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The Underside of John Locke's Philosophy: The Politics of Distrust

Peter O'Brien

Abstract

Locke's writings reveal him as a man obsessed with conflict; obsessed first with understanding it and second with controlling it. To understand it Locke developed a complex theory of conflict. He avers that conflict originates primarily due to divergent and false definitions of ideas. He devises his political theory with an aim to controlling conflict. In this scheme politics becomes fundamentally the search for and application of reasonable, correct definitions of key political ideas. The definitions function in a twofold manner. First, they facilitate trust among members of civil society who observe them and thereby lead to the effective regulation of conflict. Second, all persons who do not share these definitions Locke labels enemies of civil society. He advises his readers not to tolerate such persons — to distrust them. This second feature draws our attention to a "politics of distrust" parallel to the "politics of trust" commonly attributed to Locke's political philosophy. Finally, because Locke ultimately fails to prove the existence of "correct" definitions, both his "politics of trust" and "distrust" turn out to be grounded in English ethnocentrism and Protestant theocentrism.

We do not normally count John Locke among the philosophers who treat extensively the issue of human conflict. Our conventional picture of Locke portrays him as man who underscored the brighter side of human life. He advocated tolerance and government only by consent. He assigned a prominent role to reason in guiding human affairs and even spoke of civil society held together through the mutual trust of its citizens.

This portrait paints far too rosy a picture of Locke. It omits a significant dimension of his thought which explores the darker side of life: sin, irrationality and distrust. This darker dimension arises out of Locke's burning concern with conflict. Indeed, Locke developed a full

theory of conflict. Multi-faceted in its analysis, the theory examines conflict on a variety of levels. On the most superficial level, Locke tells us that conflict divides primarily into two sorts: material and confessional. At the deepest level, he teaches that conflict is really all about words; it festers only among persons who define their terms differently.

Furthermore, elaborating Locke's thoughts on conflict gives us cause to recast our understanding of his political thought. For Locke authors his political theory in response to his study of conflict. This need not incite us, however, to discard our rosy image of Locke altogether. For Locke's political philosophy basically aspires to liberate persons from the mischief of conflict. Peace, he claims, can get a foothold only in societies whose politics turn on tolerance, consensus, reason, and trust.

But Locke said much more about politics. He warned his readers to safeguard their commonwealth from enemies in order not to squander the peace achieved amongst the citizenry. Defense involves, first, identifying enemies. For Locke, all immoral and irrational persons come under the category of enemy. Second, it necessitates not tolerating such people — distrusting them. Given the deserved prominence of John Dunn's interpretation of Locke¹, it seems sensible to refer generally to the brighter aspects of Locke's politics as the "politics of trust" and to the darker aspects as the "politics of distrust."

This essay seeks to etch out the latter by following a design which points us to each of the topics mentioned above. As each is considered, we will recognize that Locke traverses this vast theoretical terrain with the aid of two guiding assumptions: that there is a law of nature whose moral dictates persons can know through reason; and that these dictates are the same as those enunciated in the Christian revelation. After outlining Locke's politics of distrust, the essay takes up his attempt near the end of his life to demonstrate the validity of his guiding

assumptions. His failure holds grave consequences for his political thought. It certainly dulls the brighter side; and it nearly blackens the darker side.

Conflict enveloped Locke's world. He sensed its threat all around him—at Oxford, in England, in Europe, in the world at large. Accordingly, Locke's concern with conflict runs through all of his works. He wrote the *Two Tracts on Government*, for example, as a contribution to the fierce battle over indifferent things in the 1660s. He laments over "what disasters this one issue has caused, what tempests, military no less than civil, it has provoked"². The tracts also allude to other "hotly disputed" issues of the day: "paedobaptism, church government, ordination, excommunication, etc"³. Such issues disturbed Locke because they provoke men and incite "the many Revolutions which have been seen in this Kingdom, in this and former Ages"⁴. In addition to domestic troubles like the Puritan Civil War, Stuart Restoration and Glorious Revolution, Locke felt England endangered by external designs, particularly Papist ones.⁵ In short, Locke's picture of England was marred with the "marks of men striving for power and empire over one another"⁶.

Vigorous conflict did not confine itself to England. Thus, Germany "is notorious for civil disasters"⁷. Conflict raged through the whole of Europe like "those flames that have made such havoc and desolation in Europe and have not been quenched but with the blood of so many millions"⁸. Conflict plagued lands far beyond the borders of Europe as well. Locke tells of the continental Christians' struggle with the Turks⁹ and of the Turks' own gory clashes with their eastern neighbors¹⁰. Both immediate experiences and reports from abroad, in other words, convinced Locke that "traditions vary...much the world over and men's opinions are...obviously opposed to one another and mutually destructive, and that not only among different nations but in one and the same state"¹¹.

Human diversity deeply impressed and

alarmed Locke. He frequently remarks how different peoples manage to develop fully different, even opposing beliefs and traditions; how, for instance, “Our deformity is others’ beauty, our rudeness others’ civility”¹². And in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he devotes considerable space to developing a theory of the “association of ideas” to explain rampant human diversity¹³. Locke harbors no fear for diversity in and of itself. Rather, it menaces him only when it exists in the absence of a common, recognized authority to which men can turn to adjudicate their disputes. Without such an “Authority to judge between them” force becomes the umpire among men. That is, diversity degenerates into a state of war, that “State of Enmity, Malice, Violence, and Mutual Destruction”¹⁴.

Men need not search far for such an authority. For Locke maintains that God has given mankind the Law of Nature, which “lays down what is and what is not to be done”¹⁵. Moreover, God creates men with the capacity to understand the Law of Nature through reason. As a result, Locke believes the law’s fundamental precept to be clearly ascertainable to all men: “And reason, which is that law, teaches all Mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions”¹⁶. Locke feels confident that this duty emanates from God because Jesus stated it clearly in his enunciation of “this general golden rule. Matt. 7:12, ‘All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do you even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets’”¹⁷.

Moreover, the “Execution of the Law of Nature is... put into every Mans hands, whereby every one has a right to punish the transgressors of the Law to such a Degree, as may hinder its Violation”¹⁸. Unfortunately, men can use or abuse this God-given power of execution. They can employ it just as easily to invade and oppress their neighbor as to discipline and rehabilitate him. Humans thus always live in the balance between concord and conflict, between the “state of nature” and the “state of war.” And it is by their own decisions and deeds that they come to enjoy the one or suffer the other.

Locke is aware that persons far more frequently choose the latter over the former. And this seeming enigma sparks his interest in understanding the causes

of conflict. Locke often lays the blame for conflict at the doorstep of unethical behavior, such as avarice, covetousness, dishonesty and pride¹⁹. Indeed, as John Dunn advances²⁰, Locke ultimately traces such wrongdoings to the Fall. Yet, Locke often associates immorality with irrationality. For instance, troublemakers are *both* “dishonest” and “foolish”²¹; or “moved by avarice and insatiable desire of dominion,” yet *also* “confounded”²². In Locke’s eyes, conflictual persons are not merely sinners in the sense of transgressors of ethical precepts; they are also stupid, or at least intellectually lazy.

Locke often characterizes them as being unaware of the obvious. In the *Second Treatise*, for instance, he claims that the distinction between private and communal property should be obvious to all. There can be “no doubt of Right, no room for quarrel,” since “there cannot be a clearer demonstration of anything”²³. Or in the *Letter Concerning Toleration* he criticizes the doctrine of Papal infallibility for resting on a “frivolous and fallacious distinction between the court and the church”²⁴.

The association of immorality with irrationality strikes at the core of Locke’s theory of conflict, indeed, of his entire epistemology. In *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke labors to erect the epistemological cornerstone of his thoughts on conflict. He aims to demonstrate that the irrationality of conflict issues, at heart, from opposing definitions of ideas; “which is nothing but this, that they [persons] are not agreed in the signification of those words, nor have in their minds the same complex ideas which they make them stand for, and so all the contests that follow thereupon are only about the meaning of a sound”²⁵. The *Essay* reveals Locke as a theorist profoundly interested in the role of language in society, especially in the confusion it provokes. Here Locke zeros in on conflict as the consequence of the “abuse” and “imperfection” of language. Here he endeavors to disclose the roots of the persistent diversity and conflict he sensed all around himself.

In order to follow Locke’s manner of thinking in the *Essay*, it helps to begin with his definition of knowledge. Knowledge consists in “*the perception of the connexion of and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas*”²⁶. Knowledge exists, to take

simple examples, in perceiving that white is white and not black, or that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right ones²⁷. Furthermore, it inheres in being able to draw the corresponding connection between, say, the idea of white and the actual white substance snow²⁸; or in connecting the idea of horse with an actual horse and not, say, with a cassowary²⁹. Then truth signifies “*nothing but the joining or the separating of signs, as the Things signified by them do agree or disagree one with another*”³⁰. Moreover, Locke strives to persuade that such knowledge can be attained for more abstract, moral ideas. Such “moral knowledge,” he contends, “is capable of demonstration, as well as mathematics”³¹, “without leaving any room or any contest about it”³². Accordingly, persons can not only accurately define a moral idea such as justice, but they can with equal “exactness” connect or disconnect the idea with just or unjust acts in reality³³.

Locke’s optimism rests on the assumption that persons can initially agree on definitions. Locke repeatedly contends that such consensus is possible among human beings, if only they apply themselves diligently and reasonably to the task³⁴. The premium to be won from such an effort easily requites the labor exerted. For all disputes “may in 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”³⁵.

As he is wont to do, though, Locke neutralizes his theoretical optimism with realistic pessimism. He tells us persons rarely agree on definitions. And he devotes the ninth and tenth chapters of the *Essay*’s third book (on the “imperfection” and “abuse” of words respectively) to detailing how persons mistake and confuse definitions. Locke employs countless examples of controversies arising from divergence in the meaning of words and ideas. Thus, even persons within the same sect, “who have a mind to understand one another”³⁶, disagree—or at least confuse themselves—because they use ideas and definitions inconsistently. Hence we find with moral ideas, for instance, that “one man’s complex idea seldom agrees with another’s, and often differs from his own—from that which he had yesterday, or will have to-morrow”³⁷. In relations

between different sects, matters deteriorate all the more. Here persons often refuse even to try to agree on definitions with their adversaries. To the contrary, each sect establishes its own distinct definitions and ignores those of others. Consequently, "there is scarce any sect...[which] has not a distinct set of terms that others understand not"³⁸. Locke cynically concludes that "the multiplication and obstinacy of disputes, which have so laid waste the intellectual world, is owing to nothing more than this ill use of words"³⁹.

Naturally, these reflections concern debates among persons who speak the same language and live in the same age. "But when to this natural difficulty in every country, there shall be added different countries and remote ages"⁴⁰, controversy stemming from divergent meaning becomes practically insurmountable. For when persons interact without "any standing rule to regulate themselves and their notions"⁴¹, it "fills their discourse with abundance of empty unintelligible noise and jargon"⁴². In short, Locke considered as the seed of irreconcilable conflict the failure to establish and apply lucid and correct definitions of ideas (especially moral ones). And this failure he called "the foundation of the greatest, I had almost said of all the errors in the world, if it does not reach so far, it is at least the most dangerous one, since, so far as it obtains, it hinders men from seeing and examining"⁴³.

These reflections exhibit Locke's determination not to rest content with a simplistic explanation of human conflict. He resists attributing discord merely to human evil and self-interest. "Interest, though it does a great deal in the case, yet cannot be thought to work whole societies of men to so universal a perverseness, as that every one of them to a man should knowingly maintain falsehood"⁴⁴. He searches instead for the reason why persons fail to see and examine things.

As intimated above, Locke develops the theory of the "association of ideas" to fill the explanatory void. He recognizes that human beings mature intellectually in very diverse environments. The "truths"—or established ways of viewing the world—prominent in persons' surroundings normally greatly influence persons' perspectives on life. Certain

constellations of ideas thereby become "by education, custom, and the constant din of their party, so coupled in their minds, that they always appear there together; and they can no more separate them in their thoughts than if they were but one idea, and they operate as if they were so"⁴⁵. Perhaps no other group convinces Locke of both the need and accuracy of his theory more than the Roman Catholics. He feels compelled to explain the sincerity with which Roman Catholics maintain false doctrines like that of transubstantiation or papal infallibility. He writes:

Take an intelligent Romanist that, from the first dawning of any notions in his understanding, hath had this principle constantly inculcated, viz. that he must believe as the church (i.e. those of his communion) believes, or that the pope is infallible, and this he never so much as heard questioned, till at forty or fifty years old he met with one of other principles: how is he prepared easily to swallow, not only against all probability, but even the clear evidence of his senses, the doctrine of transubstantiation. This principle has such an influence on his mind, that he will believe that to be flesh which he sees to be bread⁴⁶.

Ultimately, it is habit which causes conflict. It "is of so great force to set us awry in our actions, as well moral as natural, passions, reasonings, and notions themselves"⁴⁷.

Locke's explanation of conflict is surprisingly modern. His thoughts border on the precipice of twentieth-century cynicism and anthropological relativism without, however, plunging into their abyss of doubt. The *Essay* frequently exhibits Locke as an anachronistic phenomenologist of the seventeenth century. Ruminations which call forth modern notions like "the social construction of reality"⁴⁸ pepper the pages of the *Essay*⁴⁹. But Locke is no relativist. He never neglects to qualify his thoughts on human diversity. Thus he writes concerning the influence of the association of ideas: "This gives sense to jargon, demonstration to absurdities, and consistency to nonsense," and is that which "blinds their understandings, and makes them not see the falsehood of what they embrace for real truth"⁵⁰. For Locke,

the Law of Nature still stands majestically above the squalor of diversity and ignorance in the world. And all persons possess the god-given capacity to embrace its truths. Not to do so, regardless of the obstacles (to which Locke so insightfully draws attention), is in the last analysis nothing but "madness."⁵¹

Locke abhors conflict because it represents human beings in their worst state. When persons conflict with one another, they essentially fail to think; and they thereby let spoil the greatest of God's gifts, namely reason. Locke's works correspondingly abound with admonitions against lax study and examination⁵². "Reason," he admonishes, "must be our last judge and guide in everything"⁵³.

Locke's theology, epistemology and anthropology all deeply influence his political thought. Locke ultimately sees politics as the process by which humans make reason their "last judge and guide." And this essentially involves constructing and enforcing a reasonable language, that is, a set or system of terms and definitions on which the members of a commonwealth can agree.

The trust that Locke so often refers to in his political writings is trust in this reasonable political language. Many Locke scholars note the central role trust plays in his political philosophy⁵⁴. Certainly trust counts as one of the key marks which distinguishes Locke's political philosophy from that of Hobbes. Unlike Hobbes, Locke refuses to accept self interest alone as the foundation of civil society. A society rooted in self interest does not liberate persons from a state of war. The state of war merely persists with the apparatus of the state becoming one more weapon persons try to obtain in order to advance their designs against adversaries⁵⁵. In contrast, persons who make up a truly peaceful and stable society "cannot but be supposed to have some Acquaintance and Friendship together, and some Trust one in another"⁵⁶.

The trust in Locke's "politics of trust" fundamentally centers on an agreement among persons on definitions. Persons who politically trust one another essentially agree to define and employ key political ideas and terms in like manner; they speak the same political language. Afterall, language marks "the great bond that holds society together"⁵⁷. Building a civil—or political—society therefore first

necessitates building a correct and reliable political language. And once persons interact with the same political language, they possess the conceptual wherewithal to remedy their disputes.⁵⁸ This being in place, the concrete erection and maintenance of society easily follows.

This linguistic interpretation of Locke does not have to ignore the more conventional reading of Locke's politics. Persons do enter civil society for "the *Preservation of their Property*"⁵⁹; they do grant their natural executive power to "a *known and indifferent judge*"⁶⁰; and they do go on to organize institutions which embody the executive, legislative, and federative powers⁶¹. But they make all this possible only through an initial agreement on definitions; they first must define what property, judge, and power mean.

Indeed, Locke's concern with agreement on definitions is so strong, that it merits reading the *Two Treatises* as a series of definitions. If the work's chapter headings give any indication of Locke's purpose, they make it difficult to overlook his lexicographical aim: "of property," "of political or civil society," "of tyranny," "of conquest" (to name just a few of the political concepts Locke deemed important). In the *Two Treatises*, Locke endeavors to compile a political dictionary with which his compatriots can adroitly tackle their political problems. To express my argument slightly differently, Locke writes the *Two Treatises* assuming an underlying epistemological and moral framework which he was busy constructing in the *Essay*⁶². The cornerstone of that framework is the notion that persons cannot come to trust one another so long as they view the world through diverging definitions of ideas.

Needless to say, not just any agreement on definitions suffices to produce trust. For Locke, they must be the right definitions. Persons reach right definitions only when they employ their reason to formulate the definitions. This type of active reasoning about central political definitions seems to be what Locke has in mind when he claims political society originates out of the "positive Engagement"⁶³ of its founders. And the "express Promise and Compact" which characterize genuine members of civil society represent, at the deepest level, a commitment to recognize the same political definitions which other reasonable persons recognize. Joining

civil society, in short, entails swearing an oath to other reasonable persons to speak their political language. It is no coincidence, I suggest, that Locke refers to oaths as "the bonds of human society"⁶⁴, exactly the same terminology used to describe language.

These considerations point to the set of ideas Locke assumes when he writes of government by "consent." Consent does not mean just any group of persons each of whom individually consents voluntarily to membership in a society. Locke's consent assumes a group of persons who trust one another. They trust one another because they reason together. They reason together because each person individually takes the time to reflect seriously on prominent political ideas. Consent must be reasoned, not merely voluntary, to form a genuine commonwealth. Accordingly, Locke contends that tacit consent "makes not a Man a Member of that Society"⁶⁵. With reason absent from the act of consent trust too must be absent. And without trust a group of consenting persons at best resembles a political society; it cannot, however, constitute one⁶⁶.

The indispensability of trust in politics reveals itself most dramatically at times of crisis. Locke is thoroughly convinced that only a society bound by trust and reason can survive the aggression of enemies. Naturally, trust based on reason facilitates true conviction which provides members of society with the solidarity—the "inward strength"⁶⁷, the "sincere loyalty"⁶⁸—effectively to unite against invasion and subversion. But Locke offers another, more important justification for the necessity of trust. Only reason distinguishes definitively between friend and foe; only reason enables persons to recognize their enemies. And if persons do not know their enemies, solidarity does them little good.

Locke's works reveal a near obsession with enemies. His works display him as a man terrified by threats to England, especially hidden threats. Hidden threats stem from those who pretend to be lovers of England [that is, of "king and country,... of peace and the protestant interest"⁶⁹], but who actually conspire against it. Accordingly, Locke is concerned "to have the true friends distinguished from the secret enemies of the government"⁷⁰. Writing shortly after the Glorious Revolution, for instance,

Locke denounces all persons who defend James II's right to the throne. Such Loyalists in effect desire a situation in which "Jesuits must governe and France be our master"⁷¹. In the *Letter concerning Toleration*, Locke admonishes the magistrate not to tolerate similar enemies. To do so "means the magistrate would give way to the settling of a foreign jurisdiction in his own country, and suffer his own people to be listed, as it were, for soldiers against his own government"⁷². We thus find Locke frequently striving to draw his reader's attention to enemies within the ranks who will subvert society if not properly controlled.

These secret enemies wage their battles with words rather than with swords. For Locke, this makes them most dangerous. They do "Mischief to Prince and People (by) the Propogating wrong Notions concerning Government"⁷³. Such doctrines spread "doubts or distrusts amongst us" and cause "disorder and confusion"⁷⁴. They facilitate "the Weakness to be deceived with Contradictions dressed up in a Popular Stile, and well turned Periods"⁷⁵. And this leads Englishmen actually to "let in a foreigne force, enemy to our religion and nation"⁷⁶.

Locke combats these soldiers of words with words—with the words of reason. Reasonable persons must employ their reason like a searchlight to ferret out subversive zealots and enthusiasts. Since reasoning hangs so closely together with correct definition and application of terms and concepts, persons best disclose their enemies by examining the political definitions espoused by the politically active and influential in society. When the latter's ideas appear absurd, the secret enemies of the government have been spotted.

No work better exemplifies Locke's hunt for enemies than the *Two Treatises*. Locke obviously deemed Sir Robert Filmer (a leading apologist of absolute monarchy) a secret enemy of the government. Moreover, Locke must have felt that the persons who propogated the doctrines embodied in Filmer's *Patriarcha* were spreading doubt and distrust throughout the land. For Locke sets out in the *Two Treatises* primarily to prove the unreasonableness of Filmer's doctrine; and for Locke, this means a thorough scrutiny of Filmer's language.

Thus, Locke declares his intention to demonstrate that

if any one will be at the Pains himself...to strip Sir *Robert's* Discourses of the Flourish of doubtful Expressions, and endeavor to reduce his Words to direct, positive, intelligible Propositions, and then compare them one with another, he will quickly be satisfied there was never so much glib Nonsense put together in well sounding English⁷⁷.

This was, of course, the task of the *First Treatise*. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke goes on, as suggested above, to present and justify the correct political definitions. He must have concluded that with the wrong and right definitions contrasted so starkly next to one another his readers could easily see Filmer for the enemy of the land Locke took him to be. Moreover, by fostering reasoned examination of political ideas Locke must have hoped to contribute to the establishment of trust in English politics and to the future stability of the land.

Locke's hopes were answered. By the time he wrote the preface to the *Two Treatises* in 1689, he could applaud his compatriots for discovering and repelling their enemies. "The King, and Body of the Nation, have since so thoroughly confuted his [Filmer's] Hypothesis, that I suppose, no body hereafter will have... the Confidence to appear against our common safety"⁷⁸. However, the fact that Locke published the *Two Treatises* after the Glorious Revolution suggests he was not as confident as this passage conveys. He admits so much when he writes: "For I should not have Writ against Sir *Robert*...were there not Men amongst us, who, by crying up his Books, and espousing his Doctrine, save me from this Reproach of Writing against a dead Adversary"⁷⁹. Locke continued to be worried about secret enemies; so worried, that in both his two and only manuscripts concerning the Glorious Revolution he called for public renunciation of the political doctrines he judged false⁸⁰.

Locke's search for enemies surfaces in other works as well. In the *Letter concerning Toleration*, Locke does not scrutinize a specific "false" doctrine. Nevertheless, he does conduct the search by means of a definition. His chief purpose is "to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of

religion." As the letter reveals, this basically entails defining the two concepts carefully. In his usual manner, Locke professes that correctly defining the two concepts lies at the heart of eliminating the conflict aroused in these matters. "If this not be done, there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interest of men's souls, and, on the other side, a care of the commonwealth"⁸¹. But once Locke lays out his "correct" definitions of the two, he uses them to point the finger at enemies of the commonwealth. He counsels the reader not to tolerate atheists and Roman Catholics; atheists because they do not even acknowledge religion and therefore surely cannot see the distinction between church and civil government; Catholics because they make the two terms synonymous and thereby "have...mixed together and confounded two things that are in themselves most different, the church and the commonwealth"⁸². Since the two groups do not share Locke's reasonable definitions, he labels them unreasonable and therefore hostile.

It becomes clear, then, how much Locke relies on reasonable language and linguistic scrutiny to direct attention to the adversaries of civil society. Examining their definitions carefully constitutes an effective way not only to nip conflict in the bud, but also to protect the commonwealth from potential subversion. For all his talk of trust, in other words, Locke spent much of his time distrusting others.

Closer analysis demonstrates that Locke developed a complete "politics of distrust" parallel to his "politics of trust." And as is his custom, Locke devises the politics of distrust through a series of definitions. In the *Two Treatises*, Locke supplies his reader with several definitions needed to determine enemies. These primarily include "the state of war," "despotical power," "tyranny," "usurpation," and "the dissolution of government." The first instructs in a most general way who represents an enemy: "And therefore declaring by Word or Action, not a passionate and hasty, but a sedate settled Design, upon another Mans Life, puts him in a State of War with him against whom he has declared such an intention"⁸³. The other definitions more specifically define likely acts which

enemies commit.

But Locke also warns his readers not to wait for an actual commission. Waiting leads to the situation in which it is "too late"⁸⁴ to expel the enemy. For this reason Locke defines enemy hostility as "Word or Action." He thereby rationalizes his own method of detecting adversaries by the analysis of their words. It is Locke's epistemology which enables him to make this (in my eyes giant) step which equates words and actions. In the *Essay*, Locke convinces himself of the power of words. As the above discussion exhibited, he concludes that conflict stems originally from false definitions. Furthermore, his theory of the association of ideas lets him assume that people's words determine their actions. Only with such a theory could Locke write passages of the following sort which condemn persons completely through supposition: "For I have reason to conclude, that he who *would* get me into his Power without my consent, *would* use me as he pleased, when he had got me there, and destroy me too when he had a fancy to it...and reason bids me look on him, as an Enemy to my Preservation, who *would* take away that freedom, which is the Fence to it"⁸⁵. Locke's use of the subjunctive tense here makes it clear that an enemy in word will soon become an enemy in deed. In Locke's eyes, what reason for waiting for the deed remains outside of foolishness or insolence?

But once persons discover their enemies, they must decide what to do with them. Locke tenders essentially four definitions to guide this treatment: "man," "beast," "slavery," and "conquest." The first two do not enjoy their own chapter heading but are plainly handled in conjunction with Locke's discussion of the state of nature. Put succinctly, man reasons; beasts do not. More importantly, those persons who fail to reason degenerate into beasts, indeed, into the worst kind—those "noxious Creature(s)," those "wild Savage Beasts with whom Men can have no Society nor Security"⁸⁶. Furthermore, their bestiality prescribes their treatment. "For having quitted Reason...he becomes liable to be destroyed by him he uses force against, as any savage ravenous Beast, that is dangerous to his being"⁸⁷. Unreasonable persons render themselves liable to conquest. Conquering them practically corresponds to enslaving them; for

“Slavery...is nothing else, but the *State of War continued, between a lawful Conquerour, and a Captive*”⁸⁸.

Locke’s passage on conquest also provides another example of his belief in the power of words. He stipulates that the conqueror possesses the right of dominion only over those who use force against civil society⁸⁹. Since he earlier argued that word or action can initiate war, he seems to place words under the rubric of force. It seems Locke agrees—at least on some occasions—that the pen is mightier than the sword. Perhaps it was Locke’s awareness of the potency of ideology—to use a contemporary notion—which made him fear potential conflict all around him. Whatever the cause, this fear stimulated him to value distrust as much as trust in politics.

Both the “politics of trust” and “distrust” rely on the demonstrability of reason. They depend upon the actual existence of 1) reasonable linguists and 2) correct political and moral definitions. Moreover, if Locke uses the Law of Nature and the definitions it implies to make the case for the possibility of a civil society as well as to distinguish between the members and non-members of society, he must prove the existence of such a law. Although the majority of his works takes the law as given⁹⁰, Locke acknowledged his philosophical obligation to prove its reality. “To establish morality...upon its proper basis,” Locke writes, we must “show...that there are certain rules certain dictates which it is his [God’s] will all men should conform their actions to, and that this will of his is sufficiently promulgated and made known to all mankind”⁹¹. This task Locke undertakes in the *Essay*, whose purpose is “to take a survey of our own understandings, examine our own powers, and to see to what things they were adapted”⁹².

They are not adapted to demonstrating morality. Locke talks a great deal of a kind of mathematics of morality whereby “moral knowledge may be brought to so great clearness and certainty”⁹³. Like mathematics, morality can possess a set of definite principles and definitions which guide the moralist unequivocally through the queries of his field. Locke scholars readily agree, however, that Locke failed to supply these building blocks of an indisputable morality despite his claims of their existence⁹⁴. Locke

confesses so much himself by the end of the last edition of the *Essay* and in his final work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. In the latter, he writes: “It is plain, in fact, that human reason, unassisted failed men in its great and proper business of morality. It never from unquestionable principles, by clear deductions, made out an entire body of the ‘law of nature’”⁹⁵.

In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke searches for that needed assistance in the Christian revelation. All his life he had assumed the identity of the dictates of reason and the decrees of the Christian revelation⁹⁶. Therefore, when the light of reason shone not as brightly as Locke banked on, he turned to the example of Jesus Christ to teach men how to live. For Christ’s message encompasses the Law of Nature. “There is not, I think any of the duties of morality which he has not, somewhere or other, by himself and his apostles, inculcated over and over again to his followers in express terms”⁹⁷. Accordingly, Locke devotes his efforts in this work to deciphering Christ’s lessons as delivered in the Scriptures for all to acknowledge and follow.

Locke’s venture, however, cannot pass as a demonstration of the Law of Nature. *The Reasonableness of Christianity* constitutes at best an impressively erudite hermeneutic exegesis—but hardly an admissible philosophical proof—of the law established in Scripture. Locke creates, in effect, a loosely conceived Protestant theocentric system of morality. Granting Locke’s example cogency as the embodiment of a Law of Nature demands a Pascalian leap of faith. For faith “is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason”⁹⁸. Despite this reliance on faith, Locke refuses to let reason fall by the wayside altogether. We employ reason, he contends, to satisfy ourselves that a given testimony actually emanates from God: “whether it be a divine revelation or no, reason must judge”⁹⁹. More importantly,

no proposition can be received for divine revelation...if it be contradictory to our clear intuitive knowledge. Because this would be to subvert the principles and foundations of all knowledge, evidence, and assent whatsoever; and there would be left no difference between truth and falsehood, no measures of credible and incredible

in the world, if doubtful propositions shall take place before self-evident; and what we certainly know give way to what we may possibly be mistaken in¹⁰⁰.

Yet, Locke’s own intuition should have caused him to doubt his assertions in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. His studious analysis of peoples of different cultures and of the nature of the conflict between them suggests that it is in fact not so clear to everyone that the Scriptures’ prescriptions stem directly from God. And even those who would grant the divinity of Scripture hardly see eye to eye on its interpretation¹⁰¹. Locke not only took part in such scriptural debates, he perspicaciously explained their intensity and longevity. Indeed, his very own analysis in the *Essay* goes far to explain why in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* he himself let what he certainly knew give way to what he may possibly have been mistaken in. For in embracing the Christian revelation as real truth, Locke fell under the spell of his education, custom, and constant din of his party. “Real truth” became synonymous with being English and being Protestant.

The epistemological shift (failure) implied in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* casts considerably different light on Locke’s politics. Unfortunately, Locke never returned to his political thought to edit it, or at least to illumine the consequences his final work held for his politics. However, it behooves heirs of Locke’s thought to do so. First, Locke’s “politics of trust” transforms into a trust, not among reasonable persons, but among English Protestants. The political definitions they agree to observe result not from reasonable examination, but from cultural self-confidence and pride. Cultural partiality becomes the bond that holds society together. Reasonable definitions play no significant role.

Second, and more importantly, Locke’s “politics of distrust” turns into the distrust of all those who do not share his view. Our discussion above reveals that Locke already distrusted these people long before he wrote *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. But before this work he founded his suspicion on their irrationality *per se* and not on their cultural heritage. In supplanting the universal definitions he unsuccessfully sought in the *Essay* with his own Protestant definitions derived

from the Scriptures in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke effectively labels all non-English and non-Protestants enemies of civil (English) society. This, in turn, condemns them to bestiality, slavery and conquest - to something like an English, Protestant Inquisition.

Notes

- ¹ John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge, 1969).
- ² John Locke, *Two Tracts on Government*, ed. Philip Abrams (Cambridge, 1967), Second Tract, p. 210.
- ³ *Ibid.*, First Tract, p. 172.
- ⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (New York, 1965), II, 223.
- ⁵ See, for instance, John Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration*, ed. Patrick Romanell (New York, 1950), p. 51; or Bodleian Library, MS Locke e. 18, *passim*. Printed in James Farr and Clayton Roberts, "John Locke on the Glorious Revolution: A Rediscovered Document", *The Historical Journal*, XXVIII(1985)pp. 385-398.
- ⁶ *Toleration*, p. 13.
- ⁷ *Two Tracts*, Second Tract, p. 211.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, First Tract, p. 160.
- ⁹ *Toleration*, p. 59.
- ¹⁰ *Two Tracts*, Second Tract, p. 217.
- ¹¹ John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, ed. W. von Leyden (Oxford, 1958), p. 129.
- ¹² *Two Tracts*, First Tract, p. 146; also see *Toleration*, p. 59 and *Essays on the Law of Nature*, p. 163.
- ¹³ See, for example, John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York, 1959), II, XXXIII.
- ¹⁴ *Two Treatises*, II, 19.
- ¹⁵ *Essays on the Law of Nature*, p. 113.
- ¹⁶ *Two Treatises*, II, 6.
- ¹⁷ John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures, The Works of John Locke* (London, 1812), VII, pp. 115-116.
- ¹⁸ *Two Treatises*, II, 7; also see Dunn, *Political*, pp. 126-127 for an explanation of this "strange doctrine" of Locke's.
- ¹⁹ See, for example, *Toleration*, pp. 57-58; or *Two Treatises*, II, 46.
- ²⁰ John Dunn, *Political Thought*, p. 115.
- ²¹ *Two Treatises*, II, 46.
- ²² *Toleration*, p. 57; Locke expresses this duality clearly in the *Two Treatises* when speaking of why persons violate the law of nature: "For though the Law of Nature be plain and intelligible to all rational Creatures; yet Men being biassed by their Interest as well as ignorant for want of study of it are apt not to allow of it as a Law binding to them in the application of it to their particular cases" (II, 124; my emphasis).
- ²³ *Two Treatises*, II, 39-41.
- ²⁴ *Toleration*, p. 51; also see pp. 57-58; and MS Locke c. 27, fo. 12-13 (Printed in *Two Tracts*, p. 243).
- ²⁵ *Human Understanding*, III, IX, 9; for the same point also see later on in the essay III, IX, 16-17 and III, XI, 6-7; furthermore, see III, IX, 21 for Locke's explanation of why he came to this conclusion:
I must confess, then, that, when I first began this Discourse of the Understanding, and a good while after, I had not the least thought that any consideration of words was at all necessary to it. But when having passed over the original and composition of our ideas, I began to examine the extent and certainty of our knowledge, I found it had so near a connexion with words, that, unless their force and manner of signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly and pertinently concerning knowledge....If we consider, in the fallacies men put upon themselves, as well as others, and the mistakes in men's disputes and notions, how great a part is owing to words, and their uncertain or mistaken significations, we shall have reason to think this no small obstacle in the way of knowledge....But I am apt to imagine, that, were the imperfections of language, as the instrument of knowledge, more thoroughly weighed, a great many of the controversies that make such a noise in the world, would of themselves cease....
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, I, 2.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, III, X, 10.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, III, XI, 21.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, V, 2.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, III, XI, 16.
- ³² *Ibid.*, III, XI, 17.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, III, XI, 9.
- ³⁴ As noted above, Locke hopes for exactness in morality parallel to exactness in mathematics; and at III, XI, 25 he even speaks of the possibility, if not feasibility, of a universal "Dictionary" of all correct definitions.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, III, 20.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, III, IX, 8.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, III, IX, 6.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, III, X, 14.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, III, X, 22; or II, XXXIII, 18: "Wrong and unnatural combinations of ideas will be found to establish the irreconcilable opposition between different sects of philosophy and religion."
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, III, IX, 22.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, III, IX, 7.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, III, X, 4.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, II, XXXIII, 18.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, XX, 10; for another passage on Roman Catholics, see II, XXXIII, 17.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II, XXXIII, 9.
- ⁴⁸ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York, 1966).
- ⁴⁹ See, for instance, *Human Understanding*, II, XXXIII, 5,7,17, and 18; III, IX, 22; III, X, 2,4,14,16, and 22; such relativist statements can be found in other works as well: *Essays on the Law of Nature*, p. 129 or 163; *Two Tracts*, First Tract, p. 146.
- ⁵⁰ *Human Understanding*, II, XXXIII, 18.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, II, XXXIII, 4.
- ⁵² See, for example, *ibid.*, II, X and XI as well as IV and XIX; or *Two Treatises*, Preface, where Locke criticizes Filmer's lax study; or *Toleration*, p. 29; or *Two Tracts*, First Tract, pp. 165-66.
- ⁵³ *Human Understanding*, III, XIX, 14; also *Two Treatises*, II, 63.
- ⁵⁴ See Peter Laslett's introduction to the *Two Treatises*, pp. 126ff.; or John Dunn, *Locke* (New York, 1984), pp. 25ff..
- ⁵⁵ Speaking of religious zealots who are anxious to persecute others, Locke notes: "But so soon as ever court favor has given them the better end of the staff, and they begin to feel themselves the stronger, then presently peace and charity are to be laid aside" (*Toleration*, p. 26); also see *Two Treatises*, II, 92.
- ⁵⁶ *Two Treatises*, II, 107.
- ⁵⁷ *Human Understanding*, III, XI, 1; see also III, I, 1 and III, X, 13.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, III, 20.
- ⁵⁹ *Two Treatises*, II, 124.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 125.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, II, 143-148.
- ⁶² John Dunn, *Political Thought* makes a similar argument at p. 79.
- ⁶³ *Two Treatises*, II, 122.
- ⁶⁴ *Toleration*, p. 52.
- ⁶⁵ *Two Treatises*, II, 122.
- ⁶⁶ This is the upshot of the entire eighth chapter of the *Second Treatise*, where Locke tries to show that as much as a patriarchal society may look like a political society, it is not.
- ⁶⁷ *Toleration*, p. 48.
- ⁶⁸ MS Locke e. 18 fo. 2 (Printed in James Farr and Clayton Roberts, "Glorious Revolution", p. 395).
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, e. 18 fo. 1 (*ibid.*, p. 395).
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, e. 18 fo. 3 (*ibid.*, p. 396).
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, e. 18 fo. 1 (*ibid.*, p. 395).
- ⁷² *Toleration*, p. 51.
- ⁷³ *Two Treatises*, Preface.
- ⁷⁴ MS Locke e. 18 fo. 5-6 (Printed in James Farr and Clayton Roberts, "Glorious Revolution", p. 398).
- ⁷⁵ *Two Treatises*, Preface.
- ⁷⁶ See MS Locke e. 18 fo. 6 (Printed in James Farr and Clayton Roberts, "Glorious Revolution", p. 398).
- ⁷⁷ *Two Treatises*, Preface.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ At MS Locke e. 18 fo. 2 (Printed in James Farr and Clayton Roberts, "Glorious Revolution", p. 396) Locke calls for "a solemnne publique renunciation"; in the *Two Treatises*,

Preface, Locke calls on his adversaries to "retract...what they have vented"; although the adjective "public" is missing, the textual context suggests Locke means a public retraction.

- ⁸¹ **Toleration**, p. 17.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58; also see MS Locke c. 27 fo. 12-13 (Printed in Philip Abrams, **Two Tracts**, p. 243).
- ⁸³ **Two Treatises**, II, 16.
- ⁸⁴ MS Locke e. 18 fo. 3 (Printed in James Farr and Clayton Roberts, "Glorious Revolution", p. 396).
- ⁸⁵ **Two Treatises**, II, 17 (my emphasis); also see II, 230 for the role supposition plays in distinguishing enemies.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 10-11.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 181.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 24.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 182-189.
- ⁹⁰ In his introduction to the **Two Tracts**, Philip Abrams argues the Locke worked with this assumption from his earliest works on (p. 58); Peter Laslett makes a similar point in his introduction to the **Two Treatises** (p. 95).
- ⁹¹ MS Locke c 28, p. 152 (Quoted in John Dunn, **Political Thought**, p. 189).
- ⁹² **Human Understanding**, I, introduction, 7.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, III, XI, 17.
- ⁹⁴ See Peter Laslett's introduction to the **Two Treatises**, p. 101; or John Dunn, **Political Thought**, pp. 188ff..
- ⁹⁵ **Reasonableness**, pp. 139-140.
- ⁹⁶ See, for instance, John Dunn, **Political Thought**, p. 25 and p. 79.
- ⁹⁷ **Reasonableness**, p. 122.
- ⁹⁸ **Human Understanding**, IV, XVIII, 2.
- ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, IV, XVIII, 10.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, IX, XVIII, 5.
- ¹⁰¹ At *ibid.*, III, IX, 23, Locke himself even takes up the heated debate and conflict over biblical interpretation.