be what it is. Boyle is anxious to prove that qualitative changes occurring in bodies can be explained in purely mechanical, quantitative terms.¹⁴ Therefore, in his positive doctrine, he has little need for the concept of a form which imposes a specific kind of being on a particular thing. A body is as it is, and can undergo certain changes, because God has so arranged its constituent atoms.¹⁵ In Locke's epistemology the concept of form (or, as he terms it, 'real essence') is of considerable importance. For Locke, each particular body has a real essence and its real essence imposes a logical necessity on that body. It is not simply that a body does in fact exhibit certain qualities because of its real essence; it is logically necessary that it exhibit those qualities, and any other

12 See The Origins of Forms and Qualities, in Boyle's Works, ed. Birch (1744) Vol. 2, p. 483.

13 Op. cit., p. 469

14 Op. cit., p. 459

15 Op. cit., p. 483

body having the same real essence logically must exhibit the same qualities. Because we cannot penetrate to the real essence of bodies, our ideas of them are always inadequate. They fail to capture the necessity which Locke assumes to lie at the heart of physical substances.

For Locke the doctrine that the real essence, or form, of a body is an existent universal is simply unintelligible.¹⁶ In view of the incoherence of this doctrine, he concludes that the real essences of bodies must be their particular internal structures. This 'real constitution' of bodies is the configuration of corpuscles postulated by Boyle (or, at least, it is something very like this configuration). The reference of the term 'real essence' is, then, 'the particular internal structure belonging to a body'; but its sense is 'that which logically compels a body to have specific properties'.

However, irrespective of the knowability of the real essences of bodies, we distinguish them into kinds in accordance with what Locke calls nominal essence. That is to say, we classify bodies by ranking them under the general ideas we have framed [III, vi, 36]. Thus, to talk of the essence of a thing which has been classified under a general name is to refer to the nominal essence which, on

16 Cf. Locke's second reply to Stillingfleet: ". . . the difficulty to me, is, to conceive an universal nature, or universal any thing, to exist; which would be, in my mind, to make an universal a particular: which, to me, is impossible".
Works, 4, p. 166

Locke's account, belongs to the general idea. General ideas, as they are entities existing in the mind, are, like everything else, particular beings. It is only in their function as patterns according to which things are sorted into kinds that they can be called universals. So that, "general and universal belong not to the real existence of things, but are the inventions and creatures of the understanding made by it for its own use, and concern only signs, whether words or ideas. [III, iii, 11]

Following Boyle, Locke supposes that we frame our general ideas of physical substances by abstracting from observed similarities:

. . . the sorting of [things] under names is the workmanship of the understanding, taking occasion, from the similitude it observes amongst them, to make abstract general ideas, and set them up in the mind, with names annexed to them, as patterns or forms, . . . to which, as particular things existing are found to agree, so they come to be of that species, have that denomination, or are put into that classis. [III, iii, 13]

Locke's doctrine of abstraction encounters a considerable difficulty. For, in accordance with what we have called the Cartesian picture, Locke assumes that each individual creates his own abstract general ideas de novo. For instance, at III, iii, 7 the child is said to gather together empirical similarities observed in his nurse, his parents etc., and to unite these similarities into the single complex idea 'man'. But how is the child to know which similarities to select from his experience? Prior to his forming any general ideas, he is, by hypothesis, faced with a world of undif-

ferentiated particulars. However, any one particular thing may empirically resemble, or fail to resemble, any other particular thing in an indefinite number of ways. For, we do not just observe similarities between objects; rather, it is objects which are observed to be similar to one another in certain respects. What similarities we select depends on a number of factors; primarily on our shared interests and purposes.¹⁷

At present this difficulty in Locke's account of the original formation of general ideas need be no more than noted. For in his analysis of our ideas of physical substances, Locke clearly does have a range of interests in view; those of the natural philosopher whose purpose, as Locke conceives it, is to grasp physical substances in their essential nature. Locke believes that this purpose can never be carried out because our ideas of physical substances are inevitably inadequate. But, as yet, no reason has been given for Locke's opinion. Why should not the nominal essence of the idea the natural philosopher forms from observation exactly correspond to the real essence belonging to things as they exist in reality?

Locke gives three arguments to prove that our ideas of

17 At I, xi, 9, Locke cites the simple abstract idea of whiteness. Given this example his doctrine has somewhat more plausibility. It might be argued that we do just observe similarities of colour. The difficulties of Locke's doctrine are multiplied if we insist, as does Berkeley, that abstract ideas must be literal images. However, an abstract image is not necessarily an absurdity. Cf. Bennett Op. cit., pp. 35 - 43.

physical substances are always inadequate. First, our powers of vision are too weak for us to observe remote physical bodies, or to see the minute particles which make up those bodies close at hand. [IV, iii, 24]. Secondly, bodies are 'retainers' to other bodies for many of the qualities they exhibit. By this Locke means that, contrary to our picture of things, particular bodies do not possess their qualities in themselves, separate from all other bodies, but as parts of a network of interconnected entities which together make up the physical world [IV, vi, 11 - 12]¹⁸ Finally, the nature of the causal connexion existing between the objective primary qualities of bodies and the subjective secondary qualities produced in the observer is inconceivable:

. . . we can by no means conceive how any size, figure, or motion of any particles can possibly produce in us the idea of any colour, taste, or sound whatsoever: There is no conceivable connexion betwixt the one and the other. [IV, iii, 13]

Hence, even if we could surmount the difficulties listed in the first two arguments, our ideas of physical substances would still be inadequate. If we could make observations at the level of the ultimate constituents of bodies, and if we could somehow overcome the problem of the interconnectedness of things in nature, then our ideas of physical substances would picture that which constitutes the real essence of bodies, i.e. their real

18 Cf. Boyle: Op. cit., p. 464.

constitutions. However, even these detailed ideas would not grasp the logical connexion between the bodies internal structure and its secondary qualities. That is, they would not express the real essence as it is the form of the body, making it 'to be what it is'. We would only know that a certain structure does in fact produce certain colours etc., we could not know why it logically must produce those colours. In consequence our ideas of physical substances do not yield knowledge:

In vain . . . shall we endeavour to discover by our ideas (the only true way of certain and universal knowledge) what other ideas are to be found constantly joined with that of our complex idea of any substance: since we neither know the real constitution of the minute parts on which their qualities do depend; not, did we know them, could we discover any necessary connexion between them any of the secondary qualities; which is necessary to be done before we can certainly know their necessary co-existence. [IV, iii, 14]

Therefore, natural philosophy, or the study of physical substances, cannot achieve the status of a science.¹⁹

Locke agrees that a proposition such as 'All gold is malleable' appears to be both universal and certain. However, this is only because we have included the idea of malleableness as part of the nominal essence of our idea of gold. We cannot be certain that

19 Locke does believe that, if we could observe the minute constituent parts of any two bodies, we should have knowledge of the operations of these bodies one upon the other. That is, we could know what mechanical quantitative changes one would produce in the other. [IV, iii, 13 and 25]. What we cannot conceive is how secondary qualities, such as colour, have a purely mechanical basis.

the substance we call gold is necessarily malleable. For, "The connexion that malleableness has (if it has any) with those other qualities, being only by the intervention of the real constitution of its insensible parts, which since we know not, it is impossible we should perceive that connexion, unless we could discover that which ties them together". [IV, vi, 9] If we could express the real essence, or form, in our ideas of physical substances, Locke supposes that the propositions of natural philosophy would be universal and certain:

. . . if the formal constitution of this shining, heavy ductile thing (from whence all these its properties flow) lay open to our sense, as the formal constitution or essence of a triangle does, the signification of the word gold might as easily be ascertained as that of triangle.
[III, xi, 22]

That is, the study of bodies would achieve equality with Locke's paradigm of knowledge, mathematics.

Locke's denial that men can achieve knowledge in the sphere of nature and his argument that our ideas of physical substances are inevitably inadequate are, then, two sides of the one coin. But is Locke's conception of the real essence of bodies, and his distinction between it and the nominal essence of ideas, coherent? There are strong reasons for concluding that it is not.

Locke dismisses the doctrine of substantial forms as unintelligible. Yet he does not reject all aspects of the doctrine; he retains the concept of 'form'. As the form, or real essence, of a body cannot be an hypostatized universal, Locke concludes it to be

the particular internal structure, or real constitution, of the body. But can this reference bear the sense of the term 'real essence'? On the traditional doctrine forms are universals (although they need not be universals existing independent of all particular things). The assertion that it is essential to a particular piece of gold to be malleable is explained on the grounds that it possesses the form of gold, and if a particular thing possess this form then it is malleable. In these terms the logical connexion between a thing being gold and being malleable is quite apparent. However, according to Locke, to give a general name to a particular is immediately to rank it under a general idea, and thereby treat it as a kind of thing. Thus, to talk of a quality being essential to a piece of gold is to refer to the nominal essence of our idea. Strictly, one cannot say of a bare, unnamed particular that it has anything essential to it,

. . . take away the consideration of its being ranked under the name of some abstract idea, and then there is nothing necessary to it, nothing inseparable from it.
 [III, vi, 6]²⁰

What Locke means is that it is not essential to any particular body that it have the real essence, or real constitution, it does have. However, given the contingent fact that a particular does have a specific real constitution Locke assumes it to be logically

20 The passage from which this quotation is taken has occasioned some confusion among Locke's critics. For example, R. F. Anderson argues that here Locke gives up his belief that bodies have a real essence. See "Locke on the Knowledge of Material Things", in Journal of the History of Philosophy 1965. But Cf. R. S. Woolhouse: Locke's Philosophy of Science and Knowledge, pp. 110 - 111.

necessary that it exhibit the qualities it does exhibit. But what is the cash value of 'logically necessary' here? Locke maintains that the nature of the necessary connexion between the real constitution of a body and its secondary qualities is beyond the comprehension of human understanding. From our point of view the fact of the connexion can be attributed to nothing else but "the arbitrary determination" of God. [IV, iii, 28] Now it is extremely difficult to see how this connexion can be both logically necessary and an 'arbitrary determination'. At this stage Locke's concept of real essence is 'the being of anything whereby it is what it is' tends to lose meaning altogether.

Without going into details we might say that Locke's doctrine of the real essence of physical substances arises from an ill-advised attempt to combine two different conceptual schemes. He accepts the ontology of nature expressed in the corpuscular philosophy, yet endeavours to retain the mode of explanation developed under the auspices of the Aristotelian ontology of forms. But the doctrine of forms cannot be successfully reinterpreted in terms of the corpuscular theory of matter. If the latter philosophy is accepted it must also be accepted that a completely demonstrative science of nature, based on the knowledge of forms, is not merely something beyond the human understanding, but is a chimera. It was not Locke but his conservative minded opponent, Stillingfleet, who realized, "that according to the Atomical Principles, no Rational

account can be given of those Effects which are seen in Nature".²¹

If we take a 'rational account' to be one in which necessary connexions are exhibited a priori (as they are in mathematics) Stillingfleet would appear to be in the right; within the terms of the corpuscular philosophy Nature cannot be rational.

Locke draws his distinction between real and nominal essence with respect to our ideas of physical substances; and it might well be concluded that in this context it raises more difficulties than it solves. However, he carries the distinction over into a discussion of quite different ideas. Having examined Locke's account of ideas in general and said something of his account of the ideas of physical substances in particular, we can now turn to the ideas of morality, or moral notions.

21 Origines Sacrae: or, A Rational Account of the Grounds of Natural and Reveal'd Religion, Bk. III, ii, 17.

Chapter V

MORAL NOTIONS

Besides ideas of substances, Locke discusses two further classes of ideas: modes and relations. Though, as a natural law theorist, Locke conceives the relation between human action and law to be fundamental in morality, his account of our moral ideas is given in terms of modes. What he has to say about relations is, therefore, not strictly relevant to the present topic, and may be safely left to one side. Modes, as the name suggests, are modifications of things. A mode cannot be conceived as existing by itself. Actions, for example, are modes; they cannot be thought of except as dependent on an agent. (To be precise we should say that what a mode signifies cannot be conceived as existing by itself. However, for reasons which will soon become apparent, Locke finds it difficult to formulate a clear-cut distinction between modes as ideas and modes as things signified by ideas.) Modes are simple or mixed. Simple modes are homogeneous, consisting in a repetition of the same simple idea; mixed modes are heterogeneous, combining together ideas of different kinds. [II, xii, 4 - 5] By far the greater part of our moral ideas fall within the sub-class of mixed modes. This is because most mixed modes signify actions, and human action is the province of morality. [II, xxii, 10]

Like our ideas of substances, mixed modes are framed by the

mind uniting a number of simple ideas into one complex. However, there is an important difference between these two classes of ideas. We have seen that in the construction of general ideas of substances the mind abstracts similarities existing between the sensible qualities exhibited by bodies in nature. Once they are framed, ideas of substances constitute patterns in conformity with which we classify particular things; but in framing them we copy patterns which, Locke assumes, have a prior and quite independent existence in nature.¹ In contrast to ideas of substances, mixed modes are 'arbitrary' creations of the mind which, "combines several scattered independent ideas into one complex one and, by the common name it gives them, makes them the essence of a certain species, without regulating itself by any connexion they have in nature. [III, v, 6]

As a consequence, mixed modes achieve what Locke has argued it is impossible for our ideas of substances to achieve. In the case of mixed modes the nominal essence of the idea coincides with the real essence of that which is signified:

. . . the names of mixed modes always signify . . . the real essences of their species. For, these abstract ideas being the workmanship of the mind and not referred to the real existence of things, there is no supposition of anything more signified by that name, but barely that complex idea the mind itself has formed; which is

1 Cf. Locke to Molyneux, 20 Jan, 1692-3: "This I do say, that there are real constitutions in things, from whence these simple ideas flow, which we observe combined in them. And this I farther say, that there are real distinctions and differences

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all it would have expressed by it, and is that on which all the properties of the species depend, and from which alone they all flow; and so in these the real and nominal essence is the same. [III, v, 14]

Mixed modes are all adequate ideas; "Because they, not being intended for copies of things really existing, but for archetypes made by the mind to rank and denominate things by, cannot want anything: they having each of them that combination of ideas and thereby that perfection which the mind intended they should, so that the mind acquiesces in them and can find nothing wanting".

[II, xxxi, 3]

It can be seen that Locke's 'mixed modes' are what, in the preceding chapter, we called 'prior representations of things'. As the pattern of the motor-car, constructed by the inventor before any such machines are produced, exactly determines what any actual motor-car must be, so a mixed mode in a person's mind determines what reality must be if it is to answer to that mode. Again, if it had been the case that no motor-cars were actually produced, the pattern of the motor-car thought up by the inventor would nevertheless exist. Similarly, mixed modes may be

1 Cont'd

in those real constitutions, one from another; whereby they are distinguished one from another, whether we think of them, or name them, or no: but that that whereby we distinguish and rank particular substances into sorts, or genera and species is not those real essences, or internal constitutions, but such combinations of simple ideas, as we observe in them. [Works, 9, pp. 305 - 306]

constructed quite independently of there being anything in the world signified by them:

Who can doubt but the ideas of sacrilege or adultery might be framed in the minds of men, and have names given them, and so these species of mixed modes be constituted, before either of them was ever committed; and might be as well discoursed of . . . whilst yet they had no being but in the understanding, as well as now that they have but too frequently a real existence? [III, v, 5]

The fact that mixed modes are prior representations explains Locke's awkward use of the term 'mode' (as in the above passage) to mean both a type of idea in the mind and what is signified by that type of idea. Whereas in the formation of our ideas of substances we copy and endeavour to sum up a world which is 'already there' irrespective of our own existence, in forming mixed modes we create a possible world the actuality of which depends on things conforming to our ideas. Thus, on the one hand, it is easy for Locke to talk without qualms about ideas of substances; for substances exist quite independently of our ideas. On the other hand, it is only because we have constructed mixed modes that there can exist anything for them to be the mixed modes of. Insofar as the phrase 'idea of x' suggests an 'x' existing independent of any idea, it is misleading when the idea in question is a mixed mode. We will term this highly important creative feature of mixed modes their 'ontological priority' over the things they signify. In view of this difference between ideas representing substances, and mixed modes (or ideas of mixed

modes) Locke calls the latter 'notions'.² In what follows we will adopt Locke's terminology.

From the ontological priority of notions over things it follows, according to Locke, that notions are always real, and any knowledge they yield 'real knowledge'. In this they differ sharply from ideas of substances. The latter, "being made all of them in reference to things existing without us, and intended to be representations of substances as they really are, are no further real than as they are such combinations of simple ideas as are really united and co-exist in things without us". [II, xxx, 5] It is far otherwise with notions. So long as the ideas combined are consistent one with the other, the notion is said to be real; for "having no other reality but what they have in the minds of men, there is nothing more required to this kind of ideas to make them real, but that they be so framed that there by a possibility of existing conformable to them". [II, xxx, 4] Because notions are always real the perception of relations between them always yields

2 The mind often exercises an active power in making these several combinations; for, it being once furnished with simple ideas, it can put them together in several compositions and so make variety of complex ideas without examining whether they exist so together in nature. And hence I think it is that these ideas are called notions: as if they had their original, and constant existence more in the thoughts of men than in the reality of things; and to form such ideas, it sufficed that the mind put the parts of them together, and that they were consistent in the understanding, without considering whether they had any real being. [II, xxii, 2] Locke distinguishes between 'notion' and 'idea' in his second reply to Stillingfleet. [Works, 4, p. 133]

'real knowledge':

. . . we cannot but be infallibly certain that all the knowledge we attain concerning these ideas [notions] is real and reaches things themselves. Because in all our thoughts, reasonings, and discourses of this kind, we intend things no further than as they are conformable to our ideas. So that in these we cannot miss of a certain and undoubted reality. [IV, iv, 5]

Clearly the term 'real' is being applied to notions on different grounds from those on which it is applied to ideas of substances. The reality of notions is a function of their independence from the external world; ideas of substances are real if they conform to the external world. However, as notions and ideas of substances are different kinds of ideas, this difference in criteria for application for the term 'real' is quite in order. What does appear odd is Locke's move from the reality of notions to the reality of the knowledge in which they enter. He says that the mind can construct any notions provided only they meet the requirements of logical consistency. On what criterion can knowledge concerning notions be called 'real'? On the face of it notions would seem to have severed all links with reality. Locke's conception of reality as he applies it to ideas and to knowledge is in need of exegesis if this move is not to be intolerably odd.

We should be careful not to confuse 'real ideas' with 'adequate ideas'. Our ideas of substances all, "want something we should be glad were in them, and so are all inadequate".

[II, xxxi, 3] Nonetheless, these ideas are real, provided what

they purport to represent does exist in nature. Thus, although inadequate, the idea of gold is real; while the idea of a centaur is 'fantastical', there being no such creature in the world.

[II, xxx, 5] With respect to substances, then, the reality and adequacy of our ideas are quite separate considerations. In the case of our notions, there being no gap between the nominal essence of the idea and the real essence of the thing signified, there can be no question of inadequacy. That is, because it is reality which must measure up to our notions there is no possibility of their misrepresenting reality. Thus, from nothing more than the contemplation of a notion we can tell exactly what a segment of reality, logically, must be like if it is to answer that notion. With respect to notions, then, reality and adequacy go hand in hand.

We can now see how Locke might justify his application of the word 'real' to both certain ideas of substances and to all notions. An idea of a substance is real if what it represents actually exists. Notions are all real because if there is anything in reality corresponding to them, they cannot misrepresent it. In both cases 'realness' is concerned with felicity of representation. However, the move from the reality of our notions to the reality of the knowledge into which they enter still remains obscure. For the knowledge we gain from our notions is only hypothetical. From the notion itself we can tell what any corresponding reality must be;

but we cannot tell whether there is a corresponding reality. It is, for example, a purely contingent fact that actions corresponding to the notions of sacrilege and adultery do exist in the world. Likewise, it is a contingent fact that centaurs do not exist in the world. Yet, as 'centaur' is an unreal, or fantastical, idea in no circumstances can it enter into real knowledge. As Locke has committed himself to the application of the epithet 'real knowledge' to hypothetical propositions concerning adultery, sacrilege and such like (and would be so committed even if chastity and religious piety were universal), how can he be justified in withholding this epithet from hypothetical propositions concerning non-existent things such as centaurs?

The answer to this question lies in the differing intentions Locke assumes to be behind the formation of ideas of substances and the formation of notions. In forming ideas of substances we intend to represent and classify objects existing in the external world. Therefore, every idea of a substance carries the implication that there is something in the world corresponding to that idea. Our ideas always falling short of the real essence of substances, they can never be completely adequate representations. However, the formation of fantastical ideas frustrates our intention at the very beginning. We are, of course, able to frame ideas of centaurs etc. from material gathered in sensation. Propositions concerning centaurs are not false, but they imply a falsehood; that centaurs

exist. To call such propositions real knowledge would be to acquiesce in a falsehood.³

Although Locke talks of the mind proceeding in an arbitrary fashion in its formation of notions, he does not suppose them to be random creations. Notions are arbitrary only in contrast to ideas of substances, the latter being framed in accordance with pre-existing patterns presented to the mind. As notions are not restrained by external patterns any notion will be real so long as it keeps within the bounds set by logic. Nevertheless, in practice men do not frame just any notions; they frame notions to accord with their interest and purposes. Locke makes this point quite explicit:

. . . the mind in mixed modes arbitrarily unites into complex ideas such as it finds convenient . . . I do not say this is done without reason . . . but this I say, that it is done by the free choice of the mind pursuing its own ends . . . and there is nothing more evident than that for the most part, in the framing of these ideas, the mind searches not its patterns in nature, nor refers the ideas it makes to the real existence of things, but puts such together as may best serve its own purposes. III, v, 6

3 This is not to say that the use of 'centaur' is always misleading. When used in the context of an undisguisedly fictional narrative, for instance, the word does not carry the implication that centaurs exist, as men and horses exist. But it is to be remembered that, in his analysis of ideas of substance, Locke has in the forefront of his mind the interests of the natural philosopher, and the factual use of language. Despite his early predilection for Romances, Locke, in later life, had very little time for the "willing suspension of disbelief" demanded by works of imagination. Cf. his remarks on poetry in Some Thoughts concerning Education, § 174.

Assuming men to be clear as to their purposes, it follows from the fact that they have a free choice in the forming of notions that whatever notions they do form will fulfil their intentions. It is on this ground that notions are always real and the perception of relations holding between them real knowledge.

What has been said so far may be summarized briefly: Notions are not intended to represent a pre-existing reality. On the contrary, they are ontologically prior to any reality which corresponds to them. In forming notions, therefore, men create possibilities which may or may not be actualized in the world. Although in theory any ideas which are not inconsistent with one another can be combined into notions, in practice notions are framed in accordance with human interests and purposes. It was also stated that most notions are notions of actions and that therein lay their importance with respect to morality. But as yet the question of how notions and actions are related and the relevance of the relation to morality has not been raised. We must now endeavour to add some flesh and blood to what up to now has been a somewhat abstract discussion.

Locke mentions many different notions of actions in the Essay. The following is by no means an exhaustive list: drunkenness, lying, sacrilege, murder, fencing, running, revenge [II, xxii, 1, 3, 9, 10]; adultery, parricide, incest [III, v, 5 - 6]. He also includes dispositions to action, such as boldness and testiness.

[II, xxii, 10]. Given what we have termed the ontological priority of notions, it follows that, if the notion did not exist the corresponding action could not exist.

The priority of notions over the existence of actions is more easily seen in some cases than in others. Taking Locke's example 'fencing', the dependence of the action on the notion is fairly obvious. Fencing involves bodily movements on the part of the agent. An observer intent on describing only what he actually saw would confine himself to these movements. But his description, no matter how detailed, would not add up to a description of the action of fencing. (Indeed, the more minute his description of the movements, the further it would be from a description of the action). For fencing does not consist simply in bodily movements. In order to fence the agent must conform his movements to certain pre-ordained rules. It is by virtue of this conformity that his observable behaviour constitutes the action of fencing. Had these rules not been instituted what the agent does could not be fencing. The formulation of the rules of fencing is the main part in framing the notion of fencing. Without the notion, then, the agent's bodily movements would either not constitute any action (would be nothing more than bodily movements) or would fall under some other notion and thereby constitute some other action.

The 'fencing' example also serves to illustrate Locke's distinction between notions of actions and ideas of substances. If

men had never framed the idea of gold. Locke does not doubt but the particular objects in fact ranked under that idea would exist in themselves exactly as they are now. They would be unnamed particulars; but giving them a name can in no way alter their particular existence. It is possible that, in a world without 'fencing', men might happen to go through the motions which, in this world, constitute the action of fencing. However, their movements would lack the significance they have now. Even if, in framing a notion, we encompass certain 'doings' already prevalent in the world, we are not merely giving a name to something. We are grouping things under a name and giving them a unity and importance which they had not previously. The formulation of notions does not leave everything as it is; rather in forming notions of actions, men shape a new reality.

It might be objected, however, that in taking fencing as our example of a human action, we have unfairly weighted the argument for the ontological priority of notions over actions. Fencing is an activity which has been consciously instituted by men. It is a product of society and the notion can be understood only against a social background. Certainly, in the case of fencing the notion is prior to the existence of the action, but this hardly proves that all, or even most, human actions are dependent on notions. If we take another of Locke's examples, the much simpler action of running, the argument is likely to turn out differently. Running is something which men just do, without attending to any rules.

It is a completely non-artificial action. In framing the notion of running it would appear that we do no more than represent an action previously existing in its own right. Here the notion of an action seems to differ little if at all, from the idea of a substance.

Nevertheless, if running is understood as an action, and not merely as bodily movements, the notion is ontologically prior. It is not hard to see that there is a conceptual difference between human bodily movements and human actions. We can conceive of a wholly inanimate universe in which bodies formed configurations exactly reproducing human bodily movements. But this inanimate universe would be one in which events happened, not one in which actions were performed. The difference between actions and mere bodily movements has often been thought to consist in the fact that the former always have, and the latter always lack, certain mental antecedents peculiar to intellectual beings, e.g. acts of will, intentions. We should not be too anxious to reject the purely mental in an account of action. Nevertheless, the appeal to something out of sight in the mind, yet always standing behind the observable behaviour which constitutes human action, does come up against a host of problems. Moreover, there is a much easier way of demarcating the regions of actions and movements. Even in the performance of a simple bodily action such as running the agent does something which counts as that action. That is, his movements conform to a norm; and it is this conformity which makes an action

of his movements. In this respect, the action of running is not markedly different from the action of fencing. We can say that the fundamental difference between human actions and mere bodily movements resides not in the presence or absence of precedent mental occurrences, but in the presence or absence of norms. The norms to which actions conform are Locke's notions of actions. If we did not have these notions there would be nothing for bodily movements to accord with. Therefore there could be no actions in the world. This is all that is meant by the thesis that notions are ontologically prior to actions.⁴

Running is, in fact, an atypical human action; and this for two reasons. First, it is a physical action, or what Locke calls an 'action of the body'. [II, xxii, 10] The majority of the actions men perform are not purely physical, but involve the agent's mind as well as his body. They are not things which a man 'just does', but things he plans, intends, decides upon etc. Second, in the case of an action like running the correlation between observable behaviour and the action performed is atypically simple. If a man is observed to propel himself from place to place by rapid movements

4 This is not to say that all human actions have two components: norms, or notions, and bodily movements conforming to those norms. The concept of human action is a broad and vague one. Included under it are actions which do not involve bodily movements. What Locke calls 'actions of the mind' fall into this category. [II, xxii, 10]. However, this point does not affect the main argument. Whether or not the 'doings' involved in an action are physical movements, they must fall under a notion if they are to constitute an action.

of his legs, the cautious judgement that he is running will, under almost any circumstances, be correct. However, if, solely on the grounds of observed behaviour, the same man is judged to be (say) fleeing, there is a considerable likelihood of the judgement's being incorrect. The action of running is one of the ways in which the action of fleeing may be performed, but it is far from being the only way. Further, running is an action which can go to constitute an indefinite range of quite different actions. In running the agent may be fleeing, deserting, racing, exercising, etc., etc. Once we go beyond the cautious judgement that the man is running we need grounds which cover more than his overt behaviour. However, we almost always do go beyond the cautious judgement warranted by the observation of behaviour. The assertion that the man is running, in itself, carries very little information. As the range of bodily movements which constitutes running is a limited one, and as the action itself is completely constituted by that limited range of movements, anyone can see that the man is running. But generally what we want to know is the significance of what he is doing. This significance is expressed by the notion under which we rank his behaviour. For what counts as significant in human behaviour is relative to our interests and purposes; and the same interests and purposes prompt the formation of notions of actions. It is not surprising, then, that the great majority of notions signify actions far more complex than those in which there is a one-one correlation between overt behaviour and the action

performed. These simple actions are seldom worth mentioning; they are not the actions which go into a person's biography. The importance of actions such as running lies primarily in the fact that they constitute parts of other actions.

Locke is acquainted with the fact that in most cases the one type of overt behaviour can constitute different types of actions, and the one type of action can be constituted by different types of behaviour:

. . . a man holding a gun in his hand and pulling downe the trigger may be either Rebellion, Parricide, Murther, Homicide, Duty, Justice, Valer, or recreation, and be thus variously diversified when all the circumstances put together are compared to a rule though the simple action of holding the gun and pulling the trigger may be exactly the same.

Draft A, p. 35

However, as we shall see, he has no clear realization of the implications of this fact for moral theory.

In light of the foregoing exposition, it should be fairly clear that the distinction Locke draws between real and nominal essence does have a value in his analysis of human action. For in this context Locke can avoid the difficulties attending his distinction when it is applied to physical substances. The nominal essence of the idea, or notion, is the real essence, or form, of the action existing in the world. That is, a particular piece of behaviour in the world is the action which it is by virtue of measuring up to a notion. The notion is the universal in which the particular action partakes. It is, of course, not an hypostatized universal, or substantial form.

Notions are ideas and thus, on Locke's account, they are some kind of particular entities existing in the minds of men. As the being of a particular action depends on its participating in a universal form, it cannot (unlike a particular physical object) exist as a bare, unnamed particular. A physical object exists as a substance whether or not there is an idea under which it can be ranked. Once it is classified according to an idea it is considered an instance of a kind of substance. A particular action, however, must always be an instance of a kind of action. A bare, unnamed particular action would be one which did not measure up to any notion whatsoever; but then it could not be an action. In short, we may conclude that, with respect to human action, the doctrine of forms whereby things are what they are, is coherent and highly relevant. We may now turn our attention to the importance of Locke's analysis of notion in the context of moral action.

It can be seen that some of the actions we have cited from Locke's text are referred to by distinctively moral notions, (e.g. murder, lying); while the notions referring to others are non-moral (e.g. fencing, running). The difference between moral and non-moral notions is a difference in the use they are put to. For instance, if it is asserted of a man that he has committed murder or that he is lying, a moral judgement has been made.⁵ However, to assert

5 This is in need of some qualification. The assertion that a man has committed murder, etc. may be uttered as part of a play

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that the man is fencing or running is (unless a special background is assumed) simply to state a fact, one which is of no moral import whatsoever.⁶

It is important to note that the difference suggested here between moral and non-moral notions is not that in using the latter we assert facts about the world, whereas in using the former we express emotions or attitudes towards things in the world. On the contrary, both types of notion are equally suited to the assertion of facts. 'That a man is lying' is just as much a fact as 'that he is fencing'. Both these expressions refer to something which is the case. Since Locke's time a great many philosophers have grown suspicious of the view that moral judgements state objective facts. Yet two things are beyond doubt: (1) The assertion that a man is fencing states a fact. (2) The assertion that a man is lying is a moral judgement. Comparing the two assertions it is hard to see how they can be said to differ in anything other than that they state two different facts. Of course the philosophers

5 Cont'd

or as a joke. In these circumstances no moral judgement has been made. However, the use of moral notions outside moral contexts is parasitic upon their use within such contexts.

6 These facts may have moral import if, for instance, the man was deserting his friends or fencing on a Sunday. But if moral relevance is granted here the action in question will fall under a moral notion, e.g. 'treachery', 'Sabbath-breaking'.

who maintain that moral judgements do not state facts (or that they do not state objective facts about the world, or that what makes them moral judgements is not the facts they state) are not to be refuted this lightly. The similarity noted here between an undoubted factual judgement and an undoubted moral judgement represents nothing more than a starting-point for a theory of moral judgements. For the present we will endeavour to outline the theory of moral judgements suggested by Locke's account of notions, without paying much attention to the objections which may be urged against it.⁷

Any theory of moral judgements must take cognizance of our deeply felt belief in the division between the moral and the non-moral. If it be granted that moral notions, such as 'lying', 'murder', 'adultery' etc, are a sub-class of the notions we have formed to signify actions, and, further, that we always form our notions to accord with our interests and purposes, the difference between the moral and the non-moral might be explicated thus: When we use moral notions to refer to human behaviour we consider that behaviour in a specific way; we look at it from the moral point of view as opposed to other points of view. It is not that there is a line dividing the moral on one side from the non-moral on the other (a division expressible in terms of a dichotomy between fact and value or descriptive and evaluative discourse); rather, there

7 In Chapter IX we will consider the non-cognitivist objections raised against a 'factual' analysis of moral judgements.

are many ways of looking at the world and the moral point of view is one of these ways. There are many points of view from which the world can be seen because men living in the world have a wide variety of interests and purposes. It is true the distinction between moral and non-moral does loom large in our consciousness, while distinctions between other points of view are often forgotten. This is because we suppose the moral point of view to be somehow universal, and sovereign over all other ways of looking at the world. We assume that all men (at least those who have attained 'the age of reason') are committed to considering things in a moral light. Moreover, we assume moral considerations to be supreme. Therefore, the conclusions we reach when considering things from the moral point of view are looked on as being more important than any conclusions reached from any non-moral point of view.

Moral notions may be said to compose the vocabulary in which we express the moral point of view. That is, when we use moral notions we are speaking from the moral point of view. Moral notions signifying actions do not make up the whole of this vocabulary, but they do make up the distinctive and typical part of it. They are much more typical than notions such as 'good', 'right', 'bad', or 'wrong'. These latter certainly have roles in moral discourse, but in the everyday business of morality they are in fact seldom used. Their infrequent use is easily explicable. The assertion that an action is wrong, in itself, conveys little

information. Earlier on the same explanation was given for the infrequent use of a notion like 'running'. The assertion that a man is running is generally uninformative because the notion involved is too specific; it tells us nothing more than any observer can see from the man's behaviour. The assertion that an action is right is uninformative for the opposite reason; the notion involved is too vague. Such an assertion always invites, and always warrants, further specification. We want to know why the action is right, in what way it is right and so on. Typical moral notions (murder, adultery, etc.) group together features of the world of human action. Therefore, they can be used to convey quite detailed information. For instance, if we are told only that a person did something wrong we learn virtually nothing. If, however, we are told that he committed murder we learn at least the general characteristics of his action.

8

It may be added that terms such as 'good' and 'right' are not distinctively moral notions; for they have perfectly normal uses in non-moral contexts. In fact their use in non-moral contexts is much more frequent and informative than their use in moral contexts. If a truthful, uneccentric green-grocer says that his potatoes are good this week, we learn much more than if he tells us that his assistant is a good man.

8 It could be argued that the prime role of 'good' and 'right' is not in morality as it is practiced, but in moral philosophy, insofar as the latter is a discipline concerned with the nature of goodness and the ultimate criterion of right and wrong.

A moral notion, like any other notion, shapes reality. It imposes a form and significance on human behaviour. However, a given piece of human behaviour can be viewed in a number of ways. As was mentioned previously, once we go beyond a cautious judgement using a notion in which there is a simple one-one correspondence between overt behaviour and the action performed, there is a probability of our judgement's being incorrect. We have gone beyond what we can see to be the case. More than this, beyond a cautious judgement confined to observable behaviour there is always a range of notions under which the action might legitimately be placed. Let us suppose we correctly judge the man who is running to be fleeing. That is, his action of running, in the particular circumstances, conforms to the notion of 'fleeing'. The action of fleeing may in turn be ranked under a notion. Considered from the moral point of view it might be ranked as an act of teachery. But considered from some other, non-moral, point of view it might be ranked under the notion of (say) 'self-preservation'. These rankings are quite consistent one with another. The difference in the two judgements is due to the different points of view adopted with respect to the action. In the first judgement it is seen in a moral perspective; in the second it is seen as morally neutral.

It should not be thought that, because a piece of behaviour may be seen from different points of view (and thus quite appropriately

ranked under different notions) it can never definitely be said to constitute one kind of action rather than another. On the contrary, provided the man's behaviour conforms to the notion of 'treachery', then it is an act of treachery; provided it conforms to the notion of 'self-preservation', it is an act of self-preservation. (The 'is' here is, of course, an 'is of identity', not an 'is of predication'.) Moreover, it is both these actions (and no doubt several others as well) whether or not anyone passes a judgement and ranks it under a notion. Once notions of actions have become part of the vocabulary of mankind behaviour can conform or fail to conform to those notions. In ranking an action under a notion we judge that a certain conformity does in fact hold. Which notion (or notions) we select depends on the point of view from which we look at the action.

The fact that a given piece of behaviour may be seen in a variety of ways does have an important consequence for the theory of moral judgements. There appears to be no reason in the nature of the case why a particular action should be seen in one way rather than in another. To take an extreme example, the Emperor Heliogabalus allegedly slaughtered people because he found the sight of red blood on green grass beautiful. If this story is true, it might be said that Heliogabalus adopted the aesthetic, rather than the moral point of view. What others would rank under the moral notions such as 'murder' and 'cruelty', he thought of as acts of

creation.⁹ Now, whatever else may be said about the Emperor's position, it does not appear logically incoherent. If such a morally outrageous position is logically sound, it follows that the universality and sovereignty of the moral point of view is not something which can be taken for granted.¹⁰

The justification which Locke offers for what we have termed the moral point of view will be discussed in a later chapter. The remainder of the present chapter will be taken up, first, with an assessment of the theory of moral judgements which we have elicited from Locke's account of notions; second, with a criticism of his account concerning the definability of notions.

The importance of what may, perhaps most fairly, be termed the 'Lockean' theory of moral judgements, lies primarily in this: as we have expounded it, the theory provides a defence of moral objectivity against moral subjectivism. This is not to say that

9 Heliogabalus's aesthetic tastes are mentioned by Professor Hare in Freedom and Reason, p. 161. For a detailed account of a life lived from the aesthetic, as opposed to the moral, point of view, see Joris-Karl Huysmans' novel À Rebours.

10 It is sometimes maintained that universality and sovereignty are the defining characteristics of the moral point of view, or of moral principles. Granted this, if Heliogabalus is prepared to universalize his principle and to agree that he himself might be slaughtered for an aesthetic end, then he can be said to have adopted the moral point of view. Cf. Hare, Op. cit., p. 170. However, if the account of typical moral judgements which has been sketched in above is sound, there is no need to accept this paradoxical conclusion. What we do need is a further account of the moral point of view and a justification for the overriding force of morality.

Locke intended his account of notions to constitute such a defence. In the seventeenth-century moral subjectivism did not exist as a serious rival to objectivism. Even Hobbes, who was accused of reducing morality to governmental will, claimed to be explicating the objective natural law. The 'axiom of knowledge' had been badly shaken, but this gave rise to the question of how, and whether, the objective standards of right and wrong were to be known. It did not immediately produce the theory that these standards were a myth. It is not till David Hume that an unabashed subjectivism is put forward as a serious theory of morals. The way in which the Lockean theory constitutes a defence of moral objectivism can best be shown by measuring it against one of the arguments for subjectivism to be found in Hume.

In Book III, Part I, Section 1 of A Treatise of Human Nature, Hume sets out to prove that moral distinctions are not derived from reason. His argument in large part revolves about a single illustration:

. . . let us chuse any inanimate object, such as an oak or elm; and let us suppose, that by the dropping of its seed, it produces a sapling below it, which springing up by degrees, at last overtops and destroys the parent tree: I ask, if in this instance there be wanting any relation, which is discoverable in parricide or ingratitude? Is not the one tree the cause of the other's existence; and the latter the cause of the destruction of the former, in the same manner as when a child murders his parent? 'Tis not sufficient to reply, that a choice or will is wanting. For in the case of parricide, a will does not give rise to any different relations, but is only the cause from which the action is deriv'd; and consequently produces the same relations, that in the oak or elm arise

from some other principles . . . Here then the same relations have different causes; but still the relations are the same: And as their discovery is not in both cases attended with a notion of immorality, it follows that that notion does not arise from such a discovery.¹¹

This 'entirely decisive' argument, Hume continues, proves not only, "that morality consists not in any relations, that are the objects of science; but . . . that it consists not in any matter of fact, which can be discover'd by the understanding . . . Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts . . . The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action".¹²

Hume's argument assumes that, if moral distinctions are to have an objective status, they must exist independently of the mind in the same way as material objects have an independent existence. On this assumption, there would be moral facts in the world even if there were no human beings. The kind of answer Locke would have given

11 Treatise ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, p. 467.

12 Op. cit., pp. 468 - 469. Cf. Julius Kovesi's comments on this passage in Moral Notions, pp. 69 f. My assessment of Locke's account of notions and its relevance to morality owes much to the work done by Mr Kovesi.

Hume can be seen in the following passage. Locke is explaining that notions of actions do not mirror patterns in the external world:

For what greater connexion in nature has the idea of a man, than the idea of a sheep, with killing, that this is made a particular species of an action, signified by the word murder, and the other not? Or what union is there in nature between the idea of the relation of a father, with killing, than that of a son or neighbour, that those are combined into one complex idea and thereby make the essence of the distinct species parricide, whilst the other makes no distinct species at all? . . . Thus the mind in mixed modes arbitrarily unites into complex ideas such as it finds convenient, whilst others that have altogether as much union in nature are left loose, and never combined into one idea, because they have no need of one name. /III, v, 67

The difference between the case of the tree and the sapling and the child murdering his parent consists simply in this: we have the moral notion 'parricide' which applies in the latter case; we have no moral notion which applies in the former. The objection that, as notions are arbitrary creations of the mind, we could frame one to cover the example of the tree and the sapling has no force. Morality concerns human agents, and the moral notions we do frame accord with our interests in the behaviour of human beings. Moral facts belong to the reality which has been made possible by the mind's creation of notions which signify actions. Thus, the world of moral action, as distinct from the world of substances, does not have its existence in complete independence of the mind. Nevertheless, it does exist objectively. If a man does something which conforms to a moral notion, he has performed an action which has moral significance. This is so whether or not a moral judgement

is actually passed on what he does. It is equally a fact that the man has done something, and that what he has done has moral significance. These facts are possible only because the mind has framed notions, but this dependence does not detract from their objective status.

Nor does Locke suppose the individual at liberty to apply moral notions in a Humpty Dumpty fashion. An action cannot sensibly be called murder or theft according to a private use of these notions:

It is not enough that men have ideas . . . for which they make . . . signs stand; but they must also take care to apply their words as near as may be to such ideas as common use has annexed them to. For words, . . . being no man's private possession but the common measure of commerce and communication, it is not for anyone at pleasure to change the stamp they are current in. [III, xi, 11., cf. IV, iv, 9]

As the criteria for the application of moral notions being thus public, it is quite possible for men to rank actions under the wrong notions; and it is also possible for their errors to be corrected. On Hume's account, in arriving at a moral judgement a man must introspect a moral sentiment in his own breast. If the feeling of approval or disapproval is not present, then, for him the object of judgement has no moral relevance. There is no question of his being mistaken, for there are no objective moral standards against which he could be said to be in error.¹³

13 Locke's 'defence of moral objectivity' does not preclude the possibility of human feelings entering into the formation of moral notions. [Cf. Kovesi: Op. cit., p. 72.] Nor, of course, is it to be taken as a complete answer to Hume's moral subjectivism.

Having so far largely endorsed Locke's account of notions, it is time to balance the picture with a consideration of its main weakness. As we saw above, Locke realizes that one type of overt behaviour can count as many different actions. Therefore, in most cases one cannot tell what action is being performed merely by observing the behaviour of the agent. Consequently most notions of actions are incapable of ostensive definition. In this they differ from ideas of substances; for the sensible qualities existing together in nature, from the observation of which we construct our ideas of substances, can be shown. In recompense, however, notions can be completely and exactly defined:

For they being combinations of several ideas that the mind of man has arbitrarily put together, without reference to any archetypes, men may, if they please, exactly know the ideas that go to each composition, and so both use these words in a certain and undoubted signification, and perfectly declare . . . what they stand for. [III, xi, 15]

These definitions will be 'real definitions'; for with notions the nominal and real essence are one and the same. Thus, in defining the notion we express the real essence, or form, of the thing signified.

The method of definition Locke recommends for notions is the same as that which he thinks suitable for ideas of substances (to be exact, for the words signifying those ideas); "by enumerating those simple ideas that are combined in the signification of the term defined". [III, iii, 10., Cf. II, xxii, 9] Real definitions of substances are beyond our reach, as our ideas cannot capture their

real essences. Nevertheless, we can, by observation and experiment, greatly improve our ideas of substances. Observation reveals further properties of bodies which can be incorporated into our ideas. The natural philosopher cannot achieve his traditional aim of exhibiting substances in their essences. However he can, and should, compile natural histories of substances. If properly carried through, this task would culminate in a great dictionary in which the various kinds of substances were defined in terms of all their discovered properties. [III, xi, 25] The ideal presented is a perfectly precise system of classification expressed in a perfectly precise language. For the ordinary affairs of life our imprecise ideas of substances do well enough, but, when used in philosophical discussion, they give rise to endless verbal disputes. [III, ix, 15 - 16] As it is doubtful that we will ever be able to observe bodies at the level of their minute internal structures, the language of substances is never likely to be perfected. However, the definition of moral notions comes up against no such impediment. Hence, a perfect language of morals is a distinct possibility. Parallel to the dictionary of the physical world Locke envisages a dictionary of the world of human action. If such a project were carried through it would define, "the greatest part of the words made us of in divinity, ethics, law, and politics, and several other sciences". [II, xxii, 12]

Whether or not Locke's method of definition is viable when applied to substances, it is quite unsuitable for moral notions.

A perfect language of morals, in which each notion was broken down into a definite number of simple elements, would fundamentally distort our moral notions and render them useless for the purposes they serve. Such a language would be a distortion because, in any given case, the number of factors which might count for or against a piece of behaviour falling under a specific moral notion is indefinite. Indefiniteness here is a necessary consequence of the use to which moral notions are put in the making of moral judgements.

We have argued that, at least typically, making a moral judgement consists in ranking an action under a moral notion. Now in so doing we never merely classify the action. It is a logical truth that actions are performed by agents. A judgement which ranks an action under a moral notion always carries at least a tacit reference to an agent. This holds whether the action is one which has been performed by a particular agent, one which a particular agent is contemplating performing, or a type of action considered apart from any particular performance. For example, if an historically performed action is judged to be murder, the agent who performed it is thereby judged to have committed murder. Similarly, if a contemplated action is so judged it is implied that, if the agent does perform it, he will commit murder; if it is a type of action, the implication is that any agent who has performed it, or will perform it, commits murder. Conversely, if the agent

himself is judged to commit murder, then his action is ranked under the notion, 'murder'. We cannot make either judgement without, at least implicitly, making the other. If either judgement is shown to be incorrect the other must also be withdrawn. For instance, we cannot judge the agent's action to be murder and deny that he committed murder; nor judge that he committed murder and deny that his action is murder.

Now in the case of any judgement ascribing an action to an agent, there are an indefinite number of factors which might count as a rebuttal of that judgement. The rebuttal need not, and usually does not, take the form of a denial that the 'doings' which, under normal circumstances, constitute the action in question are present. Most often these facts will be conceded, but the circumstances will be said to be abnormal. Thus, to take the case of murder, the agent, while admitting that he killed the victim, may claim that he acted in self-defence, or to save the life of another person, or that he did not know the gun was loaded, and so on. He attempts to excuse, justify, or mitigate his behaviour. If he succeeds in his claim of special circumstances, he successfully rebuts the charge against him. He can no longer be said to have committed murder; and therefore, his action can no longer be ranked under the notion of 'murder'. The procedure of rebuttal is equally appropriate when the action under consideration is a type of action, abstracted from any actual or contemplated performance

by a particular agent. In this case one need only cite theoretical exceptional circumstances; and these are always available. However, it might be objected there are some moral notions signifying actions in which (like the notion of 'running') there is a simple one-one correlation between behaviour and the action performer. Here there would seem to be no room for rebuttal. For example, it might be argued that the moral notion of 'drunkenness' groups together a limited number of elements, and that if these elements are present there is no question but the action is one of drunkenness. But even in a case such as this, the charge that a certain action has been performed may be turned. For instance, the agent might claim that he thought the liquid he drank to be water. If this is accepted, although the agent's state is no doubt one of intoxication, his action cannot be ranked under the moral notion of drunkenness.¹⁴ It is true that from the observation of the consequences of an action we can very often deduce the cause of those consequences. However, it is not true that we thereby deduce the action itself.

It should not be thought that the list of factors which can count against the ascription of an action to an agent is indefinite in the sense that it is far too long to enumerate. Its indefiniteness is due to the fact that, whether a given factor does count as a

14 It should be noted that the procedure of rebuttal is just as appropriate when the action is ranked under a pro-moral notion such as 'kindness'. For virtues, as well as vices, may be disclaimed.

rebuttal itself depends on other factors. For example, 'blind rage' may sometimes serve as an excuse lessening the charge of murder to one of manslaughter. At other times, it may be no excuse whatever. Whether or not a rebuttal is successful depends upon an interplay of circumstances in each particular case. No matter how far we extended our list of factors we could never hope to exhaust the possibilities of this interplay; for new moves can always be thought up.

The definitions of moral notions which Locke envisages would consist in complete lists of necessary and sufficient conditions. Thus, if a notion were defined in terms of elements x, y, z, the presence of these elements in the world would entail the presence of the action signified by the notion. The fact that the ascription of an action to an agent is always open to rebuttal explains why the presence of a limited number of elements cannot entail the presence of the action. Thus, any definition of a moral notion given purely in terms of elements needs a ceteris paribus clause. We can say that the presence of certain elements means the behaviour in question falls under a certain moral notion, if all other things are equal. Here the ceteris paribus clause is essential; without it what we say is false.

Standing behind Locke's opinion of the complete definability of moral notions is his general view of ideas; of both ideas of substances, and notions. It was argued in Chapter IV that, for

Locke, ideas are essentially patterns which picture reality and serve as the criteria whereby we classify particular things. Despite his realization of the considerable difference between notions of actions and ideas of substances, Locke never doubted the correctness of this general view. Both kinds of ideas are patterns men carry in their minds:

. . . in mixed modes, at least the most considerable parts of them, which are moral beings, we consider the original patterns as being in the mind; and to those we refer for the distinguishing of particular beings under names.
 [III, v, 12]

If we assume (that which is false) that the idea of a physical substance such as 'gold' is used only to classify particular pieces of gold, there is limited plausibility in the view that an idea is a kind of pattern. A man who knows that gold is something yellow, malleable, etc will generally be able to identify pieces of gold correctly. We suppose that the more properties he adds to his pattern, the less likelihood there is of his being mistaken in an identification. The ideal pattern will be one in which all the properties of gold are listed. So long as this pattern was scrupulously applied, the misidentification of a particular piece of gold would be an impossibility. If moral notions are likewise conceived as patterns to be used in the classification of particulars, it is easy to slip into the belief that they would be similarly perfected by a complete listing of elements. Locke grants that the elements combined in moral notions are not all ideas of sensible

qualities. Actions are, "distinguished by their causes, means, objects, ends, instruments, time, place, and other circumstances". [II, xxii, 10] Nevertheless, he believes that all these are, or break down into, simple ideas which may be enumerated just as easily as simple ideas of sensible qualities. It is true that they can be enumerated. The mistake is to suppose that they can be completely enumerated. Locke's theory collapses because he pays insufficient attention to the vague 'other circumstances'.

Yet we do rank actions under moral notions. If, when we do this, we are not applying a pattern, what are we doing? The short answer is that we are exercising a capacity; e.g. the capacity to recognize in a concrete situation what counts for or against a certain action falling under a specific moral notion. We saw in the previous chapter how the entity theory of ideas to which Locke subscribes cannot explain human thought, and that it may be replaced by a capacity, or dispositional theory of ideas. There is another reason why the entity theory should be rejected; it is positively misleading. If having an idea is being possessed of a particular entity 'in one's mind', there is no reason why having one idea should involve the possession of any other ideas. Yet it is plain from the above discussion that ranking an action under a moral notion involves a quite extensive interrelation of ideas. It involves, for instance, ideas such as 'justification' and 'excuse'. If a man does not understand (or have) ideas such as these, he will not be

able to rank actions under moral notions. The fact that ideas are interrelated in their uses is easily grasped once 'having an idea' is thought of as having a capacity to do things. For we are quite used to the fact that human capacities seldom, if ever, exist in isolation one from the other.

Reflection on the nature of moral notions also serves to reveal the bankruptcy of the Cartesian picture of man, which Locke implicitly accepts. The solitary individual who builds ideas from experience (either of the internal world of his own mental processes or the postulated external world) could not possibly acquire the capacities which constitute the possession of moral notions. A man can never come to understand ideas such as 'excuse' and 'justification' except by being shown examples illustrating these ideas. But it is only because he participates in the world in which excuses and justifications figure that he can understand these examples. If he were a completely external observer he could have no point of contact with the moral world. We might say finally that to understand a moral notion is to understand the weaknesses of human beings and the exigencies of human life.¹⁵

In conclusion, something needs to be said about the manner in

15 It might well prove quite impossible to explain human moral notions to a creature whose way of life and general condition were entirely different from ours. Consider the trouble Gulliver has in explaining the comparatively simple notion of lying to the 'naturally virtuous' Houyhnhnm. See Gulliver's Travels, Part IV, ch. iv.

which Locke's 'perfect language of morals' distorts the way in which we actually use moral notions. It should be noted that such a language could be constructed; but it would not be a language of morals. Each moral notion could be given a definition in terms of a limited number of elements, and it could be stipulated that if and only if the elements contained in the notion were present was the action to be ranked under that notion. We can imagine this being done as one of the rules in a board game called 'morality'. However such stipulations would destroy the activity of morality as it is in fact carried on in the world. There are two main reasons why it would do so. In the first place we can arrive at a properly moral judgement of a particular action only after we have weighed any rebuttals which are forthcoming. If it is laid down in advance that only a certain limited number of factors count in the appraisal of an action, each particular action will have been pre-judged. It will be quite impossible for an action to be judged 'on its own merits'. Secondly, once a man has acquired moral notions he is able, not only to pass moral judgements on the actions of others, but to consciously conform his own actions to moral notions. Here again Locke's precise definitions would not be a help but a hinderance. Moral notions indicate the factors which, under normal circumstances, count for an action being of a specific kind. Knowing this the agent can act so as to avoid or include these factors in his own conduct. But very often the agent will have to decide

whether his circumstances are normal. If the definitions Locke hopes for were operative there would be no room for such moral decisions. The moral life of the agent would be simplified to the extent of automatic conformity. Locke conceived the perfect language of morals to be (like the perfect language of substances) a philosophical language, free of the imprecisions and vagueness of ordinary language:

Vulgar notions suit vulgar discourses; and both, though confused enough, yet serve pretty well the market and the wake. Merchants and lovers, cooks and tailors have words wherewithall to dispatch their ordinary affairs; and so, I think, might philosophers and disputants too, if they had a mind to understand and be clearly understood.
 [III, xi, 10]

However morality is the business of 'merchants and lovers' etc., and for this business a certain lack of precision is not an imperfection in moral notions, but an essential feature.

Locke's account of notions points in two directions. Firstly, it suggests a theory of moral judgements which (if it can be defended against certain objections yet to be considered) guarantees their status as cognitive judgements. However Locke himself does not follow up this suggestion. It is the second direction which captures his imagination. The 'ultimate definability' of moral notions provides the mainstay for Locke's belief that morality can be made a demonstrative science:

Upon this ground it is that I am bold to think that morality is capable of demonstration, as well as mathematics: since the precise real essence of the

things moral words stand for may be perfectly known, and so the congruity or incongruity of the things themselves be certainly discovered, in which consists perfect knowledge. III, xi, 16¹⁶

This ground we have seen to be hollow. Nevertheless, even as a mistake Locke's claim deserves further investigation.

16 Cf. Locke's far less optimistic remark to Molyneux: "Though by the view I had of moral ideas, whilst I was considering that subject, I thought I saw that morality might be demonstratively made out; yet whether I am able so to make it out, is another question". Locke to Molyneux, 20 Sept., 1692. Works, 9, p. 294

Chapter VI

THE SCIENCE OF MORALITY

Two pictures make up the background for Locke's belief in a science of morality: a picture of perfectly certain knowledge and a picture of morality as an integral part of a rational world order. Within the sphere of moral philosophy both pictures are more or less misleading. As they are combined by Locke, they give rise to an epistemological ambition which cannot be fulfilled; the construction of an apodeictic system of morals.

We have already said something of Locke's conception of knowledge. It is a body of universal, necessary propositions, expressing relations between ideas. The component part of knowledge are, then, known a priori; they are 'truths of reason', not 'truths of fact'.¹ Locke finds this picture instantiated in mathematics, particularly in geometry. The objects with which the mathematician deals have a purely ideal existence. The question of whether there are any examples of mathematically perfect rectangles or circles in nature is irrelevant to the truth of mathematical propositions. What is important, and what makes mathematics 'real knowledge', is the fact

1 "There are also two kinds of truths, those of reasoning and those of fact. Truths of reasoning are necessary and their opposite is impossible, and those of fact are contingent and their opposite is possible. When a truth is necessary its reason can be found by analysis, resolving it into more simple ideas and truths until we reach those which are primitive". /Leibniz: The Monadology, § 33. Cf. New Essays concerning Human Understanding, IV, ii, 17. Locke makes a similar distinction in his Journal entry for June 26th, quoted above ch. III, footnote 9.

that, if anything in the physical world is a circle it is such by virtue of its conformity to the idea of a circle:

The mathematician considers the truth and properties belonging to a rectangle or circle only as they are in idea in his own mind . . . But yet the knowledge he has of any truths or properties belonging to a circle, or any other mathematical figure, are nevertheless true and certain, even of real things existing: because real things are no further concerned, nor intended to be meant by any such propositions, than as things really agree to those archetypes in his mind . . . And therefore he is certain all his knowledge concerning such ideas is real knowledge
 [IV, iv, 6]

The fact that mathematical ideas are not intended to mirror things in the world, but only to provide standards to which things may attain, also explains the status of mathematical knowledge. As mathematical ideas are completely independent of the facts of the world, it follows that the propositions of mathematics can neither be confirmed nor falsified by experience. It would, for example, be no use trying to prove the proposition that triangles on equal bases between equal parallel lines are equal in area by taking measurements of actual triangles drawn between parallel lines. If our measurements clashed with this proposition it would not disprove a geometrical theorem, but show our measurement or our drawing to be faulty.² Mathematical knowledge thus belongs to a realm exempt from the contingencies revealed to experience. As necessity is the hallmark of a priori knowledge, so contingency marks knowledge a posteriori.³

2 Cf. Woolhouse: Locke's Philosophy of Science and Knowledge, p.2.

3 Cf. Kant ; Critique of Pure Reason, B.4. (trans. Kemp Smith, pp. 43 - 44)

According to Locke we acquire mathematical knowledge by perceiving relations holding between ideas. It is therefore essential that we begin with exact ideas of mathematical objects:

Suppose a man not to have a perfect exact idea of a right angle, a scalene, or trapezium; and there is nothing more certain than that he will in vain seek any demonstration about them. [IV, xii, 15]

As mathematical ideas are notions, in which real and nominal essence coincide, in them we are able to achieve exactitude. However, exact ideas are nothing more than a prerequisite for knowledge. Insofar as they are instructive, the propositions of mathematics express relations between ideas which are not immediately obvious from a contemplation of the ideas themselves. These propositions constitute demonstrative, not merely intuitive, knowledge. Mathematics represents the only body of demonstrative knowledge we actually have:

The art of finding proofs, and the admirable methods they [the mathematicians] have invented for the singling out and laying in order those intermediate ideas that demonstratively show the equality or inequality of inapplicable qualities, is that which has carried them so far and produced such wonderful and unexpected discoveries. [IV, xii, 7]

It is the mathematical method which Locke hopes to see extended into other fields:

This, I think, I may say: that, if other ideas that are the real as well as nominal essences of their species were pursued in the way familiar to mathematicians, they would carry our thoughts further and with greater evidence and clearness than possibly we are apt to imagine. [Ibid.]

It might be thought that what makes mathematics a demonstrative science

is the fact that it deals solely with quantitative relations expressible in numerical terms. However, Locke believes qualitative relations to be equally amenable to demonstration:

For whatever ideas we have wherein the mind can perceive the immediate agreement or disagreement that is between them, there the mind is capable of intuitive knowledge; and where it can perceive the agreement or disagreement of any two ideas, by an intuitive perception of the agreement or disagreement they have with any intermediate ideas, there the mind is capable of demonstration, which is not limited to ideas of extension, figure, number, and their modes.
 [IV, ii, 9]

Provided that there is a coincidence of real and nominal essence in the ideas in question the knowledge so gained will be real knowledge.

We saw in Chapter III that intuition is a necessary condition for demonstration. Now it is unproblematic that there are examples of intuitive knowledge. Cautiously, we may say that a truth is known intuitively if a man's dissenting from the proposition in which it is expressed is sufficient grounds for judging that he has failed to understand at least one of the ideas involved in the proposition. For example, we know that 'lead is a metal', and if a man were to deny this we could say, ipso facto, that he has not grasped either one, or both, of the ideas 'lead' and 'metal'. However, propositions such as 'lead is a metal' are what Locke calls 'trifling propositions; they "bring no increase to our knowledge". [IV, viii, 1]⁴ These he contrasts with 'instructive propositions':

4 Locke distinguishes two sorts of trifling propositions at IV, viii: (a) purely identical propositions, e.g. 'a soul is a soul'; (b) propositions in which, "a part of the complex idea is predicted of the name of the whole: a part of the definition of the word defined". 'Lead is a metal' is trifling in the latter sense.

We can know . . . the truth of two sorts of propositions with perfect certainty: the one is of those trifling propositions which have a certainty in them, but it is but a verbal certainty, but not instructive. And secondly, we can know the truth and so may be certain in propositions which affirm something of another, which is a necessary consequence of its precise complex idea, but not contained in it. /IV, viii, 8/⁵

As an example of an instructive certain proposition Locke cites, 'the external angle of all triangles is bigger than either of the opposite internal angles'. A man may fully understand all the ideas involved in this proposition yet not grasp its truth. But how is the truth of a proposition such as this, to be grasped? The notion of one idea being 'contained' in another to some degree explains the possibility of intuitive knowledge. A man who understands the idea of 'lead' cannot dissent from the proposition 'lead is a metal' because lead is by definition a metal. In terms of Locke's theory of definition this means the complex idea 'lead' contains the idea 'metal'. However, instructive propositions are not examples of containment. In their case, the relation between the ideas involved is that of ground and consequence, not containment. Locke understands demonstration to be the process whereby the necessary consequences of ideas are drawn out and exhibited. Each step in this process is intuitively guaranteed.

5 Cf. Draft A., "all universall propositions that are certain are only verball or words applyed to our owne Ideas and not instructive; and vice-versa all universall propositions that are instructive (i.e. informe us any thing about the nature

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The demonstration of a proposition consists in, "showing the agreement or disagreement of two ideas by the intervention of one or more proofs which have a constant, immutable, and visible connexion one with another". [IV, xv, 1] The visual metaphor employed here is to be taken seriously. For Locke, it is hardly a metaphor. Demonstrations, he writes in Draft A, "are as the word denotes the beare shewing of the things or proposing them to our senses or understandings soe as to make us take notice of them". [p. 47] In the same place he states that "certain knowledg or demonstration makes it self clearly appeare and be perceived by the things them selves put together in our sight or their clear distinct Ideas put together and as it were lying before us in view of our understandings". We arrive at instructive certain propositions, then, by a process of laying out our ideas in a kind of chain in which the connexion between each link is visible to intuition, thus revealing the remote connexion between the two ideas at the extremes.

A reading of the chapter, 'Of Reason' in the fourth book of the Essay makes it plain that the doctrine of demonstration is meant as

5 cont'd

qualitys and operations of things existing without us) are all uncertain". [pp. 46 - 47] However, it can be seen from the passage in parenthesis that by 'instructive propositions' Locke here means those which express something about the external world. These are still considered uncertain in the Essay. Moreover, in the same draft he states that "Mathematicall universal propositions are both true and instructive". [p. 51]

an account of ratiocination. Locke puts it forward as an alternative to the account which restricts human reasoning to the formal syllogistic mode.⁶ As is well known, Locke believes that, "God has not been so sparing to men, to make them barely two-legged creatures, and left it to Aristotle to make them rational".

[IV, xvii, 4] Locke does not consider the syllogism an illegitimate method of reasoning. What he does maintain is that the figures of the syllogism neither describe the ways men in fact reason, nor improve the exercise of reason, for "the understanding . . . has a native faculty to perceive the coherence or incoherence of its ideas, and can range them right without any such perplexing repetitions [i.e. syllogisms]". [Ibid.] On Locke's analysis, the faculty of reason has four major functions: First, it discovers intermediate ideas, or proofs. Second, it disposes these in a regular order, making their connexion readily perceivable. Third, it perceives the connexions between proofs. Fourth, via the perception of intermediate connexions, reason arrives at the remote relation between the two ideas under consideration. That is, it draws out the necessary consequences of these ideas. [IV, xvii, 3]

The question now arises as to the character of the connexions between ideas which reason is said to exhibit. In the first edition

6 Cf. Yolton: Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding, pp.91ff.

of the Essay Locke explicates the necessary connexion between two ideas in terms of the minds inability to think of them as unconnected, or as connected in any different way:

In some of our ideas there are certain relations, habitudes, and connexions so visibly included in the nature of the ideas themselves, that we cannot conceive them separable from them by any power whatsoever. And in these only we are capable of certain and universal knowledge. Thus the idea of a right-lined triangle necessarily carries with it an equality of its angles to two right ones. Nor can we conceive this relation, this connexion of these two ideas, to be possibly mutable or to depend on any arbitrary power, which of choice made it thus or could make it otherwise. [IV, iii, 29]

However, in the chapter 'Of the Association of Ideas' which he adds to the fourth edition, Locke attempts to separate the connexions between ideas from any psychological considerations whatsoever:

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. [II, xxxiii, 5]

Here the natural connexion between ideas is contrasted with false connexions set up by the mind; e.g. as when a man feels sick at the mention of honey because he once suffered from an overdose of that substance. The psychological association of ideas is an aberration and is a source of error and confusion. Reasoning is quite distinct from association. It discovers the links which objectively exist between ideas. Demonstration is the laying out of our ideas in their natural order.

At first sight it may seem out of place to talk of mathematical

ideas as having natural connexions. As notions they are, in Locke's terminology, constructions of the human mind. It would appear, therefore, that the connexions existing between them are artificial, made by us, rather than natural, discovered by us. The oddness here is somewhat lessened once we recall that notions are not random inventions of the mind. In comparison with ideas of substances they are arbitrary creations; for they are not made in accordance with external patterns. Nevertheless, they are made to suit human interests and purposes; and these dictate the manner and materials of their construction. Hence, Locke is not necessarily committed to a strict conventionalist view of mathematics. But there is no need for us to go into the much neglected subject of Locke's philosophy of mathematics. Whatever his views on the latter, the thesis that there are natural connexions between ideas is sufficiently canvassed in what he has to say about ideas of substances.

We have seen that, as our ideas of substances are all inadequate, they cannot enter into demonstrative knowledge. However, it should be remembered that this is due to the limitations of human understanding, and not in any way due to substances themselves. If we were capable of forming ideas of substances which mirrored their real essences (in the sense of their forms), then we could develop an a priori science of nature. Locke does not doubt that creatures standing above man in the Chain of Being do possess such adequate ideas and such a science. A laying out of these adequate ideas

would reveal necessary connexions holding between them because the ideas themselves would mirror necessary relations existing between objects in nature.

Broadly, Locke's thesis that there are natural connexions between ideas may be said to reflect his assumption of a rationally ordered universe. Here stress is to be put on the term 'rational'. That the universe is in some sense ordered (i.e. that it is not a chaos of random events) may be taken as evident. That it is rational in the way Locke conceives the rationality of things is open to debate. Locke admits that men can give an account of the order of the universe only in terms of observed regularities. However, this fails to be a properly scientific account because it does not reveal the rationality of the order it describes. It does not show the necessity of things being as they are. For Locke the rationality of the universe means that its order is perspicuous to reason, albeit only to a reason of superhuman capacity. That is to say, it must ultimately be expressible in terms of necessary relations between ideas. But these ideas are related because, being adequate ideas, they mirror the necessary connexions holding between substances in the world. Thus, Locke does not develop his thesis of natural connexions between ideas from an observation of links actually existing between ideas in the mind. If he did it would be a thesis in descriptive psychology, as is his account of the association of ideas. Rather he begins with the presupposition of a necessary

order of things external to the mind. It is this order which we endeavour to mirror in our ideas. If we are successful, then, we are able to perceive the natural connexions between ideas.

The science of mathematics shows reason functioning, as it were, at full strength. The inevitable inadequacy of our ideas of substances means that the methods of mathematics cannot be extended throughout natural philosophy. The physical order of the universe must, therefore, remain beyond the compass of human reason. Moral notions, however, are all adequate. Like mathematical ideas they are ontologically prior to anything they may represent in the world. As Locke puts it: "the truth and certainty of moral discourses abstracts from the lives of men and the existence of those virtues in the world whereof they treat If it be true in speculation, i.e. in idea, that murder deserves death, it will also be true in reality of any action that exists conformable to that idea of murder. [IV, iv, 8] Herein lies the main analogy between the ideas of morality and the ideas of mathematics; the analogy which sustains Locke's belief in the possibility of demonstrative moral knowledge.

Even if it is accepted that Locke's analysis of mathematical demonstration is substantially correct, that mathematicians proceed by way of perceiving necessary connexions between the ideas they make use of, an important question remains to be answered. What grounds are there for supposing natural connexions to exist between

moral notions? Granted that moral notions and mathematical ideas are similar in that, in both cases, there is a coincidence of real with nominal essence, and consequently an independence from observable reality; yet there would seem no reason why moral notions should not be dissimilar from mathematical ideas in being conceptually separate from each other. On the face of it, the moral notions we have so far considered (e.g. 'murder', adultery') would appear to be conceptually separate.

To find an answer to the above question we must look at the second of the two pictures which make up the background to Locke's belief in a demonstration of morality. Moral notions are the terms in which men express the content of the law of nature. They signify actions, but not merely as actions. Each individual moral notion falls within one of two categories; it is either a virtue or a vice. In Locke's scheme 'virtue' and 'vice' are the two most general moral notions. Thus, when an action is ranked under a moral notion it is classified as virtuous or vicious; "these ideas of virtues and vices [are] of transient actions, nowhere permanent, but only the ideas conceived in our minds to examine and denominate our actions by". [Draft B, § 156, p. 298] The classification of actions into virtues and vices articulates the content of the objective law of nature. [Cf., Essays p. 167] Now the law of nature was traditionally conceived as the moral aspect of the overall order of the universe. Locke assumes the rationality of the physical order to mean that it is explicable (to an understanding of sufficient capacity)

in terms of necessary connexions between ideas. From this assumption it is but a short step to the view that the moral order is likewise explicable. Given the fact that our moral notions are free from the inadequacy inevitably attendant upon our ideas of substances, it follows that the human understanding is capable of perceiving the natural connexions between them:

. . . the ideas that ethics are conversant about being all real essences, such as I imagine have a discoverable connexion and agreement one with another: so far as we can find their habitudes and relations, so far we shall be possessed of certain, real, and general truths; and I doubt not but, if a right method were taken, a great part of morality might be made out with that clearness that could leave, to a considering man, no more reason to doubt, that he could have to doubt of the truth of propositions in mathematics which have been demonstrated to him.
 [IV, xii; 8]

The 'right method' is, of course, the demonstrative method of the mathematicians.

Locke's picture of a rationally ordered universe is intimately bound up with his doctrine that things have real essences, or forms, which make them 'to be what they are'. We saw at the end of Chapter IV that Locke's doctrine of real essences is of but doubtful coherence when applied to the physical world. The doctrine of forms does give support to the thesis of necessary connexions existing between things in nature. However, Locke wishes to combine this doctrine with the corpuscular philosophy of nature. Obviously the corpuscular philosophy does allow for the regular connexion of things in nature. However, it is extremely doubtful that it can allow these connexions to be logically necessary. If the corpuscular

account of nature is accepted it would seem that forms must be rejected; but if forms are rejected the ground is taken from under the conception of a purely rational natural order, i.e. one which is completely expressible in terms of a priori necessary connexions between ideas. Once it is seen that the physical aspect of the order of nature is not 'rational' the picture of morality as a similarly rational aspect of that order loses its force and plausibility. Hence, the basis for a belief in a system of morals explicating the natural connexions holding between moral notions collapses.

While the parallel between 'rational' nature and 'rational' morality turns out to be vacuous; the analogy between mathematics (although in some ways it is instructive) breaks down at the point on which Locke places most weight. There are, Locke maintains, two reasons why morality has been thought incapable of demonstration. In the first place, moral notions, unlike ideas such as 'triangle' and 'circle', cannot be sensibly represented. Secondly, the simple ideas making up the complex ideas of mathematical objects are generally fewer in number than those combined in moral notions. On both counts it is difficult to keep moral notions in mind during the steps of an intricate demonstration. However, these disadvantages in moral notions, "may in a good measure be remedied by definitions, setting down that collection of simple ideas which every term shall stand for, and then using the terms steadily and constantly for that precise collection". [IV, iii, 40; Cf. III, xi, 17] Definition is, therefore, an essential step in the demonstration of morality,

and, like mathematical ideas, moral notions can be defined completely.

For good or ill, Locke's theory of definition has had a considerable influence on subsequent philosophy.⁷ Whatever may be said for or against it as a general theory, one thing is clear; it does not cover the definition of moral terms. As we saw in the preceding chapter, a moral notion cannot be analysed into a definite number of component elements; and the attempt to carry through such an analysis can only result in a truncated notion which is capable of performing its role in moral discourse. This is not to say that moral notions are all indefinable. The standard definition of 'murder' as the 'killing of a person with malice aforethought' is quite suitable for a wide range of purposes. It serves, for example, to distinguish the act of murder from accidental killing. But even if this definition embraced all instances of murder (which it does not), it would not be a precise definition in Locke's sense. For 'malice' is itself a moral notion which would in turn have to be broken down into its ultimate components. But the important point which applies to all moral notions is that, no matter how long we persevere in our analysis there will always be need for a final ceteris paribus clause. In the end we will have to say that an action constituted by such and such elements is a case of murder, all other

7 Cf. for example, G.E. Moore's Principia Ethica, Ch. I, § 7 - 8 in which the account given of definition exactly parallels Locke.

things being equal. For the everyday use of moral notions (the making of moral judgements, decisions etc.) this rider is essential. Unless a man understands the necessity for the ceteris paribus clause and is able to judge the circumstances in which other things are not equal, he cannot properly participate in the activity of morality.

Up to a point the analogy between mathematics and morality is instructive. With both mathematical ideas and moral notions real and nominal essence come to one and the same thing. Locke's mistake is to press the analogy founded on this insight in the wrong direction. Mathematical ideas are not only capable of precise definition, but, if they are to function within mathematics, they must be precisely defined. Moral notions, on the contrary, are incapable of precise definition because their function in morality demands imprecision. This important and instructive disanalogy between mathematics and morality may be expressed in the dictum that, mathematical ideas are necessarily closed, or complete, while moral notions are necessarily 'open textured'.⁸ That this is so but illustrates the banal truth that morality is not a mathematical discipline.

Insofar as Locke's hopes for a science of morality rest on the precise definability of our moral notions, he is predestined to

8 For the term 'open texture' see, Friedrich Waismann: "Verifiability" in Logic and Language (Second Series)

disappointment. However, we have yet to consider the most common objection urged against Locke's 'demonstration of morality'.

It has often been stated that, whatever Locke had in mind when he spoke of the demonstration of morality, his project rests upon a fundamental confusion; he does not see the difference between logical validity and moral obligation. No matter what conceptual links there may be between moral notions, analysis of these notions cannot demonstrate that we ought to do anything. What places moral notions in an entirely different category from mathematical ideas is the fact that the former enter into propositions which express obligation, while the latter enter into propositions which express nothing more than logical relations.⁹ The simple answer to this criticism is that Locke does not suppose the analysis of moral notions to reveal the obligatory force of morality. His legalist theory of obligation is abundantly clear in the Essays on the Law of Nature. Moral obligation can be founded only in the will of a superior to whom we are rightly subject. In the unfinished MS Of Ethics in General¹⁰ Locke explicitly distinguishes the analysis of moral notions from the explication of obligation:

Whoever treats of morality so as to give us only the definitions of justice and temperance, theft and

9 See, for example, Aaron: John Locke, p. 264; Von Leyden: Introduction to Essays on the Law of Nature, p. 55.

10 This MS. was first published by Lord King in his Life of John Locke, Vol.2, pp. 122 - 133. Von Leyden points out that Locke originally intended it to form chapter XX of Book IV of the Essay. [See Introduction to the Essays, p. 69]

incontinency, and tell us which are virtues, which are vices, does not only settle certain complex ideas of modes with their names to them . . . But whilst they discourse ever so acutely of temperance or justice, but show no law of a superior that prescribes temperance, to the observation or breach of which law there are rewards and punishments annexed, the force of morality is lost . . . for without showing a law that commands or forbids them . . . those actions which the schools here call virtues or vices, may by the same authority be called by contrary names in another country; and if these 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. King, 2, pp. 129 - 130/11

Unless a man knows there to be a law which binds his actions, the analysis of moral terms can teach him nothing more than "the skill how to speak properly, or at most to know what actions in the country he lives in are thought laudable or disgraceful; i.e. are called virtues and vices". Ibid, p. 125/

The answer to the above objection brings into focus a fact which has been surprisingly neglected by most commentators; Locke conceives the science of morality as having two distinct stages. In commenting on Locke's moral philosophy Bishop Berkeley remarks rather scornfully:

To demonstrate Morality it seems one need only make a Dictionary of Words and see which included which, at least. This is the greatest part and bulk of the Work. 12

11 Cf. Draft B, § 157, pp. 298 - 299.

12 Philosophical Commentaries, 690 in Works ed. Luce and Jessop, Vol. 1, p. 84.

That a dictionary of moral notions would make up the bulk of the work is true enough; but Berkeley's implication that it would constitute nearly all of the projected moral theory is misleading. Equipped with complete and precise definitions of moral notions, Locke supposes we could proceed to exhibit the conceptual links between them. However this is to be the final stage of the science of morality; and in itself it would be of minimal importance.

The first stage of Locke's project consists in showing the true foundations of moral obligation:

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 . . . 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: wherein I doubt not but from self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences as incontestable as those in mathematics, the measures of right and wrong might be made out . . . [IV, iii, 18] 13

It will be noted that the ideas cited in this passage are not what we have called moral notions, i.e. they are not ideas signifying actions under the aspect of virtue and vice. Nor are they notions in the general sense of the term defined by Locke. Our ideas of God and man do not impose a form on God and man. Both have their

13 Locke's Journal entry corresponding to this passage reads, "he that has a true Idea of god and his fellow creatures and of Justice goodnesse law happynesse & c. is capable of knowing moral things or have a demonstrative certainty in them". Sund. Jun. 26, 1681. [Aaron and Gibb, p. 116]

real essences independently of the nominal essences of the ideas we frame; and to us these real essences are unknowable. Locke realizes that other ideas besides moral notions enter into his moral theory, but he does not consider this a serious objection against the programme of demonstration:

For as to substances, when concerned in moral discourses, their divers natures are not so much inquired into as supposed: v.g. when we say that man is subject to law, we mean nothing by man but a corporeal rational creature; what the real essence or other qualities of that creature are in this case is no way considered. [III, xi, 16]

The ideas of God and man are prominent in the Essays on the Law of Nature; and here Locke is mainly concerned to establish morality and its obligation on a firm theological foundation. Though it may well be doubted that Locke's arguments in the Essays are all examples of the elucidation of necessary connexions between ideas, they can be said to make up the first stage in the demonstration of morality. But the Essays stop short at an account of the content of morality. The second stage of the demonstration of morality would consist in a conceptual mapping of our moral notions. This would exhibit man's duties (but not his obligation) in a quasi-mathematical fashion. It would be what William Molyneux calls a "book of offices".¹⁴

We have seen why this last stage cannot be carried through. At IV, iii, 18, Locke gives two examples of moral propositions which he claims are certain by virtue of the ideas involved: "Where

14 Molyneux to Locke, 14 March, 1695-96. [Works, 9, p. 374]

there is no property there is no injustice" and "No government allows absolute liberty". The feebleness of these examples serves more to illuminate Locke's failure than to raise expectations of a complete demonstration of morality. On the analyses Locke gives, the idea 'injustice' contains the idea 'property' and the idea 'government' contains the idea of restraints on absolute liberty. It is therefore difficult to see how he could defend himself against Berkeley's remarks that these, "instances of Demonstration in Morality are according to his own Rule trifling Propositions".¹⁵ Furthermore, as a later critic points out, it is not clear exactly how these propositions are morally relevant; for, of themselves, they do not function as guides to action.¹⁶

There is one more objection which might appear strong enough not only to demolish Locke's projected demonstration of morality, but also the theory of moral judgements which we have abstracted from his account of notions. It has been said that our moral notions are the terms in which moral duties are formulated and expressed. However, Locke holds moral notions to be creations of the human mind. As they are such, it appears unavoidable that a reliance placed on them in the guidance of action must reduce morality to a matter of subjective opinion, the very pitfall Locke's doctrine

15 Op.Cit., p. 84. Berkeley's charge has been frequently repeated. Cf. Gibson: Locke's Theory of Knowledge, p. 160; Aaron: John Locke, p. 262.

16 Cf. J. Kemp: Reason, Action and Morality, p. 21.

of an objective law of nature is designed to fence. Henry Lee, one of Locke's early critics, puts the problem in sharp focus. On Locke's showing, "the Reason why Morality may be demonstrated, is because every one making his Ideas of Virtues and Vices, according to his Fancy, he will be upon as sure Grounds as if he demonstrated, because no body will be able to judge but himself, whether his Ideas be right or wrong, and consequently he can never be confuted".¹⁷

Locke does not maintain the liberty of each individual to form moral notions according to whim. If men are to talk sensibly of moral matters they must use notions according to their commonly accepted meanings. Arbitrariness is no more allowable in moral discourse than it in mathematics. [Cf. IV, iv, 9] Nevertheless Lee's remark does present a real problem. Whether moral notions are developed by individuals or by society at large they are human creations. How, then, can Locke escape the charge that his theory leads to moral relativism and subjectivism?

Locke is acutely aware of the fact that what counts as virtue and vice differ from place to place and from age to age. He is always careful to distinguish the proper foundation of morality from its pseudo-foundation in custom and the opinions of men. This distinction is the major theme in Of Ethics in General:

But there is another sort of morality or rules of our actions, which though they may in many parts be coincident and agreeable

17 Anti-Scepticism, p. 235

with the former, the moral standards which are in fact preached in a given country at a given time yet have a different foundation, and we come to the knowledge of them a different way; these notions or standards of our actions not being ideas of our own making, to which we give names, but depend upon something without us, and so not made by us, but for us, and these are the rules set to our actions by the declared will or laws of another, who hath power to punish our aberrations. Op.Cit., p. 130

If our moral notions are to be in order, if they are really to express the moral law, they must themselves conform to a given standards. As Locke states in the Essay:

To conceive rightly of moral actions, we must take notice of them under this two-fold consideration. First, as they are in themselves, each made up of such a collection of simple ideas. Thus drunkenness or lying signify such or such a collection of simple ideas . . . and in this sense they are . . . positive absolute ideas . . . Secondly, our actions are considered as good, bad, or indifferent; and in this respect they are relative, it being their conformity to, or disagreement with, some rule that makes them to be regular or irregular, good or bad. II, xxviii, 15¹⁸

The question of how men are to know their duties now becomes a question of how they are to know whether the moral notions they form are genuine reflections of the law of nature.

If Locke's epistemology is confined within the circle of ideas, there appears to be no way of answering this question. However,

18 Cf. Draft B, § 162, p. 305: ". . . whencesoever we take the rule of moral actions; or by what standard soever we frame in our minds the ideas of virtues or vices, they consist only, and are made up of collections of simple ideas, which we originally received from sense or reflection: and their rectitude or obliquity consists in the agreement or disagreement with the patterns described by some law".

we have argued that although, on Locke's strict definition, knowledge is confined to ideas, this does not mean he places a similarly rigorous restriction on knowing.¹⁹ Locke's theory of moral knowledge does fail; for he conceives it, like he conceives all knowledge, as conforming to the paradigm set by mathematics. Nevertheless, Locke does expound a separate theory of how men come to know their duties. It consists in two theses: one is a negative thesis aimed against the wide-spread view that the law of nature is known innately; the other is a positive account of what may be termed moral discovery. In the two chapters following we will endeavour to chart Locke's doctrine under each of these aspects.

19 See above, ch. III, pp. 71 ff.

Chapter VII

INNATE MORALITY

The polemic against innate ideas in the first book of the Essay has often puzzled Locke's commentators. His arguments seem to be directed against the doctrine that men are born into the world knowing certain truths; and it has always proved difficult to find a philosopher who actually maintains this naive version of innatism. Nevertheless, Book I should not be dismissed as a belabouring of the empty air. There is a far less primitive version of innate knowledge which did enjoy considerable currency in the seventeenth-century, and which was by many looked upon as the only viable solution to the problem of moral epistemology. It is not knowledge which is said to be innate, but the disposition to receive knowledge. For the human mind is so constructed that all men who have the use of reason cannot but assent to the truth of a specific range of propositions once the terms in which they are expressed are understood. The majority of Locke's contemporary critics were quite prepared to see the naive doctrine jettisoned, but they were not willing to give up the dispositional doctrine. Taken on its own, without the context of the rest of the Essay, the thesis that there are no innate ideas could be accepted as true but platitudinous. However, seen in the light of Locke's complimentary thesis, that the mind is originally, "white paper, void of all characters" [II, i, 2], the arguments of Book I were understood as directed against both the naive, and the sophisticated dispositional versions of innatism.

Henry Lee, whose Anti-Scepticism is one of the most detailed contemporary examinations of the Essay, is typical of the reaction against Locke. No one, Lee maintains, does, or sensibly could, hold the mind of the embryo to be literally stocked with ideas or implanted with principles. The philosophers' talk of innate knowledge is to be understood figuratively. Nevertheless, the doctrine of innatism has a definite literal meaning:

. . . the Soul of Man is so framed by the Author of Nature, as not to be equally disposed to all sorts of Perceptions, to embrace all Propositions with an Indifferency, to judge them true or false; but antecedently to all the Effects of Custom, Experience, Education, or any other contingent Causes . . . is necessarily inclined to believe some Propositions true, others false; some Actions good, others evil: and so is not altogether like a rasa tabula, on which you may set any Impression indifferently . . . /On the contrary/ the Soul has an innate Power of perceiving, affirming, denying, willing, refusing; but that Power is not exerted till a proper Object is offer'd for its Perception and Judgement.¹

It can be seen that Lee grants innate status to two kinds of knowledge: the mind is naturally disposed to correctly judge the truth or falsity of some propositions and the good or evil of some actions. The knowledge for which innateness was traditionally claimed may be marshalled under two heads: speculative principles and practical principles. The former were invariably truths of the widest generality, such as the law of identity; but the latter were often quite detailed moral rules. Lee, for instance, compiles a list of innate practical principles which ranges from the duty of preserving

1 Anti-Scepticism, Preface [p. 1]

one's life to the keeping of contracts.² Innate speculative principles have recently been resurrected in a highly complex form to suit the purposes of modern linguistic theory.³ Innate practical principles, however, have never been totally eclipsed. They have survived in one form or another in the doctrine which has come to be known as ethical intuitionism. Locke attacks both categories of innate knowledge, but it is with his arguments against innate practical principles that we are here primarily concerned.

Professor Yolton has shown that, in the moral sphere, even naive innatism was not without its advocates. The doctrine, Yolton points out, had an important conservative function. For if the existing values of a society are consigned to the realm of innate knowledge they are thereby placed beyond dispute.⁴ Certainly the appeal to innateness, whether in the naive or dispositional form, does constitute a useful device in the hands of those who wish to preserve

2 Anti-Scepticism, p. 5.

3 On the modern renaissance of innate ideas, especially in linguistic theory, see, Jonathan Barnes: "Mr Locke's Darling Notion", in The Philosophical Quarterly, 1972; Harry M. Bracken: "Innate Ideas - Then and Now", in Dialogue, 1967 - 68; David E. Cooper: "Innateness: Old and New", in The Philosophical Review, 1972.

4 John Locke and the Way of Ideas, p. 29. Similarly Aaron views innatism as giving, "a show of authority and finality which teachers and preachers can put to effective use". John Locke, p. 87. The doctrine of innate moral knowledge was considerably enhanced by an appeal to St Paul's remark, at Romans II, xv, that the law of God is written in the heart. Cf. Leibniz: New Essays concerning Human Understanding, Preface, p. 43.

traditional values. However, the dispositional version of the doctrine is much more subtle than simply a conservative attempt to maintain the moral status quo.

The seventeenth-century defenders of dispositional innatism did not see themselves as merely asserting an empirical fact about the mind; that it is so made as to be incapable of doubting a number of propositions. From this nothing would follow as to the truth or falsity of those propositions. Understood as a psychological fact, the mind's incapacity for doubt might extend to false as well as true propositions. The dispositional theory is a piece of metaphysics rather than empirical observation. If a man knows something innately he is held to be in contact with a realm of truth existing external to, and independent of, his mind. Innate knowledge differs from other knowledge in that, in the case of the former, doubt is not only psychologically impossible (as it might be with respect to a well attested empirical truth), it is impossible because there exists a special relation between the mind and truth. The mind and the external realm of truth are, as it were, geared to each other; so that, once contact between the two has been established, truth has a necessary purchase on the mind.

Thus Lee writes:

. . . the only reason I can frame, why any Perceptions, Thoughts or Notions can be said to be innate, is because, according to the present Constitution of our Souls and Bodies, and their Relation to other parts of the Universe, there is a necessary Connexion fix'd and establish'd between some sorts of Motions or Impressions from external

Objects, and some sort of Perceptions or Thoughts, and they may properly enough be call'd natural or innate; because by the arbitrary Constitution of the Wise Author of Nature in uniting our Souls to our Bodies, there is a necessary and mutual Communication between both, that such Motions should produce such Perceptions.⁵

In ethics the realm with which the mind is said to be in necessary contact is that of objective moral values.

The similarity between dispositional innatism and the many-faced doctrine which goes under the title of ethical intuitionism is obvious. Whatever their differences, all ethical intuitionists may be said to hold two things. First, that the truth of, at least certain basic, propositions of morality, or the value of certain definable actions or states of affairs, is evident to all normal human beings. Second, that these intuitive truths and values are not, and cannot be, supported by argument. If a man dissents from a moral truth he can only be told to 'look again'; for no argument can avail against a failure of the individual's own moral perception. The main differences between the various intuitionist theories centre on the question of the nature of the intuitive act. Some intuitionists hold that moral truths are discernible by a special 'moral sense'. Thus, the perception of moral truth is conceived as analagous to sense perception. Others hold that man's reason, is the means whereby he attains moral truth. Its perception is thus analagous to the perception of

5 Op. Cit., p. 6.

mathematical truth. Notwithstanding these differences, there is a unity of purpose in ethical intuitionism; it is a defence of what may be called the autonomy of morals. For the intuitionist, moral values and distinctions are sui generis; they are independent of any non-moral facts. This being so, intuition must be the way moral truth is apprehended. An argument from non-moral facts might be useful in leading up to an intuition of moral truth. However, by itself it can never show a man any moral truth, nor can it entail any moral truth. Consequently the intuitionist rejects any other moral epistemology as false on the grounds that it must neglect the essential autonomy of morals; it must reduce morality to something non-moral.

Most of Locke's critics who defended innatism conceived the human capacity for innate truth as being at least closely related to the faculty of reason. James Lowde talks of the soul having, "a native power of finding or framing such Principles or Propositions, the Truth or Knowledge whereof no way depends upon the evidence of sense or observation".⁶ Thomas Becconsall maintains, "that the Soul retains a Faculty of Thinking and Reasoning in an established way: Insomuch, that when Objects are fairly presented to the Mind, and the Mind dwells and deliberates upon 'em, she will still be determin'd according to the Nature, Properties, and Agreement or

6 A Discourse concerning the Nature of Man, p. 53.

Disagreement of the things 'emselves".⁷ In the same vein, John Milner remarks that, "of such things, as so soon as they are alledged, all Men acknowledge them to be true or good, they require no Proof or farther Descourse to be assured of the Truth or Goodness of them, we need not fear to say, that they seem to have a good Title, to be receiv'd for common Notions or Catholick Truths".⁸

However, a less rationalistic note is struck by Thomas Burnet, who holds, "that the Distinction, supposed of Gratitude and Ingratitude, Fidelity and Infidelity, Justice and Injustice, and such others, is as sudden without any Ratiocination, and as sensible and piercing, as the difference I feel from the Scent of a Rose, and of Assafoetida".⁹ This move away from a rational capacity for moral truth to one founded in sense (and finally in sentiment) achieves a kind of apotheosis in an otherwise undistinguished pamphlet published anonymously in 1779. Here it stated that, "we have innate moral principles, which do not consist of propositions or maxims; but of internal sentiments, or conscious feelings, prior to all moral maxims; and without which . . . morals could have no foundation in nature, not could be

7 The Grounds and Foundation of Natural Religion, p. 17.

8 An Account of Mr Lock's Religion, p. 177.

9 Remarks upon an Essay concerning Humane Understanding; p. 5. Cf. Burnet's definition of 'Natural Conscience' in Third Remarks, p. 8.

understood",¹⁰

In general, the defence of innatism was also a defence of the autonomous nature of morality. Moral distinctions were taken to be in Ralph Cudworth's phrase, 'eternal and immutable'. The example of mathematics was commonly called upon in illustration of this point. Moral worth is internally related to actions much as three-sidedness is internally related to triangles. A wrong action is wrong for all times and for all possible worlds. The morality of an action is, therefore, quite independent of all non-moral factors. The criticism aimed against Locke took two forms. In the first place, it was argued that, in denying innate morality, he based moral distinctions on mutable custom and private opinion. Secondly, on a somewhat different level, he was accused of resolving morality into the arbitrary will of God. The second criticism reflected an extreme view of what is involved in the independence of moral values; for, finally, it led to the complete divorce of God from morality.

Lee takes a moderate view of the relation between God and Morality. Equally with Locke, he stresses God's role as a moral law-giver. Nevertheless, he is adamant in his opinion that, in rejecting innatism, Locke is forced to embrace moral relativism. He warns his readers that, in Locke's usage, terms such as 'Law of

10 Dialogues concerning Innate Principles, containing An Examination of Mr Locke's Doctrine on that Subject, p. 52.

Nature' and 'Laws of God' have changed their common meaning:

For, if the Author of Nature has contributed nothing to our gaining the knowledge of them in the original Constitution of our Souls and Bodies; but left us wholly in the dark, wholly at liberty to gain our Knowledge of them from Experience and Conversation; then the Laws of Nature, the Laws of God, may be words interpreted to signifie only such Rules of Action as every man voluntarily makes to himself, and shapes by the mutable Sentiments and exemplary Practice of his own Familiars or Superiors.¹¹

But it is James Lowde who gives the most succinct statement of the view that innate knowledge and an immutable realm of moral values are inseparable:

. . . the Law of Nature is either the same with these naturall inscriptions, or innate notions, or the one so Founded, in the other, that they must both stand, or fall together.¹²

Lowde insists on the complete independence of morality from all non-moral factors. Moral rules cannot be derived from a consideration of human nature, for God might have made men differently. Moral knowledge can only be innate, or intuitive. This position is taken to its logical conclusion by Thomas Burnet. Burnet does not so much accuse Locke of basing morality on custom and opinion, as of reducing it to the will of God:

But has the Will of the Law-Maker no Rule to go by? And is not that which is a Rule to his Will, a Rule also to ours, and indeed the Original Rule?¹³

11 Op.Cit., Preface, [p. 4] Much the same charge is made by Becconsall, Op.Cit., p. 46 and by Milner, Op.Cit., p. 60.

12 Moral Essays, p. 50.

13 Remarks upon an Essay concerning Humane Understanding, p. 6.

On Burnet's showing God and man are equally under an immutable law which is independent of both. Here the separation of morality from theology is utter and complete.

The weakness of ethical intuitionism, or dispositional innatism, is best brought out by attention to the development we first noted in Burnet; the replacement of reason as the source of moral knowledge by sense or feeling. The consequences of this move are not far to seek. It is part of our conception of reason that it is the same in all men; indeed in all rational beings. Therefore the thesis that moral truth is discernible by reason has built into it a guarantee that all men, who make proper use of their reason, will discern the same truth. In this way the objectivity of morality is provided for. The thesis that moral values are discernible by feeling carries no such guarantee. Two men might experience the same moral feeling with respect to a given object; equally they might not. If they do not, there is no way in which their differences can be resolved. Ultimately the attempt to base moral discernment on feeling reduces it to a matter of taste, and 'in matters of taste there is no disputing'. On the other hand, it is characteristic of 'matters of reason' that there is disputing, and in this lies the universality and objectivity of reason and the subjectivity of taste. Dispute is possible in matters of reason because there are decision procedures in accordance with which rational differences can be resolved. The reasoner invokes publicly agreed rules. Deviation from the rules of

reasoning can be corrected, either by the reasoner himself or by others. Conversely, dispute is not possible in matters of taste or feeling because there are no rules in accordance with which tastes can be corrected. An eccentricity of taste must be accepted as a fact of the individual's psychological make-up. (This is, of course, not to say that we may not deplore such an eccentricity and seek to change the individual's make-up). Thus, so long as moral truth is held to be discerned by reason, morality retains an air of objectivity; but once discernment is placed in feeling, or sense, or sentiment the collapse into subjectivity becomes inevitable.¹⁴

It can be argued that the move from reason to feeling is inherent in the ethical intuitionist position. Those who maintain this position insist on the immediate apprehension of, at least certain key, moral propositions. Apprehension is immediate in the sense that, once the knower understands the terms in which the propositions are expressed, no argument is necessary, nor can be

14 Cf. Hume's remarks to Francis Hutcheson: "I wish from my Heart, I could avoid concluding, that since Morality, according to your Opinion as well as mine, is determin'd merely by Sentiment, it regards only human Nature and human Life . . . If Morality were determin'd by Reason, that is the same to all rational Beings: But nothing but Experience can assure us, that the Sentiments are the same. What Experience have we with regard to superior Beings? How can we ascribe to them any Sentiments at all? They have implanted those Sentiments in us for the Conduct of Life like our bodily Sensations, which they possess not themselves". Letters of David Hume, ed. Greig, Vol. I, p. 40. Hume's problem arises even if discussion is confined to human beings, for the evidence of experience suggests that the supposed moral sentiments differ from man to man.

given, to convince him of their truth. That is, their truth is self-evident. Now it is undeniable that self-evident propositions do exist. Within this category fall analytic, or what Locke calls 'trifling', propositions, e.g. 'all bachelors are male'. Some philosophers have maintained that the category also includes propositions which are synthetic, or in Locke's terminology 'instructive'. 'Everything that is red is coloured' is sometimes cited as an example of a synthetic a priori proposition. This proposition clearly is self-evident on the criterion given above. The thorny problem of whether it is also synthetic need not detain us. What is important is the one thing the two cited propositions have in common; what might be called a 'failure of meaning' is involved in the assertion of their denial. That is, we simply would not understand a man who asserted that, 'some bachelors (i.e. unmarried males) are not male', or that 'some red things are not coloured'. This notion of a 'failure of meaning' is, of course, very vague. Nevertheless, it does serve in a rough and ready fashion to demarcate propositions which can be said to be self-evident to reason, and it has the virtue of allowing the possibility of synthetic a priori propositions. More to the point, it highlights an interesting difference between self-evident non-moral propositions and putative self-evident moral propositions. The propositions put forward by the ethical intuitionists are not analytic, but synthetic, or instructive. They express moral duties, the value of states of affairs, and so on. However, the assertion

of the denial of any of these propositions does not involve what we have called a failure of meaning. We do understand a man who denies that he has a certain duty or that a certain thing is of value, whatever the duty or the value in question may be. We even understand the nihilist when he denies all duties and values. It might be argued from this that the ethical intuitionist has no grounds on which to establish the self-evidence of his moral propositions.

Nevertheless we would underestimate the strength of the ethical intuitionist position if we took the above argument to be a conclusive refutation. Generally, the intuitionist would agree that his self-evident moral propositions can be denied, as an intellectual exercise. What he does claim is that they cannot be denied 'in the heart'. This defence is well put by Lee, who takes as illustration moral propositions which are self-evidently false and actions which are self-evidently evil:

Expose your Children; Murder or expose to wind and weather and wild Beasts your Parents, or any Person very Aged or Sick, beyond hopes of Recovery; Bury your Children alive; Geld your own Children, got on Female Captives for that purpose, & c. The Question, I ask, is, whether Human Nature, antecedent to Custom, Education or Law, be so form'd as to be free to believe such Propositions true, such Actions good? Or rather, whether, in the moulding of our Souls and Bodies, the Author of our Natures has not preposses'd us with Inclinations to judge them false, and the Actions agreeable to them evil and mischievous?¹⁶

Expounded thus, the intuitionist position has a not inconsiderable

16 Op.Cit., p. 12.

force. There are moral propositions which it seems impossible for a normal person sincerely to deny. But 'sincerity' is a term belonging to the vocabulary of feeling, not of reason. Once sincerity is brought into account for the self-evidence of moral propositions the move away from reason in the direction of feeling is accomplished.

Having said something of the position taken up by Locke's critics we can now turn to what Locke himself has to say in his polemic against innate knowledge.¹⁷ Book I of the Essay is a refutation of both innate speculative and innate practical principles. However, we will examine Locke's arguments only insofar as they have relevance to practical principles, or moral propositions.

It is true that much of Locke's language in Book I suggests that his target is naive innatism. For example, he makes much play with the fact that young children are not possessed of ideas such as 'identity'. Yet Locke was very well acquainted with the thought of his contemporaries, and it is quite incredible that he should have believed naive innatism to be the sum total of the innate knowledge hypothesis. It is probable that the terms in which Locke presents his refutation are dictated by his suspicion.

17 It is customary to refer to Book I as the 'polemic against innate ideas'. However Locke's target is clearly innate principles, or propositions, considered as units of knowledge. That there are no innate ideas is but another argument against such principles. For ideas are the parts which go to make up propositions; "if the ideas be not innate, there was a time when the mind was without those principles; and then they will not be innate, but be derived from some other original".
 [I, iv, 1]

of metaphor. The proponents of the innatist thesis frequently resort to metaphor, and one way of attacking a metaphorically expressed doctrine is to take the metaphor literally. Locke's stratagem of treating his opponents as if they believed in a kind of knowledge actually present in the mind from its very beginnings may be understood as an attempt to uncover the non-metaphorical cash value of the innatist thesis.

Locke deploys several arguments against innate knowledge, and at first sight it might seem that these are unified only by the fact that they are all directed against the one, rather vague, thesis. However, on examination a quite definite pattern emerges. The first argument may be termed the argument of universal consent. It is aimed ostensibly against naive innatism. But, by the dialectic of objection and answer, it leads on to the more interesting argument which is also effective against dispositional innatism.

The argument of universal consent is in the main part an appeal to experience. It may be summed up thus: Universal consent is a necessary condition for a principle's being innate in the naive sense. The practical principles cited as innate do not command universal consent. Therefore, they are not innate:

He that will carefully peruse the history of mankind, and look abroad into the several tribes of men, and with indifferency survey their actions, will be able to satisfy himself that there is scarce that principle of morality to be named, or rule of virtue to be thought on (those only excepted, that are absolutely necessary to hold society together, which commonly too are neglected betwixt distinct societies) which is not, somewhere or other, slighted and condemned by the general fashion of whole

societies of men, governed by practical opinions and rules of living quite opposite to others. [I, iii, 10]

In support of this rather sweeping statement Locke places much reliance on travellers' tales reporting outlandish moral practices. Now the display of the varieties of moral practice is a familiar first move in the argument for the relativity of morals. But there is an equally familiar counter-move. The fact of radical differences and contradictions in the moral practices of different peoples is granted. However, it is argued that this does not entail differences in moral principles. In some societies, let us say, it is the practice to eat one's aged parents. In European society filial anthropophagism is strongly frowned upon. Yet the members of both societies might still acknowledge the same practical principles: that children ought to respect and care for their parents. What they differ in is the way in which they fulfil this principles, and this difference is explicable in terms of differing factual beliefs and the circumstances of their respective environments.¹⁸

Although Locke does not mention this anti-relativist argument, his comments on Lord Herbert of Cherbury's innatism constitute an answer to it. He agrees that the various 'common notions' listed by Lord Herbert are "clear truths and such as, if rightly explained, a rational creature can hardly avoid giving his assent to".

18 Cf. J. D. Mabbott; An Introduction to Ethics, p. 34.

[I, iii, 15] His main objection is that the self-evidence of these principles is due to the vagueness and generality of the terms in which they are expressed. As the terms are so vague the principles are almost completely uninformative, and quite useless in the guidance of action:

I imagine it will scarce seem possible that God should engrave principles in men's minds in words of uncertain signification, such as virtues and sins, which amongst different men stand for different things: nay, it cannot be supposed to be in words at all which, being in most of these principles very general names, cannot be understood but by knowing the particulars comprehended under them.
[I, iii, 19]

Similarly, it may be objected that the plausibility of the anti-relativist's argument depends on the use of vague terms (e.g. 'respect'); and that the vagueness of these terms robs the so-called universal principles of their status as practical principles. If the anti-relativist were to tighten up his terms he would find that his principles are not compatible with a wide variety in behaviour. Experience will then teach him that there are no practical principles which can be said to enjoy strictly universal consent.

Locke's argument against universal consent may inflict severe damage upon the doctrine of naive innatism, but it leaves the much more complex doctrine of dispositional innatism unscathed. The defenders of the latter theory need only demand general consent for their principles. The mind's natural capacity for the perception of moral truths is said to be an ability which develops

in the individual. Therefore, one would not expect to find it fully operative in children or idiots. Furthermore, this capacity can be perverted and inhibited by education, custom and passion. It is therefore false that every single person must acknowledge the truth of innate moral principles. It is only necessary that they be accepted by those whose reason, or whose moral sense, functions properly.

To this Locke replies that, if general consent is all that is deemed necessary for innateness, there is no way of telling a genuine innate principle from which is only pretended to be such. For it is allowed that the perception of innate principles can be blocked, the way is open to any group of men to proclaim their own principles innate and therefore exempt from criticism. Locke writes of the proponents of this form of innatism that, "their argument stands thus: 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". [I, iii, 20] The demand for universal consent does have this advantage; it provides a fairly hard and fast criterion for distinguishing real from spurious innate principles. The weakened demand for general consent ends by allowing any proposition which can drum up fervent support.

Locke's remarks concerning general consent indicate the prime

reason behind his opposition to innatism and to all forms of ethical intuitionism. We saw in Chapter I that, for Locke, the problem of moral knowledge arises from the problem posed by conscience. The dictates of conscience present themselves as knowledge; yet conscience "is nothing else but our own opinion or judgement of the moral rectitude or pravity of our own actions". [I, iii, 8]

As judgements, the dictates of conscience may be true or they may be false. What is needed is some standard or criterion whereby the dictates of conscience can themselves be judged. This standard must be established outside conscience. The ethical intuitionists endeavour to set up a standard within conscience. They elevate certain of its dictates to the level of truths known immediately and without argument. Locke holds all the dictates of conscience to be on one level in that not even the most widely accepted of them carries a surety of its own truth.

Secondly, Locke argues that neither strict universal nor general consent can justify the unique status accorded innate propositions. Dispositional innatism demands only that the truth of innate propositions be immediately recognized by all those who understand the terms in which they are expressed. Locke is far from wishing to deny that there are such self-evident propositions. Whenever the mind immediately perceives the connexion of any two ideas (as it does in every case of intuitive knowledge) the proposition in which the ideas are combined is self-evident. But if all self-evident propositions are granted innate status the

number of innate truths will be legion and the great majority of them will be trivial. Such a generous supply of innate propositions defeats the purpose of the innate knowledge hypothesis. For innate knowledge is supposedly knowledge of first principles from which all other knowledge can be derived. It would be manifestly absurd to assign each and every self-evident proposition to the categories of first principles. [I, ii, 18 - 20] Thus, even universal consent is nothing more than a mark of self-evidence, and self-evident propositions are in no way to be confused with innate truths.

Locke's theory of intuitive knowledge admits part of his opponents case, but not the important part. Certainly there are propositions which command the mind's immediate assent. Furthermore Locke agrees that the propositions most often listed as innate speculative principles are self-evident. So far Locke is at one with the theory of dispositional innatism. Indeed some of his early critics concluded the difference between their epistemology and his to be at bottom no more than a difference in terminology.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Locke firmly parts company with innatism when it comes to so-called speculative first principles. The way to truth is not, as the defenders of innate knowledge contend, to be found in syllogistic deductions from special intuitive truths. The main

19 Lee, for example, writes: "I am apt to think this Debate, about Innate Principles, is altogether needless; and that, if the Question was stated in common Words, this Author's Sentiments wou'd not appear so widely different from others, who speak Sense on this Subject". Op.Cit., p. 4.

business of reason is the demonstration of connexions between ideas. The method of reasoning is the analysis of ideas into their components (i.e. definition) and the laying out of those ideas so as to display their interrelations. At best the syllogism can serve as one way of displaying ideas in a demonstrative order; at worst it is a positive hindrance to the perception of connexions between ideas. Locke concedes self-evident speculative principles, such as the law of identity, to have a secondary, and negative, function in reasoning; "They are of use in disputes, for the silencing of obstinate wranglers and bringing those contests to some conclusion".

[IV, vii, 11]

While Locke grants the minor part of the dispositional innatism doctrine with respect to 'speculative principles', his rejection of ethical intuitionism is complete. There are no self-evident moral propositions:

Another reason that makes me doubt of any innate practical principles is that I think there cannot any one more rule be proposed whereof a man may not justly demand a reason: which would be perfectly ridiculous and absurd if they were innate, or so much as self-evident, which every innate principle must needs be, and not need any proof to ascertain its truth, not want any reason to gain it approbation . . . should that most unshaken rule of morality and foundation of all social virtue, that One should do as he would be done unto, be proposed to one who never heard of it before, but yet is of capacity to understand its meaning, might he not without any absurdity ask a reason why? And were not he that proposed it bound to make out the truth and reasonableness of it to him? [I, iii, 4]

The upholders of an intuitionist theory of ethics, of course, simply disagree with Locke on this point. They claim that there are moral

propositions which carry their own evidence with them, and which are as immune from doubt as any analytic propositions. Writers like Lee, and much more recent intuitionists, are quite ready to list these propositions.²⁰ Over this issue moral philosophers separate into two opposing camps. In the one are those who proclaim the autonomy of morals. Any given moral proposition must either be known intuitively or it must follow from a moral proposition which is known intuitively; no moral proposition can be derived solely from a proposition expressing a non-moral fact. In the other are those (including Locke) who proclaim with equal voice that none of this is so; that morality is not autonomous. These two camps are well established in moral philosophy. In fact they represent what are perhaps the two fundamental types of ethical theory. However, the non-autonomy thesis can boast one, not inconsiderable, advantage over its rival. The proponent of moral autonomy always finds difficulty in working out a satisfactory moral epistemology; for his position makes it hard for him to maintain a belief in the existence of moral knowledge.

We have seen how ethical intuitionism prompts the move from reason to some kind of moral sense or sentiment. Once sentiment is taken as the source of ethical intuitions the collapse into subjectivism appears unavoidable; for there is no means whereby a

20 See, for example, the self-evident prima facie duties listed by Sir David Ross in The Right and the Good, pp. 21 - 22.

conflict between ethical intuitions can be resolved. But subjectivism is finally a denial of the existence of moral knowledge. Ethical intuitionism presupposes the same picture as any other epistemology of morals, i.e. that there are moral facts external to the knower and that these constitute the objects of moral knowledge. It follows that if one man claims to know a specific moral fact and another man claims to know the contrary both claims cannot be correct. If one is a genuine case of knowledge, if the content of the claim does truly reflect the moral facts, then the other can be no more than a case of (false) belief or opinion. However, if subjectivism is accepted this distinction between knowledge and belief becomes vacuous; for, in practice what is properly knowledge cannot be distinguished from what is properly mere belief. That is, terms such as 'knowledge', 'opinion', and 'belief' lack rules of application when it comes to intuitions founded in sentiment. Of ethical intuitionism it may be said that it declines, by way of subjectivism, into ethical non-cognativism; the view that there are no moral propositions expressing facts but only moral utterances which serve to evince the private feelings and attitudes of the individual (or perhaps the collective attitudes of society).

Locke's early critics were convinced that ethical intuitionism represented the only viable epistemology of morals. Unless the mind is naturally disposed to the reception of specific moral truths the moral realm must be unknowable. The only alternative is a

relativism which reduces the principles of morality to custom and subjective opinions which are formed more or less at random. Locke's attack on innate practical principles is in intent a rejection of this dichotomy. Not only is the hypothesis that there are moral propositions which command immediate assent false, it is gratuitous. It does not solve the problem of moral knowledge, rather it ossifies private moral opinions into dogmas. As Locke has already stated in the Essays on the Law of Nature, moral truths are found out by reason working on the materials gathered in experience. The way they are found out has nothing to do with an immediate illumination of the mind. It is a process of discovery, and one which includes much more than the apprehension of moral truths. Men must come to know that they have duties before they can ascertain what their duties are. This means men must know there to be a God who has set a law to their conduct. For, "what duty is cannot be understood without a law, nor a law be known or supposed without a law-maker, or without rewards and punishment". [I, iii, 12]

Reason, the faculty employed in the discovery of moral truth, is innate. Men are born with the ability to perceive connexions between ideas, both immediately and by demonstration. There is, then, a grain of truth in dispositional innatism. But as Locke's marginal replies in his copy of Burnet's third set of Remarks make plain, he does not concede anything to ethical intuitionism:

If moral Ideas or moral rules (which are the moral principles I deny to be innate) are innate, I say children must know them

as well as men. If by moral principles you mean a faculty to finde out in time the moral difference of actions. Besides that this is an improper way of speaking to cal a power principles; I never deny'd such a power to be innate, but that which I deny'd was that any Ideas or connexion of Ideas was innate.²¹

Locke's critics misread him when they took the 'white paper' metaphor as a declaration of the mind's complete passivity. The passage quoted in the early part of this chapter from Lee's Anti-Scepticism in which it is maintained that the mind does not receive all propositions "with an Indifferency" but has "an innate Power of perceiving, affirming, denying," etc. might have been written by Locke himself.²² The difference between the two philosophers lies in what they understand by this innate power. For Lee the human mind is (in a manner which in the last analysis remains ineffable) capable of direct contact with a realm of moral truth. For Locke the mind simply has the power to discover moral truths, a power which it exercises equally in the discovery of non-moral truths.

We said earlier that, despite its obvious shortcomings, ethical intuitionism does have one significant card to play. Moral propositions may not carry their own evidence with them in the same way as self-evident non-moral propositions; nevertheless, we do

21 Quoted in Yolton: John Locke and the Way of Ideas, p. 56, from Locke's copy of Burnet's Third Remarks in the Yale University Library.

22 On the activity of the mind in Locke's philosophy see Yolton: "Locke's Concept of Experience" in Martin and Armstrong.

feel that there are at least some moral propositions which could not be sincerely denied by any man who understood the terms in which they are expressed. They may be rejected in the intellect but they cannot be rejected in the heart. Locke's third, and final, argument against innate morality consists in an explanation of this feeling. On Locke's account it is the result of education:

. . . such who are careful . . . to principle children well
 . . . instil into the unwary and, as yet, unprejudiced
 understanding . . . those doctrines they would have them
 retain and profess. These, being taught them as soon as
 they have any apprehension and still as they grow up
 confirmed to them, either by the open profession or tacit
 consent of all they have to do with, or at least by those
 of whose wisdom, knowledge, and piety they have an
 opinion . . . come by these means to have the reputation
 of unquestionable, self-evident, and innate truths.
 [I, iii, 22]

It is, therefore, small wonder that there are many moral propositions accompanied in the minds of men by a strong feeling of certitude. But this feeling in no way guarantees their truth. Far less does it give them any special status in the theory of moral knowledge.

Chapter VIII

THE DISCOVERY OF MORALITY

Locke's rejection of innate morality is the negative aspect of his theory of how men know their duties; they do not know them intuitively. Before examining Locke's theory under its positive aspect, it will be useful to review the main stations in his general position. Morality, it will be remembered, is inseparable from law. This is the basic assumption underlying all of Locke's moral philosophy. Were there no law set by God there could be neither virtue nor vice, and all actions would be morally indifferent. This does not mean that the content of morality is determined by arbitrary commands. Law, or, to be exact, the authority of the divine legislator, is the formal cause of obligation. It determines the fact that men have moral obligations; it does not determine the content, or matter, of their obligations. What is truly the content of the moral law depends (roughly) on the facts of human nature. However, men themselves invent moral notions. These notions group together otherwise disparate features of reality and give them moral import. Moral notions make up the vocabulary of the moral point of view; i.e. the stand from which men see human actions as virtues to be cultivated and vices to be eschewed. They are the terms in which men articulate their duties; or what they take to be their duties. There is, therefore, a logical gap between the objective content of the law of nature and the morality expressed in terms of moral notions. Insofar as moral notions are human constructs the duties they are used to express are human conventions. These conventions may

coincide with the objective precepts of the law of nature, but moral notions by themselves yield no guarantee that they do coincide. They might just as easily be used to express pseudo-duties lacking any objective warranty. The hypothesis of innate morality does nothing to bridge the gap between what may be called conventional morality and the law of nature. Instead, it elevates certain of the propositions of conventional morality to an eminence where they are beyond dispute. Even if the propositions selected did, as a matter of fact, mirror the law of nature, innatism (ethical intuitionism) would still fail as a moral epistemology. For Locke no moral propositions are self-evident (or at least none which are not analytic and hence uninformative). The thesis that there are self-evident moral truths is only the shadow cast by the feeling of conviction which some moral propositions produce. Therefore innatism does not provide a secure foundation for moral knowledge.

Locke's positive theory begins from a description of, what he understands to be, the phenomenon of morality. All men, Locke supposes, think of themselves as being under some kind of moral rule distinct from the positive laws of the society to which they belong. In the paper Of Ethics in General he writes,

I do not remember that I have heard of any nation of men who have not acknowledged that there has been right and wrong in men's actions . . . some measures there have been every where owned, though very different; some rules and boundaries to men's actions, by which they were judged to be good or bad; nor is there, I think, any people amongst whom there is no distinction between virtue and vice; some kind of morality is to be found every where received; I will not say perfect and exact, but yet enough to let us

know that the notion of it is more or less every where, and that men think that even where politics, societies, and magistrates are silent, men yet are under some laws to which they owe obedience. [King, 2, p. 123]

That is to say, all men classify actions as good or bad and recognize themselves under obligations with respect to the actions thus classified. This practice of classification plus the recognition of obligations beyond those imposed by civil law constitutes the moral categories of virtue and vice. In theory it is possible that men might distinguish between good and bad actions yet not recognize any obligation whatsoever. If this were so, men would lack the categories of virtue and vice. For, "the rectitude of actions . . . is noething but the relation or conformity of the actions of men to some rule and this is that which we call moral goodnesse and badnesse." [Draft A, p. 11]

There are, Locke states, three different laws against which men measure their actions and determine their obligations: the divine law; the civil law; the law of opinion or reputation. The first is the moral law proper, set by God and promulgated both by revelation and the 'light of nature'. Actions according as they are contrary to, or in conformity with, the divine law are sins or virtues. With respect to the civil law, actions are either criminal or innocent. However, the civil law is irrelevant in the determination of men's moral duties. Most men in fact judge what they morally ought to do on the criteria set by the law of opinion:

Virtue and vice are names pretended and supposed everywhere to stand for actions in their own nature right and wrong; and as far as they really are so applied, they so far are coincident with the divine law . . . But yet, whatever is

pretended, this is visible: that these names, virtue and vice in the particular instances of their application, through the several nations and societies of men in the world, are constantly attributed only to such actions as in each country and society are in reputation or discredit . . . Thus the measure of what is everywhere called and esteemed virtue and vice is this approbation or dislike, praise or blame, which by a secret and tacit consent establishes itself in the several societies, tribes, and clubs of men in the world, whereby several actions come to find credit or disgrace amongst them according to the judgement, maxims, or fashions of that place. [II, xxviii, 10]¹

Locke's contemporaries were not behindhand in seizing upon this and similar passages as proof of Locke's commitment to moral relativism. However, as is quite plain from the context and as Locke emphasises in a subsequent reply to his critics, the law of opinion is introduced as a description of how men usually judge the moral worth of actions. His account of the law of opinion in no way contradicts his assertion that the divine law is, "the only true touchstone

1 Cf. Locke's unpublished paper Philanthropoy [sic] or The Christian Philosophers. (1675): "Mankind is supported in the ways of Virtue or Vice by the Society he is of or by Conversation he keeps. Example & Fashion being the great Governours of this World. The 1st Question, every man ought to aske in all things he doth, or undertakes; is, how is this acceptable to God? But the first Question most men aske is, how will this mend [commend] me to my Company, and those, whose esteeme I value? He that askes neither of these Questions, is a Melancholy Rogue; and all ways of the most dangerous & worst of men. This is the foundation of all the Sects & orders, either of Religion or Philosophy, that have been in the World. Men are supported, & delighted, with the friendship, & protection, they enjoy, from all the rest of the same way". [MS.c. 27, Fol. 30^c]

of moral rectitude". [II, xxviii, 8]²

The law of opinion is the conventional morality which men develop and articulate in terms of their moral notions. Although it is not the proper standard of virtue and vice Locke believes the law of opinion to be, in general, a trustworthy reflection of the moral law:

And though, perhaps, by the different temper, education, fashion, maxims, or interest of different sorts of men, it fell out that what was thought praiseworthy in one place escaped not censure in another, and so in different societies, virtues and vices were changed: yet as to the main, they for the most part kept the same everywhere. For since nothing can be more natural than to encourage with esteem and reputation that wherein everyone finds his advantage, and to blame and discountenance the contrary, it is no wonder that esteem and discredit, virtue and vice, should in a great measure everywhere correspond with the unchangeable rule of right and wrong, which the law of God hath established: there being nothing that so directly and visibly secures and advances the general good of mankind in this world as obedience to the laws he has set them, and nothing that breeds such mischiefs and confusion as the neglect of them. [II, xxviii, 11]

In knowing the law of opinion, then, a man will very often be acquainted with the precepts of the moral law. However, he cannot be said thereby to know the moral law. If he judges an action's moral worth solely in the light of the opinions popular among his

2 The 'Epistle to the Reader' in the second edition of the Essay (1694) contains a long reply to James Lowde, in which Locke explains the purpose for which he introduced the 'law of opinion': 'I was there not laying down moral rules, but showing the original and nature of moral ideas, and enumerating the rules men make use of in moral relations, whether those rules were true or false . . . The law of opinion alters not the nature of things, though men generally do judge of and denominate their actions according to the esteeme and fashion of the place or sect they are of". [Yolton's edition of the Essay, Vol. 1, p. 298]

fellows, his judgement will be a matter of belief not of knowledge.³

The law of opinion merely indicates where moral truth might lie, it cannot be the basis of moral truth.⁴

There are three points to be noted in the above passage. Firstly, Locke assumes the law of opinion will very often correspond to the moral law because men naturally esteem that which promotes their general advantage in this world. Locke must, therefore, conceive the content of the moral law to be concerned, at least primarily, with the promotion of temporal human good. Second, the contradictions in the law of opinion as it is manifested among the various societies of mankind are due to the "different temper, education, fashion, maxims, or interest of different sorts of men". Third, the diversity of morals represents a falling away from an original uniformity, for Locke maintains that, 'vices and virtues were changed'. There is a connexion between the second and third point. In view of his polemic against innate morality, it is clear Locke is not suggesting that men originally had a natural capacity for the apprehension of self-evident moral principles and that this has been obscured by the factors mentioned. What has been obscured

3 Cf. Locke's argument in Essays on the Law of Nature, pp. 177 - 179.

4 Locke reiterates this point in Some Thoughts concerning Education: "Concerning Reputation, I shall only remark this one Thing more of it; That thought it be not the true Principle and Measure of Vertue, (for that 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) yet it is that, which comes nearest to it". [§ 61]

is not a special capacity for moral truth, but knowledge which was first acquired (as is all knowledge) in experience. If this is so it would seem that the best way to clear the obscurity will be to recapture the state in which men first came to know moral truth. It should then be possible to test the moral beliefs constituting conventional morality against their originals.

In the Conduct of the Understanding Locke discusses a method of inquiry which he takes to be of primary importance:

Most of the difficulties that come in our way, when well considered and traced, lead us to some proposition which, known to be true, clears the doubt, and gives an easy solution of the question, whilst topical and superficial arguments, of which there is store to be found on both sides, filling the head with variety of thoughts and the mouth with copious discourse, serve only to amuse the understanding, and entertain company, without coming to the bottom of the question, the only place of rest and stability for an inquisitive mind whose tendency is only to truth and knowledge. [Sect. XLIV]

'Bottoming' is Locke's alternative to the topical disputation of the schools. A problem is bottomed once it is bracketed off from the assumptions and preconceived patterns of arguments which surround it. Then it lies open to the light of man's reason. For, "Every man carries about him a touchstone, if he will make use of it, to distinguish substantial gold from superficial glitterings, truth from appearances. And indeed the use and benefit of this touchstone, which is natural reason, is spoiled and lost only by assumed prejudices, overweening presumption, and narrowing our minds".

[Conduct, Sect. III] The Essay itself is a sustained exercise of this method; the problem of human understanding being bottomed on the empirical origin of ideas. But it is in the second of the

Two Treatises of Government that Locke applies his method specifically to the world of human action and values. The problem of political power is bottomed on the 'state of nature'. So too, it will be argued, is the problem of man's original knowledge of the moral law.

Locke's conception of the state of nature has prompted a number of interpretations. It has been debated whether Locke understands by the 'state of nature' an actual historical period, a logical construction or a heuristic myth.⁵ One thing does appear quite clearly; the concept encapsulates what Locke understands to be the fundamental features of the human condition.

The state of nature is said to be the state of men living together without civil government. Locke characterizes it as a state of freedom and equality. Freedom consists in each individual's right to act independently of the will of any other man. Equality in the state of nature is closely related to freedom. For, as no man is naturally in a position of authority over others, "all the Power and Jurisdiction is reciprocal". 2nd Treatise, § 47 Now if Locke's state of nature is interpreted simply as the condition of

5 The literature in the debate is extensive. For example: Peter Laslett supposes the state of nature to be the inferred original state of man Introduction to the Two Treatises, p. 111 C. B. MacPherson understands it as "a curious mixture of historical imagination and logical abstraction from civil society" The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, p. 209 John Dunn, on the other hand, argues that it is completely ahistorical, functioning as, "an axiom of theology". The Political Thought of John Locke, p. 103 For Hans Aarsleff it is an exercise in 'conjectural history'. "The state of nature and the nature of man in Locke", in John Locke - Problems and Perspectives, p. 104

men before civil authority is established, his assertion that it is a state of freedom and equality looks like a mere tautology. Before government there is, by definition, no authority (at least none on earth) to which the individual can be subject. Thus, logically each man must be in a state of freedom and equality with respect to his fellows.⁶ However, Locke's characterization is more substantial than a tautology. If we are to understand his state of nature aright it is important to bear in mind that in it men are under the law of nature.

A man in the state of nature cannot be bound by the will of another man. Nevertheless, his freedom is not absolute nor is it arbitrary. All men are naturally in, "a State of Liberty, yet it is not a State of Licence . . . 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". 2nd Treatise, § 67 Indeed the law of nature is not a restriction on human freedom, but the necessary condition of freedom:

For 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 . . . So that, however it may be mistaken, the end of Law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge Freedom: For in all the states of created beings capable of Laws, where there is no Law, there is no Freedom. For Liberty is to be free from restraint and violence from others which cannot be, where there is no Law . . . For who could be free, when every other Man's Humour might domineer over him?
2nd Treatise, § 57

6 Cf. J. D. Mabbott: John Locke, p. 142.

It is the law of nature, then, which gives form and direction to man's freedom. Likewise, human equality is dependent on the law of nature. Locke is careful to explain that he does not suppose men equal in everything. Age, virtue, excellence, alliances entered into, benefits given or received all in various ways place one man above another even in the state of nature. 2nd Treatise, § 54 The equality of 'power and jurisdiction' which all men possess in the absence of instituted civil authority consists in, "the Execution of the Law of Nature . . . whereby every one has a right to punish the transgressors of that Law to such a Degree, as may hinder its Violation". 2nd Treatise, § 7 Locke has already in the First Treatise proved against Sir Robert Filmer that God did not originally invest any one individual with executive power. It follows that each man must originally have such power:

For the Law of Nature would, as all other Laws that concern Men in this World, be in vain, if there were no body that in the State of Nature, had a Power to Execute that Law, and thereby preserve the innocent and restrain offenders.
Ibid.

As is the case with freedom so it is with equality; the notion is given meaning by the law of nature. It is, therefore, not the absence of civil government which makes the state of nature one of freedom and equality, but the presence of the law of nature.

The law of nature furnishes the base on which Locke builds his conception of the state of nature. The latter may be initially summarized as the state in which men are related one to another by the law of nature. The law regulates the conduct of all men in

order that their actions may be consistent with the freedom of each man. Understood thus, the state of nature is not something which can be transcended. For men qua men are always subject to the law of nature. The view of the state of nature as a period preceding the institution of civil government (whether it be considered an historical time or an historical construction) is not essential to the concept itself. Rather, it belongs to the manner in which Locke presents his theory of political power.

Locke's account of government is given in quasi-historical terms. The transition from the apolitical community of men living together to civil society is accomplished by a social compact which conveys executive power into the hands of elected rulers. In this manner the advent of government abolishes the equality which characterizes the state of nature. For, in consenting to government, men submit themselves to the arbitration of those duly placed above them. Nevertheless, it should not be thought that the individual possession of executive power is thereby annulled once and for all. The social compact is a two way affair. The government thus established is entrusted with power by the people. If it betrays its trust the people are freed from their side of the compact and government is, in effect, dissolved. Consequently the possession of executive power reverts to the individual. A government acts contrary to its trust when it fails to promote the end for which it was first established. Broadly, government is established as a remedy for the "inconveniences of the State of

Nature". 2nd Treatise, § 90 Where there is no third party to whom appeal can be made for judgement in a dispute or redress of an injury every individual must fend for himself. It is the task of government to forestall disputes between individuals, or, if they do arise, to ensure that they are resolved in an orderly manner.

If Locke were seeking nothing more than a pragmatic justification for government the doctrine of the law of nature would be of no particular relevance. His argument might then be put thus: All men being of equal authority in the state of nature their condition will inevitably be one of disorder. Only by agreeing to institute government and submitting to its authority can men escape from this condition. A government which achieves the purpose for which it has been created is justified. If a government fails in this, then the state of nature has in fact returned, and the original compact is null and void. However, Locke's intention is to place government on a moral foundation, and for this reason the law of nature is essential to his conception of the state of nature.

A pragmatic justification of government, based on the preferability of ordered civil society to the disorder consequent upon the absence of political authority, would have to admit absolute rule as, at least, one suitable form of government. But Locke rejects political absolutism as inconsistent with civil society:

As if when Men quitting the State of Nature entered into Society, they agreed that all of them but one, should be under the restraint of Laws, but that he should still retain all the Liberty of the State of Nature, increased with Power, and made licentious by Impunity. This is to think that Men are

so foolish that they take care to avoid what Mischiefs may be done them by Pole-Cats, or Foxes, but are content, nay think it Safety, to be devoured by Lions. 2nd.Treatise, § 93

It is not simply the inconveniences of disorder which Locke is considering, but a specific kind of inconvenience; that to which the moral man who follows the law of nature is subject when he comes in contact with men who disobey the law. The instituted government takes over the executive power of the law of nature, but in so doing it does not so much strip the individual of a right as remove a burden from his shoulders. He no longer has to safeguard himself against the encroachments of the immoral man. Government is not justified on the grounds that it provides political order, but because the political order it does provide facilitates the working of an original moral order, which is the law of nature. Hence, political absolutism is contrary to the purpose of government. The absolute ruler, being regarded as the one source of law, is placed above all law. Against his encroachments the subjects can have no appeal. Therefore, far from remedying the inconveniences of the state of nature, absolute government concentrates them in one supremely powerful individual. In Locke's view all men, rulers and subjects, are equally bound by the law of nature⁷; and against the government which pretends to absolute authority there is always what he terms

7 Cf. 2nd. Treatise, § 195: "I will not dispute . . . whether Princes are exempt from the Laws of their Countrey; but this I am sure, they owe subjection to the Laws of God and Nature".

the 'appeal to Heaven'; the right of the people to rebel. Thus, Locke places government within a pre-existing order, and justifies it in terms of that order.

Strictly speaking, the advent of government does not abolish the state of nature, but adds to it. All men, whether or not they live under a government, are bound by the law of nature. That is, they are naturally subject to God's authority. On entering civil society men subject themselves to a second, artificial authority. While men follow their reason they will conform their actions to the law of nature. If such rational behaviour were universal there would be no need, and hence no justification, for the institution of government. However, reason is not the sole element in the make-up of human nature; "Principles of actions . . . there are lodged in men's appetites . . . that, if they were left to their full swing, . . . would carry men to the over-turning of all morality". [I, iii, 13] The fact of these non-rational appetites in human nature is the raison d'être of government.

The state of nature also sets the boundaries of government. The natural freedom of men which is formed and directed by the law of nature is not an 'inconvenience'. By taking over the power to 'preserve the innocent and restrain offenders' government ensures that freedom is operative among men. Any act of government contrary to freedom (i.e. against the law of nature) must be illegitimate. In this way the state of nature, or the condition of men under the law of nature, limits the sphere of political authority. This does

not mean that the positive laws of the civil state are restricted to a republication of the law of nature. A government must have the power to bind things which are morally indifferent; for in the life of the civil state circumstances often arise which demand positive legislation. These are catered for in Locke's rubric that the, "end of Government is the good of Mankind". 2nd Treatise, § 229/ The law of nature does not tell the magistrate what he must do; rather it limits government by circumscribing an area of morality within which political authority is incompetent.

On the interpretation given here the state of nature is essentially a timeless condition. Locke need not prove that there ever was a period when all men exercised the executive power of the law of nature, nor that this period was brought to a close by a social compact. Indeed, taken simply as a piece of history the state of nature cannot serve as a basis for government. For what bearing could a period in the long distant past have on the present day existence of political authority? If government is to be vindicated and the proper sphere of political power delineated, the conditions on which they are founded must constantly apply. The state of nature is, then, best understood not as an original state which is superceded by the state of civil society, but as a condition which, as it is the foundation of civil society, is always present. The quasi-historical language of the Second Treatise is not integral to Locke's argument, but arises from an intellectual presupposition common to much seventeenth-century thought; that a

phenomenon is fully explained only when it is traced back to its first cause or generative principle.⁸

The idea that Locke's state of nature is essentially an historical period has led to a certain amount of confusion in the interpretation of his political philosophy; for Locke appears to give two incompatible descriptions of the state. In criticising those philosophers who confound the state of nature with what he terms the 'state of war' Locke writes that the two, "are as far distant, as a State of Peace, Good Will, Mutual Assistance, and Preservation, and a State of Enmity, Malice, Violence, and Mutual Destruction are one from another". 2nd Treatise, § 19 On the strength of this passage some commentators have concluded that, in contrast to Hobbes, Locke sees the state of nature as a 'golden age'.⁹ But if the state of nature is thus idyllic, what reason can men have for leaving it? Locke's answer to the question of why men should leave the state of nature is unequivocal. The individual's enjoyment of the rights he has in that state, "is very uncertain, and constantly exposed to the Invasion of others. For all beings Kings as much as he . . . and the greater part no strict Observers of Equity and Justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very unsecure. This

8 Cf. Hans Aarsleff, Op. Cit., p. 103. This presupposition might itself be traced back to Aristotle. See, for example, Analytica Posteriora, Bk. I, 2, 71^b, 2.

9 See, for example, Phyllis Doyle: A History of Political Thought, pp. 186f.

makes him willing to quit a Condition, which however free, is full of fears and continual dangers". 2nd.Treatise, § 123¹⁰

Passages such as this have led other commentators to the conclusion that Locke's view is quite close to Hobbes's, or even that he is a committed Hobbesian in disguise.¹¹ Whatever the overall interpretation placed on Locke's political philosophy, one thing is evident; Locke cannot consistently hold the state of nature to be one of peace and fellowship yet claim that it is also fraught with fears and dangers.¹² In fact Locke holds neither view; for the dichotomy is a false one, generated only when the state of nature is understood as essentially historical.

A reading of the 'idyllic' passage in its context reveals that Locke is not contrasting two mutually exclusive states, but clarifying

10 Cf. Epistola de Tolerantia: "But since men are so dishonest improbitas that most of them prefer to enjoy the fruits of other men's labour rather than work to provide for themselves; therefore, to protect their possessions, their wealth and property, and also their liberty and bodily strength, which are their means of livelihood, they are obliged to enter into society with one another, so that by mutual assistance and combined forces each man may have secure and private possession of the things that are useful for life". trans. Gough, p. 125

11 The extreme 'Hobbesian' interpretation of Locke has been elaborated by Leo Strauss Natural Right and History, Ch.V and R.H. Cox Locke on War and Peace. It is not often one can say of an interpretation of a philosopher's work that it is patently false. This can, I believe, be said of the Strauss-Cox thesis. For a criticism see Aarsleff: "Some observations on recent Locke scholarship" in John Locke-Problems and Perspectives, and Yolton: "Locke on the Law of Nature" in The Philosophical Review, 1958.

12 Cf. J. J. Jenkins: "Locke and Natural Rights" in Philosophy, 1967.

two concepts. At the end of the passage he sums up the distinction he wishes to make:

Want of a common Judge with Authority, puts all Men in a State of Nature: Force without Right, upon a Man's Person, makes a State of War, both where there is, and is not, a common Judge. /2nd.Treatise, § 19/

Later in the chapter he explains that, "in the State of Nature, for want of positive Laws, and Judges with Authority to appeal to, the State of War once begun, continues". /2nd. Treatise, § 20/ The state of war, the, is something which can occur both in the state of nature and in civil society. Its tendency to continue in the former, "is one great reason of Mens putting themselves into Society". /2nd. Treatise, § 21/ Those who equate the state of nature with the state of war are not misdescribing a period of man's history. Their error reflects a misconception of the law of nature. The 'idyllic' passage harks back to Locke's argument, in the eighth of the Essays on the Law of Nature, that the law cannot be based on individual self-interest. For, on the assumption that it is so based, "men are . . . by the law of nature in a state of war". /Essays, p.213/¹³ On the contrary, all men are naturally bound by a law which, "willeth the Peace and Preservation of all Mankind". /2nd Treatise, § 7/ If obedience to the law were universal, human life would be idyllic. However, as a matter of empirical fact, men are often led astray by passion, prejudice and ignorance. Locke does not

13 See above, Ch. II, p. 50.

derive this fact from an anthropological investigation of man's primitive state, but from observation of the world in which he himself lives. The state of war exists within civil society; and (given the irrational elements in man's nature) in the absence of government it would be even more prevalent. This is not to say the state of war would be universal. Human nature is rational and so far as men follow their reason they obey the law of nature without coercion by positive law. Nevertheless, the occurrence of the state of war even within civil society is frequent enough to warrant the institution of government.

Having abstracted the state of nature from its home in Locke's political philosophy we may now consider its relevance to his moral epistemology. The state of nature we have seen to be the condition of men living together under the law of nature. It might be called simply the state of man. Citizens living within civil society are still men; the fact that they are bound by the law of nature remains the fundamental feature of their condition. As men are under the law they must have the capacity to know what the law dictates. A law of nature which was unknowable would not only be otiose; as was argued in Chapter I, it would be a contradiction in terms. In the state of nature the law is, "as intelligible and plain to a rational Creature, and a Studier of that Law, as the positive Laws of Common-wealths, nay possibly plainer; As much as Reason is easier to be understood, than the Phansies and intricate Contrivances of Men, following contrary and hidden interests put

into Words". [2nd. Treatise, § 12] Locke, of course, does not mean the law of nature is 'intelligible and plain' in the sense that its precepts are literally present in the mind from the very beginning, nor that they constitute a series of self-evident moral propositions.¹⁴ The law is knowable in the sense explained in the Essays on the Law of Nature; it is discovered by reason.¹⁵ But reason, as it is a faculty, must start from something given. For, "Nothing . . . is achieved by reason . . . unless there is first something posited and taken for granted". [Essays, p. 125] What, then, is given to reason in the state of nature?

So far two features of the state of nature have been noted: men are under the law of nature and men live together. For Locke, sociability is a part of human nature:

God having made Man such a Creature, that, in his own Judgment, it was not good for him to be alone, put him under strong Obligations of Neccessity, Convenience, and

14 Nonetheless several commentators have seized upon this passage as another illustration of Locke's inconsistency; while he denies innate practical principles in the Essay, he clearly accepts them for the purposes of his political philosophy. See, for example, Laslett's Introduction to Two Treatises, esp. pp. 94-95; C. E. Vaughan: Studies in the History of Political Philosophy before and after Rousseau, Vol. 3, pp. 162 - 163. Yet, even if there were nothing else, the phrase, 'a Studier of that Law' counts strongly against this interpretation. If the law is innate, either in the naive or dispositional sense, why should a man need to study in order to know it? Here the charge of inconsistency seems to be based largely on the assumption that Locke is inconsistent.

15 As Locke writes in the Essay, the law of nature is not innate but, "something that we, being ignorant of, may attain to the knowledge of, by the use and due application of our natural faculties". [I, iii, 13]

Inclination to drive him into Society, as well as fitted him with Understanding and Language to continue and enjoy it. / 2nd. Treatise, § 77/16

However, there is a third feature which, although it is not specifically dealt with in the Two Treatises, is of considerable importance in Locke's picture of the human condition. This is the individual's desire for happiness. While all men are naturally sociable and desire to live in groups, each man is engaged in an essentially egoistic search for happiness. It takes no very acute powers of discernment to perceive the possibilities for conflict between men latent in these features. The desire for happiness is Janus-faced. On the one hand it embraces those natural principles of action which work against the ideal harmony dictated by the law of nature. On the other hand, it supplies the point and meaning of morality. It is the spring of all human actions:

Nature . . . has put into man a desire of happiness and an aversion to misery: these indeed are innate practical principles which . . . 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 . . . these are inclinations of the appetite to good . . .
/I, iii, 3/

The law of nature aims at the good of men in general. The main function of the law is, therefore, the regulation of this natural hedonistic drive so that all men may achieve happiness.

16 Cf. Essays, p. 157: "[Man] feels himself not only to be impelled by life's experience and pressing needs to procure and preserve a life in society with other men, but also to be prepared for the maintenance of society by the gift of speech and through the intercourse of language".

Locke's belief in man's innate social inclinations and the thesis that the desire for happiness is the spring of human action are amply covered in his published works. Yet he published nothing explicitly on the crucial question of how, given these facts of human nature, reason can discover the law of nature in its content. In the Essay, (notwithstanding his speculations concerning the demonstration of morality), he confines himself to an account of how men in fact come by their moral notions and judge their actions. He disclaims any direct concern with the correctness of everyday moral notions and judgements.¹⁷ In the Two Treatises he is content to state men's capacity to know the law while leaving the mechanism of knowing in obscurity. It is in the works he chose to leave unpublished that the epistemological question comes to the fore. We have already examined his full length treatment of the law of nature as presented in the Essays. But the Essays we saw stop short of a satisfactory moral epistemology. Locke returns to the problem at a much later date, in several, as yet unpublished, MSS retained in the Lovelace Collection. Of these the most important is a paper entitled Morality [MS c. 28. Fol. 139 - 140]¹⁸ Here the concept of happiness occupies a dominant position.

17 Cf. Locke's letter to James Tyrrell, 4 Aug., 1690, in Lord King: The Life of John Locke, Vol. I, pp. 366 - 373.

18 The paper is undated, but there can be little doubt that it represents part of the materials mentioned to William Molyneux as put aside towards a demonstration of morality. See Locke to Molyneux, 30 Mar., 1696. [Works, 9, p. 377]

Locke begins with a definition of morality as, "ye rule of man's actions for ye attaining happynesse".¹⁹ All men constantly aim at happiness, and therefore nothing could be a rule of conduct for them unless following it promoted their happiness and ignoring it led to their misery.²⁰ Locke defines happiness as pleasure and misery as pain. Good is said to consist, "in what gives or increases pleasure or takes away or diminishes pain & Evill, in the contrary". Given God's power, it is at least possible that even after death men may be capable of pleasure and pain. Hence, a state of future rewards and punishment is a possibility. But Locke does not draw out the implications of this in Morality. Instead he limits his inquiry to the rules necessary for mundane happiness. He lays down two evident truths: (1) "Man made not himself nor any other man"; (2) "Man made not the world w^{ch} he found made at his birth". Taken together, these yield the conclusion that no man can have an original right, over and above the right of another, to anything the world naturally provides. Such a right could arise only from dependency, and originally nothing in the world depends on man.²¹ But if all the goods of the earth were to be

19 Cf. the definition of Ethics given in the Essay: "the seeking out those rules and measures of human actions which lead to happiness, and the means to practice them". [IV, xxi, 3]

20 Cf. 2nd Treatise, § 57: "Could they [men] be happier without it, the Law, as an useless thing would of it self vanish".

21 Thus, as we have seen God's rightful authority over man is a function of man's dependency. Locke's whole theory of moral

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left in common each man would attempt to obtain as much as he could for himself. The general condition of mankind would be one of, "want rapine & force". In such circumstances happiness would be beyond each man's attainment. To avoid this condition men enter into compacts establishing individual rights. Thus, "Justice is established as a duty & will be the first & generall rule of our happynesse".

Locke's argument has a familiar ring to it. On the supposition that all men first and foremost seek happiness, the individual's rational preference will always be for a world in which the rule of justice is established. For it is this world which provides the stability and security which is a prerequisite for the successful pursuit of individual happiness. However, let us suppose that justice has been established. It is true that, in the world of justice, it will very often be to the individual's advantage to act justly towards his fellows. But it is also true that there will arise occasions in which injustice is more to his advantage, or when justice is contrary to his happiness. As, ex hypothesi, human happiness is the rationale behind justice, it would seem that when acts against justice better further a man's advantage these must be permitted.

21 Cont'd

obligation is stated clearly and briefly in a paper entitled Ethica B. [MS c. 28 Fol. 141] "The originall & foundation of all Law is dependency. A dependent intelligent being is under the power & direction of him on whom he depends & must be for the ends appointed him by y^t superior being. If man were independent he could have noe law but his own will noe end but himself. He would be a god to himself, & satisfaction of his own will the sole measure & end of all his actions".

Locke's solution to the above difficulty is of considerable interest, for it reveals a new aspect of role assigned to law in his moral philosophy. As well as being the formal cause of moral obligation, the concept of a moral law has an essential role in determining the content of man's duties:

All men being equally under one and the same rule if it be permitted to me to break my word for my advantage it is also permitted every one else & then whatever I possess will be subject to the force or deceit of all the men in ye world in w^{ch} state it is impossible for any man to be happy unless he was both stronger & wiser than all the rest of man kinde for in such a state of rapine & force it is impossible any one man should be master of those things whose possession is necessary to his well being.

MS c 28. Fol. 140

Locke's major premise is contained in the first clause. It is because all men are equally under the one law that the individual is not allowed to make an exception in his own favour. It should be noted that it would not be irrational for the individual to make an exception. As all men constantly aim at happiness in all they do, the fact that an action will result in the agent's happiness gives him an overriding reason for performing that action. However it is contrary to reason for a man to suppose that, in making an exception in favour of his own happiness, he can be acting in accord with the law of nature. If he believes his action to be morally lawful he is bound to conclude the like action performed by another man in the like circumstances to be equally lawful. Thus, in the case under consideration, if a man deems it lawful for himself to ignore the compacts which establish individual rights to the goods of the

world, he must concede that others may lawfully invade his rights. But if he concedes this, he must suppose the law of nature to be founded in pure self-interest. Consequently he must conceive the natural condition of man to be a perpetual and universal state of war in which the attainment of happiness is impossible. This is tantamount to denying that there is any such law as the law of nature.

The argument in Morality shows the way reason derives the law of justice from a reflection on the basic features of the human condition, features which are originally gathered in experience. It need hardly be added that this derivation is not an example of the perception of necessary relations between ideas. The law of justice is deduced from contingent facts concerning, for example, human nature. The element of contingency means that the derivation is not, in Locke's strict sense, a case of demonstrative knowledge.²² The law of justice itself may be looked upon in two ways. It might be thought of as one precept of the law of nature, or as the fundamental precept from which other, more detailed, rules of conduct derive. We saw previously that Locke does believe that there is a 'primary and fundamental' law of nature which serves as 'the standard and measure of all other laws depending on it'.²³ Justice, as "the first & generall rule of our happynesse", seems the most plausible candidate for the office of primary law. If justice

22 Cf. J. W. Gough: John Locke's Political Philosophy, p. 9.

23 Cf. above, Ch. II, p. 49.

is primary how are the other, secondary, laws to be derived from justice?

Locke's argument in Morality is expressed in historical terms. Justice is presented as a discovery made at a certain point in time. The establishment of justice is seen as marking man's transition from the pre-moral to the moral period. Nevertheless, as with Locke's conception of the state of nature, the historical presentation is not essential to the argument. Men in fact do not live in a pre-moral society. They are born into communities in which moral notions have already been developed. (Locke would suppose this true even of primitive societies). A steady reflection on the law of justice in an attempt to discover what further rules of conduct follow from that law is likely to produce little more than acute mental cramp. However, the fact that we already have a system of morals is an important addition to the data presented to reason. It was suggested earlier that the question of how men are to know their duties comes down to the question of how they are to know whether or not the notions making up the conventional morality of a society reflect the objective law of nature. Reason, then, is not under the necessity of deducing completely unknown rules of conduct from the primary law of justice. It need only test the known law of opinion against the law of justice. Justice will, in Locke's words, act as a 'standard and measure'.

Moral notions divide up into those which signify actions (or action dispositions) as virtues and those which signify them as

vices. The complete list of virtues and vices exhausts the content of the law of nature. On the hypothesis that justice is the primary law of nature against which the moral notions of mankind are to be tested, all virtues should be species of justice and all vices species of injustice. A moral notion will be valid if it fulfills two conditions: First, if it signifies an action which properly falls under the law of justice. Second, if it signifies the action correctly, i.e. within the class of virtuous actions when just and within the class of vicious actions when unjust. There are two objections which may be raised here. In the first place, in Locke's account, justice appears restricted to the distribution and protection of property rights. Whatever merit or demerit may attach to the emphasis Locke places on property in his political theory, it seems clear that a theory of moral justice developed from this concept is sure to be impoverished. A fortiori, a complete system of moral duties derived from such a theory must be hopelessly truncated. Secondly, it may be objected that, no matter how 'justice' is explicated, the concept is not rich enough to generate all of morality.

Certainly in the paper on Morality justice is introduced as a law which preserves the individual's right to material possessions. 'Property' and 'justice' are, in Locke's mind two very closely connected concepts.²⁴ However, Locke's concept of property is

24 Cf. Some Thoughts concerning Education, § 110: "Children cannot well comprehend what Injustice is, till they understand

somewhat wider than might be expected. In the Second Treatise 'property' means not merely material possessions, but "Life, Liberty and Estate".²⁵ Once 'property' is understood in this extended sense a theory of justice founded on property appears correspondingly larger in scope. It will be possible to construe a quite wide range of actions as falling under the law of justice. For instance, murder, as it deprives a man of life, will be an act against property and for that reason unjust. The concept might also be said to embrace a man's character so that vices such as slander will be included as contrary to justice. Nevertheless, even on this enriched theory, the reduction of all morality to various aspects of the one fundamental law of justice comes up against a two-pronged difficulty. Firstly, whatever the definition of justice, it seems impossible to give anything like a comprehensive account of all the virtues in terms of justice. Secondly, it is generally supposed that men have duties towards themselves as well as towards others, and these cannot be comprehended under the law of justice.

Whatever else is included in the concept, it is clear that acts of justice involve rights belonging to men, and that such acts

24 cont'd

Property, and how particular Persons come by it"; Essays, p. 213: "For what justice is there where there is no personal property"; and the first example given of an instructive, certain proposition in morality at Essay, IV, iii, 18.

25 Cf. 2nd. Treatise, § 123: "Men unite for the mutual Preservation of their Lives, Liberties and Estates, which I call by the general Name, Property". See also, §§ 87, 173.

relate to someone other than the agent. Many, perhaps most, virtuous actions do not involve a person's rights. For example, acts of kindness, of generosity and benevolence go beyond what a man has a right to expect from his fellows. Further, there are some virtues which are incompatible with a strict following of justice. Mercy, for example, is said to temper justice, i.e. it relaxes the strict demands of justice and allows a man less than is his due. The difficulty here reflects an important asymmetry holding between virtue and vice. Virtue is thought of as, in some way, contributing to human good. Conversely, vice is thought of as contributing to human harm. This is no idle 'association of ideas'. It would be absurd to classify an action as virtuous yet maintain that its performance has no effect on human good; or to classify it as vicious yet maintain that it does not contribute to human harm.²⁶ Now it may be possible, by dint of a careful analysis of the concepts involved, to construe actions which contribute to human harm as invasions of a man's rights, and therefore as acts of injustice. But acts of justice are acts whereby a man's rights are preserved and respected. The most that could be claimed for justice in its relation to human good and harm is that it is a law whereby the individual is protected from harm. In this sense justice may be said to contribute a negative good. However, when

26 This point is controversial only when the notion of human good and harm is given some specific content.

good is done to a man we usually suppose his well-being not only preserved, but increased. In general, virtue promotes human good; it does not merely ensure the conservation of human good. Although, in the absence of a precise definition we cannot afford to be dogmatic, 'justice' does seem essentially a negative concept. The world of justice is a world in which, "no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions". 2nd. Treatise, § 67 Most virtues are viewed as essentially positive; their practice adds to the sum total of goodness. Therefore, while it may be possible to use 'injustice' (the defect of justice) as a generic term covering all cases of vice, one cannot use 'justice' to cover all virtues.

The second prong of the objection is based on the social nature of justice. Strictly speaking, a man cannot act justly or unjustly towards himself. His actions can be characterized as just or unjust only insofar as they relate to others. However, it is often maintained that even a lone individual on a desert island has some moral duties. He might be said, for example, to have a duty not to commit suicide or to develop his talents. Some philosophers have argued that the notion of duties to oneself is incoherent because morality presupposes a social context.²⁷ But it is highly doubtful that Locke would have accepted this argument. The sphere of morality described in the fourth of the Essays on the Law of Nature

27 Cf. Kurt Baier: The Moral Point of View, esp. Ch. 10.

embraces not only what men owe to their neighbours, but also what they owe to God and to themselves.²⁸ Even if man's duties to God could somehow be manoeuvred under the concept of justice, the individual's moral obligations to himself must remain outside justice.

On the evidence of Locke's text it cannot be said that he definitely does believe justice to be the one fundamental law of nature. It has been argued only that, whatever Locke's opinion, the whole of morality cannot plausibly be considered as following from the one law of justice. The attempt to determine the validity of moral notions by testing them against the law of justice would, as it were, decimate conventional morality. Of course, Locke does not suppose the law of opinion an exact mirror of the law of nature. He does allow for the revision of popular moral beliefs. Nevertheless, this can be revision only up to a point. Locke does hold the law of opinion, or conventional morality, to be by and large a faithful reflection of the law of nature. A revision as radical as that implied by the testing of ordinary moral notions against the law of justice is therefore out of the question.²⁹

28 Cf. Locke's Journal entry, dated 25th February, 1676: "There are virtues & vices antecedent to & abstract from society. v.g. love of god, unnatural lust". [MS. f 1, Fol. 123]

29 Locke's rejection of Hobbes's fundamental principle of self-preservation is in a similar vein to the argument given above: "An Hobbist, with his principle of self-preservation, whereof himself is to be judge, will not easily admit a great many plain duties of morality". ["Study", King, I, p. 191]

In a short paper dated 1681, Locke gives a definition of virtue and vice:

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. Thus the bounds of temperance are prescribed by the health, estates, and the use of our time: justice, truth, and mercy, by the good or evil they are likely to produce. King, 2, p. 94³⁰

This definition might be understood as expressing a more fundamental principle of morality than justice. For here justice is presented as one virtue amongst others. What characterizes the whole class of virtuous actions is their tendency towards human good; what characterizes all vicious actions is their tendency towards harm. Both the good and the harm may be done to the agent himself or to others. If good and harm are adopted as the two standards against which moral notions are to be measured, the difficulties encountered when justice is taken as the fundamental principle of morality are apparently resolved. Within the new scheme, there will be ample room for the usual virtues and for duties to oneself.³¹

The thesis that virtue and vice are characterized by their

30 King misdates this paper to 1661. His mistake has been corrected by Abrams. [See, Introduction to *Two Tracts*, p. 9.]

31 Similarly, St. Thomas Aquinas holds the first command of the law to be, " 'that good is to be sought and done, evil to be avoided': all other commands of natural law are based on this. Accordingly, then, natural-law commands extend to all doing or avoiding of things recognized by the practical reason of itself as being human goods". [Summa Theologiae, 1a, 2ae. 94, 2]

respective tendencies towards human good and harm may be termed the utilitarian theory of the content of morality. It is not to be confused with the utilitarian theory of morality. The latter theory states that actions are morally right, or virtuous, because they tend to human good, and morally wrong, or vicious, because they tend to human harm. That is, for the utilitarian, the fact that actions are productive of good and harm provides the necessary and the sufficient conditions for the existence of morality. The fact that a given action has a tendency towards human good characterizes it as virtuous and imposes a moral obligation on the agent with respect to that action. In view of the wide-spread opinion that (in his published writings) Locke takes up a position which is closer to utilitarianism than it is to any other type of ethical theory, it is worth repeating here that Locke always remains an ethical legalist. On his theory the utility of an action can determine no more than the matter of obligation; it is law, and law alone, which constitutes the form of obligation. Thus, where there is no law there can be no such thing as morality. In the nature of the case there would still be actions which tended to good or to harm; but men would be under no obligation either to perform or refrain from those actions.

Does the utilitarian theory of the content of morality provide a principle strong enough and comprehensive enough to determine the validity of ordinary moral notions? The short answer is that, unless, the concepts of human good and harm are defined, the theory

cannot provide such a principle. We have said that it would be absurd to put forward an action as virtuous or as vicious, yet maintain that its performance, in no sense whatsoever, contributed to either human good or harm. But this means the principle that all virtues tend towards good and all vices towards harm is a truism. It serves to rule out of court moral absurdities and perverse attempts to call vices virtues, but it leaves untouched the vast range of putative vices and virtues for which a connexion with good and harm is claimed. Views of the nature of human good and harm vary considerably. The defenders of the autonomy of morals generally assert that goodness resides in the virtuous act itself (and that harm, or evil, resides in the vicious act). Virtue contributes to good in the sense that the performance of a virtuous action is intrinsically good. To look for good consequences extrinsic to the action is to misconceive the nature of morality. Even if non-moral goodness is always to be found in the presence of virtue, it in no way determines virtue.³²

32 The view that non-moral consequences have no relevance to the moral status of an action is concisely put by Wittgenstein: ". . . it is clear that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the ordinary sense. This question as to the consequences of an action must therefore be irrelevant. At least these consequences will not be events. For there must be something right in that formulation of the question. There must be some sort of ethical reward and ethical punishment, but this must lie in the action itself". Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 6.422/ See also, D. Z. Phillips: "Does It Pay to be Good?" in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1964 - 1965.

Locke rejects this aspect of the doctrine of moral autonomy as completely as he rejects ethical intuitionism. His ethical theory is thoroughly teleological. Virtue is not good in itself. On the contrary goodness is the end at which virtue aims. Thus, the whole point of acting virtuously, or in accord with the law of nature, is that good should flourish among men, not that virtue should flourish. Locke does allow the common distinction between natural and moral good. However, he differentiates them only by reference to the source from whence they come:

The difference between moral and natural good and evil is only this; that we call that naturally good and evil, which, by the natural efficiency of the thing, produces pleasure or pain in us; and 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 consequences, but by the intervention of that power. [Of Ethics in General", Op.Cit., pp. 128 - 129]

Moral good and evil, then, consist in the rewards and punishments following upon a man's action, and these are imposed either by God, or by some other intelligent agent who has authority under the law of nature. Taken in itself, something which is morally good or evil is of the same nature as a natural good or evil.³³

33 Cf. Essay, II, xxviii, 5. Thomas Burnet, in his Second Remarks upon An Essay concerning Humane Understanding, accuses Locke of failing to distinguish Bonum Utile and Bonum Honestum: "In your way either the Parts are coincident, or Bonum Utile is superior to Bonum Honestum". [p. 25] Burnet's charge is substantially correct; Locke has no use for a good which terminates in virtue. His position is quite clear in a shorthand note on "Pleasure and Pain": ". . . honestum . . . were [it] not ordained by God to procure the jucundum and be a means to help us to happiness, . . . I do not see how [it]

Locke's account of the nature of good and evil is consistently hedonistic:

Things . . . are good or evil only in reference to pleasure or pain. That we call good which is apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us, or else to procure or preserve us the possession of any other good or absence of any evil. And, on the contrary, we name that evil which is apt to produce or increase any pain, or diminish any pleasure in us, or else to procure us any evil, or deprive us of any good. [II, xx, 2/

He is careful to add that pleasures and pains can be mental as well as bodily. Goodness, therefore, is not restricted to the so-called sensual pleasures. Happiness, which is the spur of all human action, "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 anyone cannot be content". [II, xxi, 42] Human good, then, is pleasure and human harm is pain. Formulated in terms of this hedonistic definition, the utilitarian theory of the content of morality will read thus: Virtues are those actions the performance of which tend to promote pleasure; vices are those

33 cont'd

would be reckoned good at all . . . What makes temperance a good and gluttony an evil but that the one serves to procure us health and ease in this world and happiness in the other, when gluttony does quite the contrary?" [Deciphered by Von Leyden, Essays, pp. 268 - 269] Notwithstanding his occasional use of the term 'moral goodness' to mean 'moral rectitude' (See above, p. 212), there is no doubt that this note represents Locke's final position. For a very able contemporary defence of Locke against Burnet's criticism see Mrs Catharine Cockburn: A Defence of the Essay of Human Understanding. See also, George H. Moulds: "The 'Right' and the 'Good' in Locke's Writings" in The Locke Newsletter, 1972.

actions the performance of which tend to cause pain. Unlike the world of justice, in which each individual is merely left alone to attain happiness as best he can by his own efforts, the world in which the utilitarian virtues are cultivated will be one of mutual assistance in the common pursuit of happiness.

The testing of moral notions against the utilitarian standard, as it has now been explicated, might appear an empirical task of no great complexity. If a notion signifies an action which is productive of pleasure, then it will be a valid moral notion and the action signified will be virtuous. Conversely, the validity of moral notions falling within the general category of vice will be determined by reference to pain. Notions which pass this test truly belong to the content of the law of nature; those which fail may be dismissed as the product of human error and prejudice. However, the concepts of pleasure and pain are almost as highly contested as the concepts of good and harm. If the utilitarian standard is to be properly operative as the determinant of virtue and vice, 'pleasure' and 'pain' must themselves be elucidated.

Unfortunately, Locke's account of pleasure and pain renders the concepts ineluctably contestable. He understand pleasure and pain to be psychological states accompanying sensations and thoughts. The ideas we have of them are simple; and these, "like other simple ideas, cannot be described, nor their names defined; the way of knowing them is, as of the simple ideas of the senses, only by experience". [II, xx, 1] This means that each individual's idea

of pleasure, or of pain, is strictly limited by the bounds of his own experience. Whereas a man may come to know a complex idea by description or by definition, he can know a simple idea only by acquaintance. It follows that a man's judgement that an action produces pleasure can amount to no more than a judgement that the action causes him pleasure. Further, his judgement will be incorrigible in the sense that, if it is mistaken, no one but the man himself can be in a position to correct it.³⁴ Therefore, if one man judges an action to be productive of pleasure and another man judges the contrary, there is no means whereby their disagreement can be resolved. Indeed it is not at all clear that there is a disagreement involved here. It might be said that one man is claiming simply that, in his case, a certain action arouses a certain feeling, while the other claims that, in his case, the same action arouses a different feeling. These assertions do not contradict one another and both may well be true.

There is a move which, although it does not provide a complete answer to the above objection, might be thought to forestall its full force. One of Locke's shorthand Journal entries, dated 16th July

34 This is not to say the judgement is infallible. Locke sees reflection, or introspection, as closely akin to sense perception. On this analysis there is no reason why a man should not be mistaken in his introspective awareness of his own mental state just as he can be mistaken in sense perception. Nevertheless, if pleasure and pain are only known as internal mental states, the individual is the only one in a position to form any opinion as to whether he is experiencing these states.

1676, reads:

God has so framed the constitutions of our minds and bodies that several things are apt to produce in both of them pleasure and pain, delight and trouble, by ways that we know not, but for ends suitable to His goodness and wisdom.
Von Leyden, p. 265⁷⁵

On the very large assumption that human nature is uniform with respect to the things that cause pleasure and pain, it might be argued that, although irresolvable disagreement is a logical possibility, it will in fact not occur. A difference of opinion as to whether an action causes pleasure will always be resolvable by a further introspective 'look'. However, in a passage added to the second edition of the Essay Locke deprives himself of even this doubtful line of defence. He admits the fact that different men find their pleasures in different objects:

For, 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. II, xxi, 55

If pleasure is thus subjective the utilitarian standard cannot provide a satisfactory test for the validity of moral notions. Whether or not an action causes pleasure will be relative to each individual's private experience. Working on this data reason might arrive at various systems of private goods and evils, but it will not be able to discover a system of virtues and vices. The

35 Cf. Essay, II, vii, 2 - 6.

concept of a private system of virtues and vices is incoherent; for if an action is conceived as virtuous or vicious it is thought to be so with respect to all men, whether they realize it or not. It is this universality which sets morality apart from other systems regulating human behaviour. For example, the rules of etiquette in one society often prescribe conduct of a type contrary to that prescribed in another society. A man crossing from one group to the other will, for the sake of politeness, vary his behaviour. An analogous difference in moral practices will not elicit any alteration in the conduct of a man seriously concerned with living a moral life. Moral differences prompt dispute, not acceptance. For Locke, the universality which is distinctive of morality depends on there being an objective moral law binding equally on all men. However, even a philosopher who denies the existence of such a law must grant universality to be an essential feature of morality. Therefore, any moral theory which fails to accommodate this feature must be inadequate.

Both justice and what we have called the utilitarian theory fail to provide a fundamental principle whereby reason can make out the content of the law of nature. The former is too narrow to encompass all of morality; the latter ends in subjectivism. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that Locke has done nothing to vindicate his belief in a rational basis of morals.

Locke's state of nature was said to be his assessment of the human situation in its essentials: man is naturally a social creature.

Each man is intent on achieving his own happiness. All men are equal under the one law set by God. From this data it is possible to derive at least the outline of what may be termed a minimal morality. In order for men to live together there must be some rule, or set of rules, harmonizing individual quests for private happiness. Given Locke's extended definition of property, the law of justice, as it is set out in the paper on Morality, does constitute such a minimal morality. It dictates the fundamental conditions necessary for the existence of society. This derivation of justice, it should be noted, is not affected by the absence of a precise definition of happiness. Different men may, and in fact, do form very different ideas of happiness; yet there clearly are circumstances which will prevent a man's happiness, no matter what his idea may be. For instance, if a man is killed his quest for happiness is terminated. Therefore, it is possible to indicate types of action incompatible with the existence of a society in which each individual seeks to fulfil his own idea of happiness. Hence we can compile a minimal list of moral notions, or virtues and vices.

Locke is aware of the necessity of minimal morality. He is also aware that it is minimal; that such rules do not cover the full extent of what we call morality:

. . . it cannot be supposed that any men should associate together and unite in the same community, and at the same time allow that for commendable, i.e. count it a virtue, may not discountenance and treat such actions as blameable, i.e. count them vices, which tend to the dissolution of that society in which they were united; but all other actions that are not thought to have such an immediate influence on society I find not . . . but that in some

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countries or societies they are virtues, in others vices, and in others indifferent, according as the authority of some esteemed wise men in some places, or as inclination or fashion of people in other places, have happened to establish them virtues or vices. /"Of Ethics in General", Op.Cit., p. 126/

It is the secondary area of non-minimal morality which most concerns Locke. For it is here that disagreement and debate typically arise, and what Locke hopes for is a system of duties concerning which rational men could as little disagree as they can over the certainties of mathematics. That he never found the key to this system is not surprising, for no such key exists. Moral notions, unlike the notions employed by mathematicians, are open textured. What is more they must be open textured if they are to function properly. As this is so, moral disagreement and debate, even between men who make use of the same notions, is always possible. Morality, therefore, cannot be reduced to a quasi-mathematical discipline. The kind of certitude Locke seeks is neither available, nor appropriate, in the study of morals.

Nevertheless, Locke's contention that moral law is discovered by reason working on the materials of experience is far more fruitful than the alternative epistemologies current among his contemporaries. The thesis that each man has an infallible conscience within his own breast inevitably ends with subjectivism and relativism, i.e. with a theory in direct antithesis to a theory of moral knowledge. The closely allied thesis that moral propositions are self-evident to intuition is more a way of closing the subject than of solving the problem of moral knowledge. On Locke's theory men construct

moral notions in accordance with their own interests, and the overriding interest of all men is happiness. Morality, then, originates in the human endeavour to devise rules for the attainment of happiness. It is this endeavour which gives unity and coherence to what we have called the moral point of view. For when men deal with the world from this point of view they do not rank actions under a random collection of notions, but rank them under notions developed with one specific object in mind; the attainment of happiness.

Locke's analysis of happiness in terms of pleasure and pain, and his subjective account of the latter, precludes a stringent test for the validity of moral notions. However, the stress he lays on human happiness as the end and object of morality does set a limit to the sphere of morality and thereby imposes a shape on debates concerning virtue and vice. Although it is impossible to give a concise definition of happiness, the concept is clearly not vacuous. It is not vacuous because we can cite states of affairs which are definitely incompatible with human happiness. For example, it is true that physical pain is incompatible with happiness. This is a general truth even though, in exceptional circumstances, we might truly say of a particular man that he is both in pain and happy. Therefore a man cannot sensibly pitch upon just anything and maintain that it constitutes his private idea of happiness. Of course, it may be objected that Locke's characterization of morality as the 'rule of man's actions for attaining happiness' is itself

problematic, that it is nothing more than an expression of Locke's personal moral 'intuition'. However, the philosopher who makes this objection must either deny that morality has any object whatsoever, or he must bear the onus of explaining what morality is about, what gives the moral point of view coherence.

Locke does see himself as failing to solve the problem of moral knowledge. In his own eyes he fails because he finds it impossible to exhibit, in a manner perspicuous to unaided reason, the one set of moral commands which he knows to be true. What may be taken as Locke's final thoughts on the problem of moral knowledge occur in The Reasonableness of Christianity:

Whatsoever should . . . be universally useful, as a standard to which men should conform their manners, must have its authority, either from reason or revelation . . . It is true, there is a law of nature: 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 showed the world their obligation? Where was there any such code, that mankind might have recourse to, as their unerring rule, before our Saviour's time? . . . such a law, which might be the sure guide of those who had a desire to go right; and, if they had a mind, need not mistake their duty, but might be certain when they had performed, when failed in it. Such a law of morality Jesus Christ hath given us in the New Testament; but by the latter of these ways, by revelation. We have from him a full and sufficient rule for our direction, and conformable to that of reason. Works, 7, pp. 142 - 143

Locke has not given up his belief in a law accessible to unaided reason. What he does maintain is that reason has never yet been completely successful in displaying the law in all its parts and the full force of its obligation. In other words, ethics has yet to

find its Newton. However, even without a fully rational morality, men are not left in the dark as to their duties. The law of opinion (what, in more modern terms may be called 'common moral consciousness') is, in the main, a safe guide to the objective law of nature. It is so because it is the law which men have developed in their corporate endeavours after happiness. Moreover the evangelized part of mankind do possess moral certitude; but it is a certitude founded not in reason but in divine revelation. Locke finally rests (not without reluctance) with a morality which, although it is not initially discovered by reason, is completely acceptable to reason.

Chapter IX

MORAL JUDGEMENTS AND MORAL ACTION

In Chapter V. we endeavoured to construct (out of the materials supplied in Locke's account of notions) a theory of moral judgements which allows them a cognitive status equal to that enjoyed by judgements concerning non-moral facts. It was said that, at least typically, a moral judgement consists in the ranking of an action under a moral notion. If the action in fact falls under the notion, we can say that the judgement in which the notion is used is true. Subsequently we saw that, if Locke's theory is to guarantee the objectivity of morals, this cognitive analysis of moral judgements needs to be augmented by some standard whereby the validity of moral notions can be tested. Up to a point, Locke's rule of justice, taken together with the view that human happiness is the object of morality, provides such a standard. It is not one from which a complete and final list of virtues and vices can be derived with the rigorous certainty Locke stipulated as the hallmark of knowledge. Nevertheless, it does narrow the scope of moral debate. Moreover, it enables us to characterize the criticism, defence and revision of established moral notions as activities in which objective facts, and not merely subjective attitudes and emotions, are involved. However, what we have termed the Lockean theory of moral judgements is still subject to a number of objections; and no final assessment of the theory can be reached until it has been considered in the light of these objections.

Were it not for the prominence of so-called 'non-cognitivism'

in recent ethical theory the statement that moral judgements are cognitive would appear to labour the obvious. Ordinary usage sanctions the words 'know' and 'knowledge' in connexion with moral judgements. The moral judgement that a thing is wrong or that it is murder seems to assert a fact in the same way as the, undoubtedly factual, judgement that a thing is red or that it is a table. Nevertheless, the permission of ordinary usage and the grammatical similarity between moral judgements and the paradigmatic type of factual judgement hardly proves that the former are examples of knowledge or that they assert facts. Ordinary usage and grammatical similarity, it may be said, mask fundamental logical differences.

The grounds for the non-cognitivist critique of ordinary moral discourse are far too complicated to be given in detail here.¹ The critique itself has given rise to theories as different as the emotivism of Professors Ayer and Stevenson, the prescriptivism of Professor Hare, and the existentialism of writers like Jean-Paul Sartre. What unites these philosophers is the belief that there are no objective criteria in accordance with which moral judgements can be said to be true or false. A moral judgement is analysed as an expression of an emotion, or of an attitude, towards the object judged, or as a personal decision, taking the form of an imperative, with respect to the object. To say of a moral judgement made on a particular occasion that it is true is merely a way of endorsing the

¹ For an excellent short survey see J.O. Urmson: The Emotive Theory of Ethics, Ch. 2.

feelings and attitude of the speaker, or of agreeing to the prescription he is putting forward. It is a mistake to suppose that, in moral discourse, terms such as 'true', 'false', have any reference to a realm of objective moral truth. Consequently, it is a mistake to suppose that moral disagreement concerns the content of that realm. When two men differ in their moral opinions they do not disagree (as they would over a matter of fact), but diverge in their feelings, attitudes or the decisions they have reached. Moral dispute is still possible, its point being to bring about a convergence of attitudes, or a uniformity in decision. In a moral argument one man attempts to get the other to 'see things his way'. Certainly, there is a large cognitive element in moral discourse. Both the development of an attitude and the making of a decision involves a knowledge of facts from which the attitude grows and on which the decision is based. Similarly, the dialectic of moral argument involves the exhibition of known facts and the discovery of new facts. However, the important point is that the cognitive element does not belong to the moral judgement itself. As there is no objective moral truth, it is logically possible for two men to arrive at quite contrary moral judgements from a knowledge of exactly the same facts. Nor is there any stage in a moral disagreement at which the outcome must, logically, favour one party rather than the other. The resolution of a moral disagreement can only result from a change of heart, or from weariness on the part of one of the contenders. Thus, although one comes to a

moral judgement in the light of certain facts, the judgement itself is in the nature of a leap in the dark. In short, no facts (which are the proper objects of cognition) entail a moral judgement.

Very broadly, three factors have contributed to the rise of non-cognitivism in recent ethical thought. In the first place, there has been a widespread acceptance of the 'naturalistic fallacy' argument. Secondly, there has been even more widespread dissatisfaction with a specific cognitive analysis of moral judgements which claimed to avoid this fallacy. Finally, it has been thought that any cognitive analysis must neglect the most essential feature of moral judgements, that they tell the agent what he ought to do.

The first and second of these factors can be traced to G. E. Moore's Principia Ethica. Moore's moral theory contains a negative and a positive thesis. In his negative thesis he sets out to demolish all naturalistic and metaphysical theories of the foundations of morality, on the grounds that they commit the 'naturalistic fallacy'. Few, if any, philosophers would now try to frighten their opponents with the naturalistic fallacy in the exact terms of Moore's original formulation. Nevertheless, it is often held that Moore's criticism is correct in spirit, and that, in some modified version, his argument does refute all naturalistic and metaphysical ethical theories.² In general, the naturalistic fallacy may be said to be the attempt to identify a moral concept with a non-moral concept.

2 For an influential revamping of the naturalistic fallacy argument see R.M. Hare: The Language of Morals, pp. 83 - 91.

Thus, to take Moore's example, if we define 'good' as 'pleasure', the assertion that 'pleasure is good' must be equivalent to the tautology that 'pleasure is pleasant'. But the first assertion is clearly not a tautology. Therefore, the putative definition (or identification) must leave something out; it must fail as a definition. The same failure occurs whatever 'naturalistic' definition is offered.³

Although Moore's naturalistic fallacy argument still enjoys considerable currency in many quarters, his positive thesis is generally regarded as a museum piece. Briefly, Moore argues that, as 'good' cannot be defined in natural terms, the word must stand for a simple (thus indefinable) 'non-natural' property, goodness. He is thus led to postulate the existence of a very odd entity indeed. For neither Moore nor anyone else has ever been able to give a satisfactory account of what a 'non-natural' property may be. Again, if the naturalistic fallacy argument is deployed against the attempt to define other moral concepts besides 'good', a proliferation of 'non-natural' moral properties seems inevitable. As well as suffering on the score of postulated entities, Moore's positive thesis has been attacked on two further counts. Firstly, as good-

3 Moore's naturalistic fallacy argument bears a close resemblance to the argument against ethical voluntarism common in the seventeenth-century: If the criterion of moral rightness or goodness is the will of God or of the sovereign then it will be non-informative to say that what God or the sovereign wills is right (and contradictory to say that it is wrong). For an account of Moore's historical antecedents see A.N. Prior: Logic and the Basis of Ethics, *passim*.

ness is a simple, non-natural property belonging to things, its presence can be detected only by some kind of intuition. Moore is, therefore, open to the kind of objection we have seen urged by Locke against innate (self-evident) moral principles: he ends by claiming a sacrosanct status for propositions which may be no more than his own moral opinions. But it is the second objection which has done most to discredit Moore's positive thesis. It is claimed that he neglects the distinctive relation between moral judgements and action, and that, as an ethical cognitivist, he cannot but neglect this relation.

All moral judgements, it is argued, either take the general form, 'x ought to be the case', or involve a judgement which takes this general form. On the other hand, all factual judgements take the general form, 'x is the case'. If this is so it is easy to see that the possible connexions between moral judgements and actions, and those between factual judgements and actions are going to be quite different. A moral judgement will tell a man what he ought to do, whereas a factual judgement can only tell him what he has done, is doing, or will do. It follows that moral judgements belong in a different category from factual judgements. For no factual judgement, nor any combination of factual judgements, can perform the essential function of a moral judgement. This category difference is often summed up in the dictum that an 'ought' cannot be derived from an 'is'. Cognitive analyses of moral judgements, it is said, are bound to ignore the fundamental difference between these two

categories of judgement. Whether they be framed in terms of natural, non-natural or metaphysical properties, they all construe moral judgements on the model of factual judgements. Hence, they may be looked upon either as incoherent attempts to move from 'is' to 'ought', or as inadequate analyses which leave the moral 'ought' entirely out of account.

In view of what has been said above, we can see that if the analysis of moral judgements which has been gathered from the discussion of moral notions is to be acceptable, it must negotiate certain obstacles. (That these obstacles have come to the fore largely since Locke's time is, of course, quite irrelevant.) At the outset we can put aside the problem of non-natural properties accessible only to intuition. Locke does not postulate any such entities, and he is as much opposed to ethical intuitionism as any of Moore's critics. This leaves the naturalistic fallacy argument and the demand that an adequate analysis of moral judgement include a coherent account of the moral 'ought'.

On the Lockean theory, a moral judgement typically consists in the ranking of an action under a moral notion. For example, if an action is judged to be murder it is ranked under the notion 'murder'. This judgement logically depends on certain features of the action and the surrounding circumstances. Given the presence of these features, and given that the surrounding circumstances are within the vague ceteris paribus clause which we saw to be a necessary adjunct to all moral notions, the action in question is murder. We will now

look more closely at this analysis in order to see how extensive an account of moral judgements it yields. We will take as our example the judgement that a particular action is murder. (We do, of course, sometimes pass judgements on kinds of actions, e.g. 'the acquisition of property is theft'. We also judge actions to be virtuous, e.g. to be examples of kindness, courage etc. However, for the present purposes, nothing of importance turns on this. Whatever is shown to hold concerning the Lockean analysis in the light of our chosen example will also hold, mutatis mutandis, with respect to judgements passed on kinds of actions, and to pro-moral judgements, in which an action is ranked under a notion signifying a virtue.)

If an action is murder it follows that it is morally wrong. On the analysis under consideration this is explained by the fact that the notion of murder falls under the much more general notion of vice. In Locke's terminology 'vice', or 'vicious' is equivalent to 'morally wrong'. Thus, the judgement that an action is murder entails the much broader judgement that it is vicious, or morally wrong. Now it is the latter type of moral judgement which has chiefly engaged the attention of moral philosophers. Suppose, then, we were to begin with the broad moral judgement that the action is vicious. What account can be given of this in terms of the Lockean theory? Clearly it does not entail the judgement that the action is murder. Nevertheless, given the judgement that a particular action is vicious we can say that the action must fall under some moral notion signifying a type of vice. A man who simply expresses the judgement that an action is vicious lays himself open to the demand

for further specification. A moral judgement, such as the judgement that an action is vicious, is further specified when the action in question is ranked under a moral notion which indicates what type of vice is involved. Here there are two important points to be noted. First, the further specification of a general moral judgement is not only something which can be demanded for the purpose of greater information, it is something which must be forthcoming if the judgement is to retain its moral character. For an action is not vicious simpliciter; but vicious in that it exemplifies a type of vice. Therefore, if a man judges an action to be vicious he must be prepared to specify the way in which it is vicious. Otherwise, his judgement is a pseudo-moral judgement. He is asking us to believe in an action which is vicious yet does not exemplify any particular type of vice. But such an action is an absurdity, analogous to an object which is coloured yet of no particular colour. Secondly, moral notions must be used in the further specification of a moral judgement. Suppose the man attempts to make his broad judgement more specific by giving a description of the circumstances of the action, but without giving any indication that those circumstances warrant that action's inclusion under a moral notion. No matter how detailed the description given in non-moral terms, it would remain an open question whether the action were vicious or not. A judgement in which an action is ranked under a moral notion is the only type of judgement entailing a broad judgement of virtue or vice. Therefore, if the man is to further specify his judgement that the action in question is vicious he must make use of a moral notion signifying a vice.

We may conclude, then, that the analysis generated from a consideration of the judgement in which an action is ranked under a moral notion does provide an account of moral judgements in which notions of the widest generality are involved. We may also, tentatively, conclude that the Lockean theory avoids the naturalistic fallacy. In the course of the analysis no attempt has been made to identify moral concepts such as 'vice' or 'moral wrongness' with non-moral concepts. It has only been claimed that the use of these terms in judgements necessarily involves the use of detailed moral notions. Nor have these notions been defined in the sense of definition proscribed by the naturalistic fallacy argument. 'Murder' has not been identified with something other than 'murder'. It has been pointed out that moral notions are applied to actions in accordance with rules, and that, therefore, one can rank an action as murder only on the basis of certain facts. This is an obvious, albeit highly important, truth. Nevertheless, the conclusion that the naturalistic fallacy has been avoided can, at present, be no more than tentative. For the naturalistic fallacy argument shades into what is the most general and far reaching of all objections to a cognitive theory of moral judgements: that no 'ought' can be derived from an 'is'. As we have seen, this objection is considered decisive against any analysis which construes moral judgements on the model of factual judgements.

The Lockean theory does construe moral judgements on the model of factual judgements. However, unlike Moore's theory, it does not take the factual judgement which asserts that an object has a certain

property as paradigmatic. Instead moral judgements are likened to the type of factual judgement in which a piece of human behaviour is identified as an instance of a kind of action. Judging an action to be murder is akin to judging an action to be fencing or dancing. In view of this model of moral judgements, the objection that no 'ought' can be derived from 'is' may be put thus: The judgement that an action is (say) murder tells a man no more than that in performing the action he will commit murder. It is true that from this judgement he can proceed to the judgement that his action will be vicious, or morally wrong. However, the second judgement contains nothing not contained in the first, and neither contain an 'ought'. The man who wishes to discover what he ought to do must know further that he ought not to commit murder or that he ought not do that which is wrong. This extra piece of information is not a fact, but a moral rule or moral principle.

There is, however, an important, though seldom noticed, ambiguity in the doctrine that an 'ought' cannot be derived from an 'is'. Sometimes it is taken as meaning that no moral obligation, or moral 'ought', can arise from any fact or set of facts. Perhaps more frequently it is taken as meaning that no fact or set of facts, in itself, can prompt a man to act. Two quite different things are being asserted in these formulations. But, as we shall see, there is a reason why the difference should have gone largely unnoticed.

Locke's theory of obligation, as it is expounded in the Essays on the Law of Nature, may be taken as a denial of the first

formulation. According to Locke, men have moral obligations because God exists as the supreme legislator. God's right to legislate concerning the behaviour of mankind is, by definition, part of His 'right of creation'. This right belongs to God essentially; for, again by definition, He is the creator of mankind. The fact that God has set laws to mankind provides the formal cause of the moral obligations men are under. Without God's law there could be no such thing as moral obligation. Therefore, it makes no sense to say that men morally ought to do anything except against the background of God's commands. For Locke, except as they are understood in terms of law words such as 'ought' and 'obligation' are literally empty sounds. The usual argument against a theistic basis of moral obligation states that one cannot move from the fact that God has issued laws to the fact of moral obligation without importing the synthetic proposition that men ought to obey God as an additional premise.⁴ Locke's reply would be that the term 'ought' used in the new premise has meaning only insofar as moral obligation does follow from the fact that God has issued laws.⁵

Law provides the form, not the matter, of obligation. Therefore, from the fact that God has issued laws it follows only that men are under a moral obligation to do something. The fact tells

4 Cf. P. H. Nowell-Smith: Ethics, pp. 37 - 38 n.2.

5 Cf. Essay, I, iii, 12: ". . . what duty is cannot be understood without a law, nor a law be known or supposed without a law-maker". Locke's legalist theory of the moral 'ought' is echoed in G. E. M. Anscombe's paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" in Philosophy, 1958.

men nothing of what they are under an obligation to do. Given that the existence of moral obligation is thus distinct from the content of that obligation, we can defend the Lockean theory of moral judgements against the charge that it involves an illegitimate move from 'is' to 'ought'. From the judgement that an action is murder it does not follow that the agent ought not perform that action. Rather, the agent knows beforehand that he has moral obligations; and, assuming he understands the notion of murder, he also knows that 'murder' is a term used in the expression of a negative obligation. This knowledge is presupposed in his use of a moral notion in making the moral judgement. In the absence of this knowledge man might still rank actions under notions such as 'murder', but in this case he would not express a moral judgement. For a moral judgement does tell a man what he ought to do in that it expresses the content of his moral obligations.

Even if Locke's theory of obligation is acceptable, there remains the second formulation of the 'ought/is' objection. It is not denied that the factual knowledge a man has can, and does, contribute to the way in which he acts. But it is maintained that the mere knowledge of a matter of fact on its own is powerless to move a man to act. Action can be initiated only by some psychological state of the agent, by a desire or a want. For instance, a man's knowledge that a certain liquid is poisonous in itself has neither the power to make him drink nor to restrain him from drinking. However, if he wants to die this knowledge will influence him to drink; if he wants

to stay alive the same knowledge will influence him to refrain from drinking. Now it is often said to be the distinguishing characteristic of a moral judgement that it not merely contributes to the way in which a man acts, but of itself has the power to initiate action. When a man accepts a moral judgement, he ipso facto acquires a tendency to act, either to perform the action in the case of a pro-judgement or to refrain from it in the case of a con-judgement.⁶ Or, to put the point slightly differently, a moral judgement gives the agent a conclusive reason for acting. Therefore, an analysis which reduces moral judgements to factual judgements, or which explains them on the model of factual judgements, must be inadequate.

It may seem strange that this objection stressing the dynamic quality of moral discourse should be considered under the general heading of the 'ought/is' rule. Granted that moral judgements are intimately connected with obligation, that to accept a moral judgement is to accept (in accordance with the judgement) that one ought to act in a certain way; might it not be said that this is only to accept a fact? Granted further that actions are not initiated by the knowledge of facts; might this not only go to show that moral action is initiated by something other than a moral judgement? In other words, why should it not be that the recognition of a moral

6 This insistence on the dynamic quality of moral judgements is central to the emotive theory of ethics as it is developed by Charles Stevenson. See, for example, his "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" in Facts and Values, Essay 2.

obligation is one thing, while action in accord with the obligation is another thing, and that the two are only externally related to one another? If there is a problem about moral action it will be distinct from the problem of finding a satisfactory account of moral obligation.

The objection against this separation of action from the apprehension of obligation, and the ambiguity of the doctrine that no 'ought' follows from an 'is', can, at least in large part, be traced to the concept of obligation itself. In ordinary usage the term 'obligation' often carries the connotation of constraint or compulsion. Indeed in some contexts to say that a man is obliged to do a thing means that he cannot help but do it. Clearly moral obligation cannot be equated with this degree of constraint. No one has ever suggested that men cannot but fulfil the moral obligations they recognize. Nevertheless, the concept of 'being under a moral obligation' does retain something of this connotation. Hence, we do tend to doubt that a man in fact recognizes a moral obligation if, in the appropriate circumstances, he makes no attempt whatsoever to act in accord with that obligation. We would generally want to say that he has not fully understood his obligation, or that he has not seen its force. The thesis that there is an internal relation between a moral judgement and a tendency to act may, therefore, be spelled out thus: a moral judgement tells a man what he ought to do, but a man cannot be said to have properly acknowledged that he ought to do a thing unless he is prepared to act.

Locke is aware of the dynamic dimension of moral discourse. He subscribes to the common distinction between purely speculative and practical knowledge, and places morality within the latter category. However, he does not believe that moral truth in itself has the capacity to move the will. In an MS note entitled 'Ethica' he writes:

Therefor [sic. There are] two parts of Ethics the one is the rules w^{ch} 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 practice them & the ways to bring men to observe them & these are generally either not well known or not rightly applyd. Without the latter moral discourses are such as men hear with pleasure & approve of. The mind being generally delighted with truths especially if handsomly expressed. But all this is but the delight of speculation. Something else is requird to practice, w^{ch} will never be till men are made alive to virtue & can taste it. [MS, c. 28, Fol. 113]

The second part of ethics is Locke's moral psychology. As it constitutes his account of the practical aspect of moral knowledge, it may be said to round off and complete his moral epistemology. But more than this, Locke's moral psychology provides us with a vantage point from which to view the whole of his ethical theory. For Locke does not see moral philosophy as a discipline concerned with the analysis of moral judgements, or with the elucidation of the logic behind moral discourse, but as, "πρακτικῆ", the skill of right applying our own powers and actions, for the attainment of things good and useful". [IV, xxi, 3]

The major premise in Locke's theory of human action is one with that which shapes his idea of the nature of morality; all men seek to attain their own happiness and avoid their own unhappiness, or

misery:

Happiness and misery are the two great springs of human actions, and though through different ways we find men so busy in the world, they all aim at happiness, and desire to avoid misery, as it appears to them in different places and shapes. [“Of Ethics in General”, King, 2, pp. 122 - 123]

Happiness is not merely the preponderant aim in men's actions; it is the sole object in each and every action:

If it be . . . asked, what it is moves desire? I answer: happiness, and that alone. Happiness and misery are the names of two extremes, the utmost bounds whereof we know not . . . But of some degrees of both we have very lively impressions, made by several instances of delight and joy on the one side, and torment and sorrow on the other; which, for shortness's sake, I shall comprehend under the names of pleasure and pain, there being pleasure and pain of the mind as well as the body. [II, xxi, 41]

For Locke; "what has an aptness to produce pleasure in us is that we call good, and what is apt to produce pain in us we call evil, for no other reason but for its aptness to produce pleasure and pain in us, wherein consists our happiness and misery". [II, xxi, 42] This shift from psychological hedonism, or the doctrine that happiness (defined in terms of pleasure and the absence of pain) is the one object in all desire, to an account of good and evil deserves careful attention. It is exactly the kind of move which Moore castigates as, "a naive and artless . . . use of the naturalistic fallacy".⁷ Further, it is the point at which, in the eyes of most commentators, Locke tacitly discards his original natural law ethic for a hedonistic doctrine, according to which the moral worth of an action is determined solely by the pleasantness of its consequences.

7 Principia Ethica, p. 66. Moore is criticizing John Stuart Mill.

Fortunately, Locke's defence against the naturalistic fallacy argument also enables us to see the continuity between his hedonism and his natural law doctrine.

The naturalistic fallacy argument turns on the fact that moral judgements are always synthetic, or what Locke would call 'informative propositions'. It is assumed that 'good' is a moral predicate, and that therefore any judgement of the form 'x is good' is a moral judgement. 'Good', therefore, cannot be identified with 'x' (e.g. with pleasure). If it were, the judgement 'x is good' would express an analytic truth, and be what Locke calls a 'trifling proposition'. But need Locke understand 'good' as a moral predicate? If it is not so understood, there is no reason why the judgement 'x is good' should not express a mere analytic truth. Before attempting to answer this question it is necessary to look more closely at the connexion Locke forges between psychological hedonism and goodness.

The move from pleasure to good is most clearly seen in the following passage:

. . . an understanding free agent naturally follows that which causes pleasure to it and flies that which causes pain; i.e. naturally seeks happiness and shuns misery. That, then, which causes to any one pleasure, that is good to him; and that which causes him pain, is bad to him . . . for good and bad, being relative terms, do not denote any thing in the nature of the thing, but only the relation it bears to another, in its aptness and tendency to produce in it pleasure or pain; and thus we see and say, that which is good for one man is bad for another. ["Of Ethics in General" King, 2, pp. 127 - 128/

The most obvious thing about the above passage is that, if 'good' is taken as a moral predicate, it must be supposed that Locke has

abandoned his objective natural law ethic for an extreme form of subjectivism. For he is quite explicit in his claim that the goodness of things is relative to each individual. It can also be seen that the argument presented here contains a concealed premise. From the proposition that each agent naturally seeks his own pleasure, Locke arrives at the conclusion that, in the view of each agent, his own pleasure is good. But this conclusion cannot be derived solely from the given premise. There is, prima facie, nothing contradictory in a man judging both; (a) that x gives him pleasure, (b) that x is bad. What Locke needs is a further premise to the effect that whatever ends men set themselves in their actions they always conceive those ends as good. Given this it will follow that what gives a man pleasure is good to him; and that the man who judges x to be both pleasurable and bad is contradicting himself.

The thesis that no man chooses an end for himself except under the aspect of good, and the definition of good as the object of every appetite, are commonplace in scholastic, and especially Thomist, thought.⁸ The metaphysical scheme which gives meaning to this thesis is highly complex. Very briefly, it is held that every being in the order of creation tends towards some other being which is its natural end. The end of a thing is the being which completes, and

8 Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Contra Gentiles, III, iii. The definition of good is appropriated by St. Thomas from Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, I, i, 1094a1. The Thomist conception of human action is taken for granted by Hooker, Cf. Ecclesiastical Policy, I, viii, 1.

thus perfects, its nature. As the end towards which a thing tends perfects its nature, it is identical with the good of that thing. The metaphysic scheme serves as an explanation for all action, both the motions of the physical universe and the acts of intellectual agents. The difference between physical and intellectual agents consists in the fact that the latter are capable of apprehending their natural end, or good. By the same token, they are capable of misapprehending it, i.e. acting with a view to what they incorrectly suppose to be their good. Such a mistake is, of course, covered by the thesis that men act always under the aspect of good. If this were not so, if men sometimes acted for an end which did not at least seem to them good, their acting would be quite inexplicable.⁹

Needless to say, Locke is very far from accepting this metaphysic in toto. For him it would be a prime example of the venture 'into the vast ocean of Being' which is beyond the compass of human understanding. Nevertheless, residual traces of just such a metaphysical scheme can be discerned in Locke's thought. For example, we can see something of it in his belief that, for beings of sufficient intellectual capacity, an a priori science of nature is possible via a knowledge of real essences. However, the only residue included in Locke's theory of action is the thesis that whatever men choose as the object of their actions that they consider

9 For an account of this metaphysical theory of action in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas see Etienne Gilson: The Elements Of Christian Philosophy, Ch. 11.

good; and this he incorporates into a system quite different from the metaphysical scheme which originally gave it meaning. Locke does not begin from the notion of man's end, or good, and argue that men must desire this end, and act to attain it. Rather, he argues from the proposition that all men desire (and act to attain) pleasure, to the conclusion that pleasure must be their end, or good. The difference between the two arguments is subtle and highly significant. On what may be termed the scholastic argument, the object of human action is desired because it is good; on Locke's argument it is good because it is desired. His relativistic conclusion would be acceptable to neither Aristotle nor the Thomists.

Having outlined the background against which Locke makes the transition from psychological hedonism to an account of good, we are now in a position to assess this account vis a vis the so-called naturalistic fallacy. Certainly, Locke does identify 'good' with 'pleasure'. He makes this identification on the grounds that pleasure is what all men desire, and that the things which give a man pleasure are the ends he sets before himself in his actions. In consequence, the judgement that a thing is good is equivalent to the judgement that it is pleasant. 'Good' is actually defined, not as pleasure, but as 'that which is the object of desire', and, for Locke, this definition is a trifling proposition. However, the naturalistic fallacy argument forbids the definition of good and its equation with pleasure (or with any other non-moral property) only if 'good' is then used as a moral predicate. For the logic of its

role as a moral predicate demands that any judgement of the form 'x is good' must be synthetic. So far there has been nothing in Locke's argument to suggest that he uses 'good' in any way except as a name for the end of human action, that end being, in his opinion, pleasure, or happiness. Further, if 'good' is used as a moral predicate, the judgement that a thing is good must be understood as a pro-moral judgement ascribing moral worth to the thing judged. We saw in the previous chapter that Locke (notwithstanding occasional inconsistencies in his terminology) does not use even the term 'moral good' to signify the moral worth of a thing, but only in reference to the rewards following upon an action which is itself of moral worth. His position with respect to moral worth and goodness is made abundantly clear in a commonplace book entry dated 1693:

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 the [sic] self able and proper to move the will. But the moral rectitude of it considered barely in itself is not good or evil nor 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 pravity as proper motives to the will, which would be needless if moral rectitude were in itself good and moral pravity evil. [Quoted by Von Leyden, *Essays*, pp. 72 - 73]¹⁰

10 Cf. Locke's marginal notation to Burnet's Third Letter: "Men have a natural tendency to what delights and from what pains them. This universal observation has established past doubt. But that the soul has such a tendency to what is morally good and from evil has not fallen under my observation, and therefore I cannot grant it". [Quoted by A. C. Fraser in his edition of Locke's *Essay*, Vol. I, p. 67, n 1.]

The most general term expressive of moral worth which Locke recognizes is 'rectitude' (or 'virtue'). But by this term he understands something quite separate from goodness. That which is morally worthy is good only insofar as it is either accompanied by pleasure or is the cause of pleasure.¹¹ Hence, a man may, without any inconsistency, judge a thing to be both good (i.e. pleasant) and morally reprehensible (i.e. wrong, or vicious). In Locke's account 'good' is not a moral predicate. Therefore, we may conclude that his move from psychological hedonism to goodness does not fall under the naturalistic fallacy argument.

If it is not a moral predicate, what role does 'good' have in Locke's moral philosophy? The answer to this question has already been given: good is, "the proper object of desire in general".

[II, xxi, 43] As what men desire is pleasure, Locke might without much loss have dropped the term 'good' altogether. As it is, 'good' has a role, first and foremost, within his theory of action. Locke, does not draw any hard and fast distinction between theory of action and moral theory. The law of nature, being the rule of man's conduct, must facilitate man's desires. Otherwise, we must suppose

11 As Locke explains in the Essay, "things are judged good or bad in a double sense. First, that which is properly good or bad is nothing but barely pleasure or pain. Secondly, but because not only present pleasure and pain but that also which is apt by its efficacy or consequences to bring it upon us at a distance is a proper object of our desires . . . therefore things also that draw after them pleasure and pain are considered as good and evil. [II, xxi, 61]

that God has set a law over His creatures which aims at frustrating the nature He has given them. Not only would such a law be contrary to the wisdom of God, its content would be inaccessible to man's reason, i.e. it could not be the law of nature. In this way the hedonistic conception of goodness does play an important part in Locke's attempt to arrive at the content of the law of nature. However, it is hardly true to say that Locke's increasing interest in psychological hedonism, and his consequent equation of good with pleasure, marks the tacit abandonment of his early natural law ethics in favour of ethical hedonism. What it does show is an increasing awareness of the problems involved in the explanation of human action; and, more specifically, an increasing concern with the problem of moral action.

Even though there is a continuity discernible between Locke's early natural law doctrine and the hedonic definition of good given in the Essay, psychological hedonism does raise an acute problem within the context of his moral philosophy. Locke accepts the egoistic form of hedonism; each man desires pleasure for himself. We saw in Chapter VIII how, strictly out of a regard for his own happiness, a man will choose to live in a world in which justice has been established. It may be added that, out of the same regard, he will choose a world in which virtues other than justice are established. Under the rule of justice he can expect to be free from the encroachments of his fellow man; given the practise of other virtues he can expect their positive help. Further, reason will tell him that, as

all virtues belong to the content of a law which binds all men, he is not permitted to make an exception in his own favour when it comes to moral conduct. That is to say, he must agree that he is himself bound to practice virtue and avoid vice, even when doing so conflicts with his personal happiness. Nor is a conflict between the agent's own happiness and the dictates of virtue an unlikely occurrence; for, as Locke remarks, "a great number of virtues, and the best of them, consists only in this: that we do good to others at our own loss". Essays, p. 207] This being so, it seems a man who is intent solely on the achievement of his own happiness will modify his original choice. He will prefer a world in which the conduct of others is governed by the law of nature. Now, given Locke's doctrine of psychological hedonism, it appears that each individual is determined to make a choice similar to this when faced with the possibility of acting either virtuously or viciously. Virtue is not intrinsically pleasant, nor is vice intrinsically painful. Therefore, the agent will not be moved by a bare consideration of virtue and vice. Although he will choose that others should act virtuously towards himself, he will not act virtuously towards them unless circumstances are such that by so doing he encompasses his own pleasure. A fortiori, he will not act virtuously if circumstances are such that virtue crosses his own pleasure. Yet men do follow virtue to their own visible detriment. How can Locke explain such conduct?

It will be best to break this question down into two sub-

questions: First, how can the agent be rationally justified in choosing virtue? Second, how is it possible that the agent should ever spontaneously choose virtue? The grounds for this division lie partly with the doctrine of psychological hedonism as it has been put forward both by Locke and by other philosophers, and partly with the peculiarities of Locke's exposition of the doctrine. Psychological hedonism has often been understood as an empirical doctrine. There is said to be a gravitational drive towards pleasure in man which accounts for his actions in much the same way as the Newtonian theory of gravitation accounts for the motion of the physical universe. The truth of this 'law of human nature' is finally a matter of observation. However, besides the theory of hedonic gravitation, there is another version of psychological hedonism. The fact that an action will promote a man's pleasure is understood to give him a conclusive reason for performing that action. Conversely, the fact that an action will cause a man pain, or lessen his pleasure, is a conclusive reason for him not to perform that action. If human action is defined as rational action, it follows that all men act for the sake of pleasure. This theory might be termed metaphysical, rather than psychological, hedonism. Although they differ in important respects, these theories are often conflated.¹² Locke's own theory of action is most fully worked out in the chapter

12 The two theories seem to be conflated by John Stuart Mill. He remarks, for example, "that to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility". Utilitarianism. (Everyman ed.) p.36.

'Of Power' in the second book of the Essay, Locke extensively revised this chapter in the second, and subsequent editions, and the result of his revision is two overlapping theories. The first is akin to what we have termed metaphysical hedonism; the second resembles psychological hedonism in its quasi-empirical guise.

The question of the rational justification of virtue may be phrased in terms of a choice between points of view. This will bring it into line with the Lockean theory of moral judgements. The man who takes up the moral point of view sees his own actions, and the actions of others, as subject to the categories of virtue and vice. He acknowledges an obligation, binding on himself as well as others, to pursue virtue and avoid vice; and this irrespective of any advantage or disadvantage he may incur in particular cases. Thus, for the man deciding what he should do from the moral point of view, the fact that an action falls under a notion signifying a vice is sufficient to rule that action out of court. He will not, for instance, debate whether he should commit murder. Similarly, the fact that an action falls under a notion signifying a virtue is a prima facie reason for performing that action.¹³

13 Here we should note an important asymmetry between the demands of morality with respect to vice and with respect to virtue. Vice is thought of as something prohibited absolutely, so that (from the moral point of view) the fact that an action is vicious constitutes a conclusive reason against its performance. However, the virtuousness of an action is only a prima facie reason for its performance. If the latter were to be considered a conclusive reason for acting we would have to suppose that men are under an obligation to spend their entire lives in the performance of virtuous actions. For at any given time there is some virtuous act a man might perform. Rather, we

However, the moral point of view is not the only position from which the world of human action can be considered. Nor is it the only coherent stance an agent might adopt. The most comprehensive, as well as most obvious, alternative is the point of view of self-interest. The man who takes up this point of view will no doubt often conform to the dictates of morality. In many circumstances he will find virtue to be the best policy and vice contrary to his interest. Nevertheless, morality and self-interest are quite different; for the latter cuts across the categories of virtue and vice. From the self-interested point of view the fact that an action is virtuous or vicious carries no weight in the agent's decision. He chooses what to do purely in the light of his own

13 cont'd

suppose virtue to be positively prescribed only when appropriate circumstances arise. This is not to say a man might not devote his life to positive virtue. But in this case we think of him as acting beyond the call of moral duty, and of his actions as works of supererogation. Locke is well aware of this asymmetry. The law of nature does not bind man, "at all times to perform everything that the law of nature commands. This would be simply impossible, since one man is not capable of performing different actions at the same time . . . we say that the binding force of nature is perpetual in the sense that there neither is, nor can be, a time when the law of nature orders men, or any man, to do something and he is not obliged to show himself obedient . . . The binding force of the law never changes, though often there is a change in both the times and the circumstances of actions, whereby our obedience is defined. We can sometimes stop acting according to the law, but act against the law we cannot". Essays, p. 193. See also, Locke's letter to Denis Grenville, 23 Mar. 1677 = 8. H. R. Fox Bourne: The Life of John Locke, Vol. I, p. 393.

desires. This point of view can be adopted with perfect consistency. The agent is not bound in consistency to universalize his point of view, i.e. to will that all men act strictly out of a regard for their own interest. For clearly the universal pursuit of self-interest would be contrary to the selfish individual's own interest. He will, of course, not divulge his position to others; but, as he will follow virtue whensoever it suits him, he should not find keeping this secret any great strain. He will be guilty of a kind of inconsistency only if he maintains that in constantly following his own interest he is conforming to the moral law. Now on the doctrine that an action is rational only when it is aimed at the agent's own happiness, the point of view of self-interest appears the one position which it is reasonable for a man to adopt. Consequently, the moral point of view is unreasonable.

Locke's defence of the reasonableness of virtue turns on the possibility of reward and punishment in the next life. The bare possibility that a life of virtue will earn reward, and a life of vice punishment, after death constitutes an overwhelming reason for adopting morality rather than self-interest:

The rewards and punishments of another life, which the Almighty has established as the enforcements of his law are of weight enough to determine the choice against whatever pleasure or pain this life can show, when the eternal state is considered but in its bare possibility, which nobody can make any doubt of . . . This is evidently so, though the virtuous life here had nothing but pain, and the vicious, continual pleasure: which yet is, for the most part, quite otherwise . . . But when infinite happiness is put in one scale against infinite misery in the other; if the worst that comes to the pious man, if he mistakes, be the best that the wicked can attain to; if he be in the right, who can without madness run the venture? . . .

Whereas on the other side, the sober man ventures nothing against infinite happiness to be got, if his expectation comes to pass. If the good man be in the right, he is eternally happy; if he mistakes, he is not miserable, he feels nothing. On the other side, if the wicked be in the right, he is not happy; if he mistakes, he is infinitely miserable. /II, xxi, 70/

Locke's whole argument bears a striking resemblance to Pascal's famous 'wager'.¹⁴ Like Pascal, what Locke argues for is a way of life.

It is important to recognize that it is a way of life, and not merely a series of disconnected actions, which is at stake here. Otherwise we are likely to come away with a distorted picture of Locke's moral philosophy.

The emphasis Locke places on rewards and punishments may give the impression that he does after all reduce morality to self-interest. For how can rewards and punishments in the next life be anything more than additional factors to be considered in a practical calculation made from the point of view of self-interest? The agent realizes that, although a certain action will bring him transient pleasure, there is a likelihood of its bringing far greater pain upon him at a future date. Similarly, he realizes that a painful action may bring ultimate pleasure. However, as this calculation is one of pure self-interest, the fact that those actions likely to result in ultimate pain and those likely to result in ultimate pleasure are respectively vices and virtues plays no part. For Locke, on the other hand, this fact is essential. It is essential for two reasons. In the first place, the concept of

14 See Pensees (trans. A. J. Kailsheimer) § 418, pp. 149 - 53. There can be little doubt that Locke's borrowing is quite conscious; for he had read Pascale and kept a copy of the Pensees in his Library.

rewards and punishments for actions in the next world is intelligible only if actions are considered under the aspect of virtue and vice. Rewards and punishments are not pleasures and pains which happen to result from specific kinds of actions; they are imposed by a rightful authority. In Locke's theory it makes sense to talk of pleasure as a reward and pain as a punishment only against the background of law. As he explains, the law of nature places men under both an obligation of obedience and a liability to punishment if they disobey.¹⁵ The pain of punishment is, therefore, not simply a result of a man's action, but something he deserves because of his action. Any pain a man incurs because of what he does cannot be properly interpreted as punishment unless he is understood to have broken the law, and thus deserved punishment. Now the actions proscribed by the law of nature, and which thus deserve punishment in the next world, are those falling within the category of vice. Consequently, if the agent understands that a certain action is likely to be punished in the next world he cannot but see that action as vicious. That is, he must be looking at it from the moral point of view, and must acknowledge himself under an obligation to refrain from that action. Similarly, if the agent considers the rewards he is likely to deserve because of his actions he must again be looking at them from the moral point of view. Of course, it is in the agent's interest to live his life in accord with the dictates of morality. This is the whole burden of Locke's argument. Nevertheless, this does not alter the fact

15 See above, Ch. II, pp. 35 - 36.

that the point of view from which actions are seen under the categories of virtue and vice is quite different from that from which they are judged solely in the light of the agent's own pleasure or pain.¹⁶

In the second place, it is essential that each man view his actions under the aspects of virtue and vice because the life of virtue is the only means whereby an individual can achieve his complete happiness, while the life of vice is a certain way to his complete misery. Although what constitutes happiness for one man may differ to a considerable degree from that which constitutes the happiness of another, we can be certain that the reward of heaven will suit each and every man:

For that being intended for a state of happiness, it must certainly be agreeable to everyone's wish and desire; could we suppose their relishes as different there as they are here, yet the manna in heaven will suit everyone's palate. [II, xxi, 65]

Because of the relative nature of pleasure there is no summum bonum to be pursued in this world. It is the hope of heaven alone which can impose unity on the various actions of men:

For if there be no prospect beyond the grave, the inference is certainly right, let us eat and drink, let us enjoy what we delight in, for tomorrow we shall die.

16 Locke does not, as Professor Kemp suggests, "give up what purported to be a system of ethics in favour of a system of prudential calculations". [Reason, Action and Morality, p.24] On the interpretation given here, prudential calculation will consist purely in a consideration of the agent's own pleasure and pain without any thought being given to the virtue or vice of the action in question. It is certainly prudent for the agent to consider his actions in terms of virtue and vice, but this is not to say that such a consideration is identical with prudence.

This, I think, may serve to show us the reason why, though all men's desires tend to happiness, yet they are not moved by the same object. Men may choose different things, and yet all choose right: supposing them only like a company of poor insects, whereof some are bees, delighted with flowers and their sweetness; others beetles, delighted with other kinds of viands, which, having enjoyed for a season, they should cease to be and exist no more for ever. [II, xxi, 55]

Locke's ethics is, therefore, teleological in a double sense. The object of morality is human happiness in general. But Locke did not make the mistake of supposing that obedience to the law must therefore promote each agent's personal happiness. So far as the individual is concerned, what makes virtue a proper object of choice (indeed the most proper object of choice) is the belief that the life of virtue in this world has as its end his own greatest happiness in the world to come. Locke's conception of the double end of human existence is well expressed in a Journal entry dated 8th February, 1677:

. . . if we will consider man as in this world & that his minde & facultys were given him for any use, we must necessarily conclude it must be to procure him that happynesse w^{ch} this world is capable of w^{ch} certainly is noe thing else but plenty of all sorts of those things w^{ch} can with most ease pleasure & variety preserve him longest in it . . . It being . . . possible & at least probable that there is an other life where we shall give an account of our past actions in this to the grat god of heaven & earth here comes in another and the main grat concernment of mankinde & that is to know what those actions are that he is to doe what those are he is to avoid what that law is he is to live by here and shall be judg by hereafter. [Aaron and Gibb, p. 87 - 88]

We have seen that the knowledge necessary for achieving the 'main concernment of man' cannot be divorced from that necessary for his well-being in this world. The law according to which each individual will be judged hereafter is the law of the temporal happiness of

mankind.

Notwithstanding this justification of the moral point of view, there still remains the second difficulty which we have broadly indicated in the question, 'how is it possible the agent should ever spontaneously choose virtue?' On Locke's defence of the reasonableness of virtue, it would appear that men coolly choose the life of virtue on the grounds that, although it is not intrinsically pleasant, it leads to their ultimate happiness. But this ignores the fact that men are quite capable of performing virtuous acts spontaneously, without ever having thought on the rewards which might be involved. If men always act with a view to their own happiness, and if virtue is not intrinsically pleasant, how is spontaneous virtue possible? Locke's answer to this question is very largely dependent on the modifications he introduces in his general theory of action in the second edition of the Essay.

In the first edition of the Essay Locke expounds the common doctrine that a man always acts in order to attain what he apprehends to be his greatest good. That is, on Locke's interpretation of goodness, he acts under the aspect of what he considers his greatest happiness, or pleasure. Wrong action is therefore a species of wrong judgement. It occurs when, through ignorance or some other cause, a man mistakes a lesser good for a greater. In short, wrong action is due solely to, "the weak and narrow Constitutions of our Minds". [II, xxi, 64, 1st. ed. 42] In the second edition, Locke shifts the emphasis from the intellectual to the non-intellectual roots of action:

What is it that determines the will in regard to our actions? And that, upon second thoughts, I am apt to imagine is not, as is generally supposed, the greatest good in view, but some (and for the most part the most pressing) uneasiness a man is at present under. [II, xxi, 31]

Locke's modified doctrine is initiated first, by the fact that men do often acknowledge their greatest happiness to lie in one direction while they act in a contrary direction. He cites the example of a drunkard destroying his health [II, xxi, 35] and of a man risking the loss of the eternal reward of heaven. [II, xxi, 44] Hence, something more than the mind's apprehension of good is requisite to explain human action. Secondly, theoretical considerations show that absent happiness cannot, in itself, move the will; for, "it is against the nature of things that what is absent should operate where it is not". [II, xxi, 37] The idea of absent happiness can, of course, be brought before the mind; but it can have no efficacy with respect to action unless accompanied by an uneasiness in the agent; "Till then the idea in the mind of whatever is good is there only like other ideas, the object of bare unactive speculation, but operates not on the will, nor sets us on work". [Ibid]

Locke's conception of uneasiness, is, to say the least of it, shadowy. At times it is presented as an empirically observable item in our mental life; as when Locke writes, "it seems to me evident that the will, or power of setting us upon one action in preference to all others, is determined in us by uneasiness; and whether this be not so, I desire everyone to observe in himself".

[II, xxi, 38]¹⁷ At other times he employs 'uneasiness' as a blanket term covering various states and dispositions of the agent; e.g., aversion, fear, anger, envy, shame [II, xxi, 39]; hunger, thirst, heat, cold, weariness, the desire for honour, power or riches [II, xxi, 45]. As it is clearly impossible to reduce all these to a unity in one definite psychic entity, Locke's 'uneasiness' is best understood as a theoretical construct; one which is introduced to make good the deficiencies in his earlier theory of action. Locke's modifications in no way replace his earlier theory. He still maintains the thesis that men aim at happiness in all of their actions. It is for this very reason that uneasiness is able to move the will. For, whatever state or states may be grouped under the term, they are all incompatible with the agent's happiness:

. . . whilst we are under any uneasiness, we cannot apprehend ourselves happy, or in the way to it: pain and uneasiness being . . . inconsistent with happiness, spoiling the relish even of those good things which we have . . . And, therefore, that which of course determines the choice of our will to the next action will always be the removing of pain, as long as we have any left, as the first and necessary step towards happiness. [II, xxi, 36]

Uneasiness, then, arises whenever a man recognizes a defect in his own situation as vitiating or preventing his own happiness.

Uneasiness is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for action, in that, whenever a man is conscious of any uneasiness within

17 Cf. Berkeley's pointed criticism: "Uneasiness precedes not every Volition. This evident by experience". [Philosophical Commentaries, 628, in Works Vol. 1, p. 77]

himself, he will act in order to be rid of it. Nevertheless, Locke does not suppose men inevitably determined by the first uneasiness they perceive. The intellectual element in action is not, or at least need not be, superseded by the feeling of uneasiness. According to Locke, human freedom lies in the capacity which the mind has for standing back from what happens to be the most pressing uneasiness of the moment, and deciding whether the action prompted by that uneasiness really does accord with the true happiness of the agent:

. . . 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 weight 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.
 [II, xxi, 47]

There is still an uneasiness at the back of the action the agent does finally perform; but the uneasiness is now a desire for the object which best suits his idea of happiness.¹⁸

18 This hardly saves Locke from the charge that his theory of action is thoroughly determinist. The suspension of the operation of desire on a particular occasion would appear itself to be an action. According to Locke's theory, then, it must be prompted by some uneasiness. If the uneasiness involved is the one which happens to be the most pressing, it must be conceded that men are determined by the desire which becomes uppermost in their perception. If, on the other hand, it is supposed that the act of suspending desire might itself be preceded by a suspension of desire, a vicious infinite regress is generated. The suspension of desire in which 'lies the liberty man has' will then render action impossible.

As well as a capacity to suspend the immediate operation of uneasiness, the mind is able to generate uneasiness from the contemplation of that which it judges to be good:

. . . by a due consideration, and examining any good proposed, it is in our power to raise our desires in a due proportion to the value of that good, whereby in its turn and place it may come to work upon the will and be pursued. [II, xxi, 46]

In this way a man who understands the eternal bliss of heaven to comprise his greatest good can make himself uneasy when separated from the means to that end. That is, he can cultivate in himself a genuine desire to act virtuously and to avoid vice. Thus Locke writes; "the forbearance of a too hasty compliance with our desires, the moderation and restraint of our passions, so that our understandings may be free to examine, and reason unbiased give its judgement, being that whereon a right direction of our conduct to true happiness depends: it is in this we should employ our chief care . . . and not permit an allowed or supposed possible great and weighty good to slip out of our thoughts . . . till by a due consideration of its true worth, we have formed appetities in our minds suitable to it, and made ourselves uneasy in the want of it, or in the fear of losing it". [II, xxi, 53] In other words, Locke holds that the agent can, and should, make himself into a person who needs to act virtuously. For such a man virtue becomes a good; at least it is a good in the negative sense of being something the lack of which makes his happiness impossible. It would be highly inappropriate to call such a man self-interested in his actions. On the contrary, he has taken on virtue as a necessary component in

his own happiness and is properly a virtuous man.¹⁹

Locke's modified theory of action, with its emphasis on the state of uneasiness rather than the intellectual apprehension of happiness, does go part of the way towards an explanation of spontaneous virtuous action. Yet it does not go the whole way. Locke's account presupposes a complex operation of the understanding. Beginning from the judgement that the pleasures of heaven must constitute his greatest possible happiness (and that the punishment of vice must constitute his greatest pain), the agent trains himself to value those things which are the means to that supreme happiness and to feel uneasy when they are absent from his life. Virtue, therefore, is a good to the agent, but only in the secondary sense that pleasure 'is looked on to be a consequent of it'. However, men do sometimes claim, with apparent sincerity, to take pleasure in the actual performance of virtuous actions. Locke's theory leaves this phenomenon in obscurity; for here it seems the pleasantness of virtue itself moves the will, irrespective of any precedent operation of the understanding. Locke can meet this objection; but his answer is not to be found in the theory of action detailed in the Essay. It is most clearly expressed in the educational theory expounded in Some Thoughts concerning Education.

19 Here a further parallel might be drawn with Pascal's Wager. According to Pascal, those who wager in favour of God's existence and live their lives accordingly will in time acquire faith and become truly religious. See Op.Cit., p. 152.

Locke believes that a man has the ability to train himself to need virtue. He also believes that the child may be similarly trained by the educator. The most important object in education is not the learned man, but the virtuous character:

'Tis Vertue . . . direct Vertue, which is the hard and valuable part to be aimed at in Education . . . This is the solid and substantial good, which . . . the Labour, and Art of Education should furnish the Mind with, and fasten there, and never cease till the young Man had a true relish of it, and placed his Strength, his Glory, and his Pleasure in it. Education, § 70

How then is virtue to be inculcated? According to Locke, the first necessity is to teach the child self-denial. For "our Natural Propensity to indulge Corporal and present Pleasure, and to avoid Pain at any rate . . . is the Root from whence spring all Vitious Actions". Education, § 48 Conversely, "the great Principle and Foundation of all Vertue . . . is placed in this, That a Man is able to deny himself his own Desires, cross his own Inclinations, and purely follow what Reason directs as best, tho' the Appetite lean the other way". Education, § 33 However, were the child brought to deny his natural inclination to present pleasure out of nothing more than a fear of greater corporal pain in the future, the purpose of education would be defeated. On the contrary, the power of denying onself immediate enjoyment provides an effective foundation for virtuous conduct only when it is internalized, when it is, "got and improved by Custom, made easy and familiar by an early Practice". Education, § 38 This is not to be achieved by physical rewards and punishment, but principally by praise and blame. The child naturally finds pleasure in the esteem

shown him by others, and pain in their contempt. The educator is, therefore, to suit his expressions of esteem and contempt respectively to the virtues he would nurture and the vices he would eradicate:

If by these Means you can come once to shame them out of their Faults (for besides that, I would willingly have no Punishment) and make them in love with the Pleasure of being well thought on, you may turn them as you please, and they will be in love with all the ways of Vertue. /Education, § 58/

The successfully educated agent remains a creature motivated solely by uneasiness, one whose actions are all orientated towards his own happiness. But he has been moulded in such a way that his happiness acquires a specific content, and his uneasiness takes on a definite object. For him pleasure is not merely seen as the final consequence of a virtuous action, but as accompanying that action.²⁰

The major theme of this chapter has been the relation between moral judgements and action, a theme which has occupied an increasingly prominent position in moral philosophy over the last few decades. We will end with a brief synopsis of the theory which

20 The implications of Locke's theory of moral education and its importance in the history of ideas have been admirably dealt with by J. A. Passmore, in "The Malleability of Man in Eighteenth-Century Thought", /Aspects of the Eighteenth Century, ed. Wasserman/. See also, Passmore's The Perfectibility of Man, esp. pp. 159 - 163. I have discussed the Lockean theory as it is taken over and developed by Mandeville, in "Bernard Mandeville and the Reality of Virtue", /Philosophy, 1972/

has emerged during the preceding discussion.

Within Locke's moral philosophy there is clearly no room for a dynamic property internally related to moral judgements. The acknowledgement of the virtue or the vice of an action cannot, by itself, move the agent's will. Moral rectitude and moral pravity are in themselves neither good nor evil, there being nothing inherently pleasant in a virtuous act, or painful in a vicious one. Therefore, a moral judgement can serve to prompt action only when virtue is connected with pleasure, and vice connected with pain, in the mind of the agent. The agent himself may forge this connexion by contemplating the object of his ultimate happiness and the means whereby it can be obtained. It may also be created in the agent's consciousness by the art of the educator. Either way it is not the moral judgement on its own which initiates action, but the judgement in a context of acquired desires and propensities.

Finally, can we say, within the terms of Locke's theory, that a moral judgement ever gives a man a reason for acting in one way rather than another? Taken in one sense, the answer is 'no'. A man may agree that an action is vicious, or that it is virtuous, yet disagree that he has been provided with a reason for acting. As all men constantly aim at their own happiness, no consideration can be seen by the agent as a reason for acting unless it in some way involves the furtherance of his happiness. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which a moral judgement does stand as a reason for action. When he makes a moral judgement (or acquiesces in one made by another)

the agent sees the object of judgement from the moral point of view. He thus acknowledges an obligation to act in accord with the judgement. The consequences of this is that in justifying his action, either to himself or to others, he need but repeat the judgement. Once the judgement is articulated, his account of why he did what he did is complete. Here an analogy with a game like chess helps to clarify the situation. Suppose someone observing a game of chess asks one of the players why he made a certain move, and is told that the move, either directly or indirectly, results in checkmate. So long as the observer understands chess, he has been given a complete explanation of, and justification for, the move in question. If he does not understand chess, then the rules and the aim of the game must be explained to him. But even with this knowledge the observer might go on to ask why people play chess in the first place. Generally this will be a trivial question, and its answer the trivial one that people play chess because they enjoy it. Analogously, an agent might be asked why he performed a certain action, and reply that, when seen from a moral point of view, the action is of a specific kind. In general, this answer will count as a complete explanation, and justification for, the action in question. However, he may be asked further why he looks at his actions from the moral point of view. Here a quite different explanation is being demanded. Granted that, if one does take on morality, certain factors constitute reasons for actions just as, if one plays chess, certain factors constitute reasons for moves, but

why should one be moral in the first place? This question is obviously very far from trivial. Some philosophers have been willing to dismiss it as logically incoherent, while others have tended to think it morally wicked. Locke, however, sees it as a question which must be answered if the practice of morality is to have any basis. As God has made men such that they desire happiness above all else, the only satisfactory answer must be one given in terms of happiness. The practice of morality promotes both the happiness of men in this world and the ultimate happiness of each virtuous man in the next world:

I place Vertue as the first and most necessary of those Endowments, that belong to a Man . . . 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. Education, § 135

CONCLUSION

Any philosopher, no matter what his chosen field of enquiry, is subject to two basic demands: he must be consistent in his thoughts and what he says must be adequate to the phenomena under investigation. One of the major contentions in the foregoing thesis has been that, despite the weight of contrary critical opinion, Locke is consistent in his thoughts on morality. In conclusion we will very briefly consider the second demand: Does Locke's theory constitute an adequate account of moral phenomena?

Questions of the adequacy of philosophical theories are always difficult to answer. For the demand that a theory be adequate is by no means clear-cut, and this is especially so in moral philosophy. The concepts we bring to bear in our endeavours to explain the diverse phenomena which have a claim to the title of morality unavoidably influence our general view of the phenomena under investigation. Consequently, it is not the case that there are a number of different moral theories put forward by moral philosophers, each of which may be measured against a set of agreed facts. Rather, each theory includes its own account of what the moral facts really are, of what morality is in its essence. The result is a number of competing pictures of morality. The acceptability or otherwise of these pictures most often depends on facts which are themselves outside the phenomena of morality.

Locke is consciously putting forward one type of moral theory. There are, he realizes, other types; but these he believes to be erroneous:

That men should keep their compacts is certainly a great and undeniable rule in morality. But yet, if a Christian, who has the view of happiness and misery in another life, be asked why a man must keep his word, he will give this as a reason: because God, who has the power of eternal life and death, requires it of us. But if a Hobbist be asked why, he will answer: because the public requires it, and the Leviathan will punish you if you do not. And if one of the old heathen philosophers had been asked, he would have answered: because it was dishonest, below the dignity of a man, and opposite to virtue, the highest perfection of human nature, to do otherwise. [I, iii, 5]

Locke sees both the Hobbist and the Stoic as giving mistaken accounts of morality. The correct answer is that which he understands as being given by the Christian. The existence of a God who has created man and issued laws for his guidance is the key fact in Locke's entire moral theory. Morality is a matter of law, a law which is above any and every positive enactment or institution of mankind. Were there no authority with competence to deliver such a supreme law, morality could have no existence. Locke states this opinion clearly at the beginning of the first of the Essays on the Law of Nature:

I assume there will be no one to deny the existence of God, provided he recognizes either the necessity for some rational account of our life, or that there is a thing that deserves to be called virtue or vice.

[Essays, p. 109]

We have discovered nothing in Locke's subsequent writings to indicate that he ever revised the opinion expressed in the early years of his philosophical career.

Locke's moral theory remains strictly theological. The one fact which dominates his picture of morality in his early unpublished works and in his mature philosophy is the existence of

God. However, Locke escapes the objection so often urged as a decisive refutation of any morality founded on the existence of God. His theological picture does not reduce morality to a series of arbitrary commands expressing nothing but the whim of an omnipotent being. The fact that it is God who enacts the moral law constitutes the form of moral obligation: the matter of moral obligation derives from the way man himself is, and pre-eminently from the fact that all men desire happiness. Considered with regard to its content, morality is a system of laws the final object of which is the happiness of mankind in general.

The picture of morality as a system of laws does mislead Locke in one important respect. It encourages his belief in the possibility of a demonstratively certain morality. Traditionally, the moral law of nature was looked upon as one aspect of the overall order of the universe. Locke assumes the universal order in its physical aspect to be somehow logically necessary. Given this assumption, it is quite natural for him to make the transition from logical necessity in the physical order to logical necessity in the corresponding moral order. We saw that Locke's ambitions for a demonstration of morality led him into an intellectual cul-de-sac. His thesis that moral notions are similar to mathematical notions in that they can be precisely and completely defined by an enumeration of elements is mistaken. Once this mistake is realized, the whole idea of a system of morals exhibited in accordance with Locke's method of demonstrations loses plausibility.

Locke's belief that morality might be demonstrated also suggests the picture of a timeless moral order. Morality is a whole made up of parts, each one of which is essential to the whole. It might be seen as analogous to a mosaic constructed from interlocking segments, each segment being necessary to the completed design. This kind of picture did have an appeal for Locke and his contemporaries. After all, morality, or the law of nature, was seen as God's design. Nevertheless, this is not the only picture to have emerged from our examination of Locke's moral theory. His account of moral notions and his insistence (especially prevalent in his mature writings) on the connexion between morality and human happiness, suggests a somewhat different picture. Moral notions are human constructs formed to accord with the interests of men. This does not mean that morality has no objective warrant. Moral notions signify actions and the motive constantly at the back of human action is the desire for happiness. Moral notions (at least, well-formed moral notions) categorize actions on the grounds of their tendency to promote or hinder the happiness of mankind. As it is God who has implanted the ruling hedonistic drive in human nature, it is clear that God wills men to regulate their conduct in ways which will promote happiness. This picture does not represent the morality as a mosaic of interconnected laws. Rather, the law of nature appears to consist in rules for the attainment of a specific end, i.e. happiness. It is this which gives shape to the various precepts of the law; for it indicates,

in a broad manner, the content to be included in all moral notions. Such a picture introduces a certain flexibility into morality. Moral notions are not presented as reflections of a timeless (and therefore a rigid) order, but as products of man's attempts to cope with the human situation. Morality, we might say, derives from experiments in living. God, of course, continues to occupy the dominant position in this second picture of morality. Were there no God and no law set by God, human happiness could not be the end of morality. Men might still strive after happiness, but their endeavours would be completely lacking in moral significance.

The picture of morality as an activity aimed at happiness has, needless to say, been of tremendous influence in the history of moral philosophy. This is especially so if we consider moral theories developed by philosophers influenced by Locke. Nevertheless, there are rival pictures. It is often said that morality can neither be based on the existence of God nor have any object outside of itself. Moral judgements are sui generis. To suppose that a moral judgement can be entailed by a non-moral fact, or set of non-moral facts, is to misconceive the nature of morality. However, a discussion of this picture is far beyond the scope of our present enquiry. So far as the examination of Locke's moral philosophy is concerned, it should be pointed out that the picture of morality as something absolutely autonomous is no more than a rival to Locke's picture; it does not supplant or refute Locke. Indeed, one of the most interesting developments in recent moral

philosophy has been the trenchant criticism of the doctrine of autonomous morality, and the re-emergence of a teleological, and even theological, view of morals. Thus, Locke's moral philosophy is not to be dismissed as a relic which is worth dusting only in order to exhibit its antique colours. For all its manifest faults, what Locke has to say on the subject of morality is just as suggestive and fruitful in the present climate of opinion as it was at the end of the seventeenth-century.

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