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Locke's Cicero: between Moral Knowledge and Faith

Tim Stuart-Buttle

Like so many of his contemporaries, John Locke's (1632-1704) intellectual development was profoundly marked by his youthful witness of the tumultuous events of the civil wars. For Locke, this illustrated vividly the capacity of religion to undermine social peace and political order. To pick up where Ethan Shagan leaves off, the young Locke was all too aware that religious belief of an extreme Reformed variety 'did things in the world': bad things. Locke's early correspondence betrays a combination of bemusement and hostility towards the Ranters and Quakers, who 'with light in their breast and smoke in their mouth' had 'sett all most of the world in an uprore and at variance'.¹ This deep anxiety regarding religious fanaticism, as Ross Lerner's essay on Spenser in this volume reminds us, was by no means new. It nonetheless acquired greater urgency in the British Isles following the experience of the civil wars. By the mid-seventeenth century, moreover, it was clear that religious plurality and dissent were now permanent features on the political landscape, and had to be accommodated rather than eradicated. When placed in this context, Locke's lifelong objective to probe, and more accurately to define, the relationship between reason (philosophy) and the Christian revelation (Scripture) as the two sources of mankind's knowledge is distinctly unsurprising. In one of his earliest surviving journal entries, dating from 1661-2, Locke touched upon precisely this point. 'The greatest caution', Locke declared, 'should be taken lest, having trusted too much in our reason, we neglect faith, and, by not having given due regard to the mysteries of the gospel, we embrace philosophy instead of religion'.² Where did knowledge end and faith begin? How might the responsible individual, concerned to live well in this life and to secure salvation in a world to come, enjoy a tolerable degree of confidence that she had properly identified the boundary between them, and thereby lived as Christ demanded?

For Locke, the need to establish this distinction was particularly pressing in the field of ethics: to what extent might scriptural warrant supersede, as sectarians had argued to such devastating effect, the insights of custom or reason when it came to how individuals ought to live, and societies ought to be regulated? As his friend James Tyrrell later noted, Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) was initially stimulated by discussions in the early 1670s at Lord Shaftesbury's London residence,

¹ Locke to (Isaiah Ward?), Aug. 1659; and to (Samuel Tilly?), Sept. 1659, in *Correspondence of Locke*, i, pp. 28-9. 98-9.

² The National Archives, Shaftesbury Papers, 30/24/47/33 (c. 1661-2). The entry is in Latin; the translation is Goldie's (*Locke: Political Essays*, p. 209).

Exeter House, regarding the relationship between ‘the Principles of morality and reveal’d Religion’.³ Was the relationship between philosophy and Christian theology one of radical discontinuity and rupture, as an extreme Augustinian view of post-lapsarian depravity suggested? Alternatively, if reason were able to establish with a tolerable degree of certainty everything that mankind was required to know, this would imply that revealed Christianity merely reaffirmed, albeit perhaps in clearer terms, what had already been discovered without its assistance, thereby dissolving faith into reason. This implied a radically attenuated vision of human sinfulness, or even its rejection altogether; and it marginalised the expiatory significance of Christ’s sacrifice and denied the individual’s need for the assistance of regenerating grace. Such a conclusion was increasingly endorsed from the 1690s, most explicitly by ‘deists’ such as John Toland, for whom Christianity was a religion of reason. This was the period in which Locke dedicated himself to Christian apologetic and biblical hermeneutics.

The aim of this essay is to explore a neglected strategy employed by Locke in order to show how far philosophy alone, without the assistance of revelation, could establish the obligatory character and content of the moral (natural) law. Locke endeavoured to show how far it had, in fact, done so prior to Christ’s ministry. This focused attention on the literary bequest of the classical, and especially the late Hellenistic world. To what extent, Locke asked, had the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers succeeded in identifying those truths according to which the individual ought to govern her conduct?

This attentiveness to the historical relationship between classical moral philosophy and revealed Christianity was not new. It had preoccupied Christian apologists from the age of Augustine and Jerome onwards, and was intimately connected to the perennial question of whether the most virtuous of the ancients might potentially have secured salvation.⁴ As Torrance Kirby’s essay in this volume illustrates, in the *Lives* Hooker turned to the Platonic tradition in order to vindicate his philosophical methodology and biblical hermeneutics, and indeed his substantive conclusions. Locke’s interest in the ancient world was, however, impelled by newer anxieties and excitements regarding knowledge, its reach and its limits which are distinctive of the seventeenth century, and which the ‘Crossroads of Knowledge’ project seeks to recover. The narrative Locke offered regarding the dynamic between heathen moral philosophy and Christian theology needs to be understood both as testifying and responding to the pressures to which older theories of knowledge, and the apologetic strategies they encouraged, had been subjected in recent decades. This point is succinctly borne out if we focus on the most distinctive aspect of the interpretation Locke offered. In general, Locke argued that the ancient

³ Cited in the editor’s foreword to *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, p. xix; and see, too, Locke’s comments regarding ‘the History of this Essay’ in *EHU*, ‘Epistle to the Reader’, p. 7. All citations from the *Essay* will be provided in parentheses in the text, in the following format: (Bk. Ch. Para.).

⁴ A question which continued to preoccupy theologians and philosophers throughout the seventeenth century, as the example of Leibniz indicates: Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers*.

philosophers had fallen into all kinds of avoidable errors, largely on account of their methodological shortcomings. To the extent that there was a radical discontinuity between philosophy – in its ancient form, at least – and Christian theology, this was primarily due to the particular, personal and methodological failings of the ancients. There was, however, one striking exception to this rule, which requires some explanation. This was Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC). Here Locke parted company from earlier Christian humanists such as Erasmus, whose marked admiration for Cicero's ethics was not accompanied by a thoroughgoing rejection of the merit of every other heathen moral philosopher.⁵ Locke presented Cicero as a pioneer of the empirical method advocated by the experimental natural philosophers of the Royal Society: a methodology which Locke adopted and sought to vindicate from its critics in his *Essay*.

Locke argued that Cicero's philosophy was unique in identifying both the reach and limits of reason. One of Locke's fundamental objectives in his *Essay* was to re-establish these limits: it was intended 'to give some account of the *weaknesse and shortnesse* of humane understanding'.⁶ This, in turn, had implications for Christian apologetic. Only by re-establishing those limits might it become clear precisely where, and how, Christ's revelation had decisively enlarged upon what mankind was able to acquire by means of philosophy. It followed that, as these truths had been delivered by revelation rather than discovered by reason, so they ought to be defended upon this basis: they were more properly the objects of 'faith' rather than 'knowledge'. In this regard, the relationship between Ciceronian moral philosophy and Christ's teachings, and so between reason (properly cultivated) and revelation (properly understood) was one of harmonious continuity, even as the latter enlarged decisively upon the former. Locke turned to Cicero to identify one, particularly important doctrine which fell into this category: the existence of a future state of rewards and punishments, which occupied a crucial position within Locke's moral theory. Here, as elsewhere, Locke's aim was to show how 'many are beholden to Revelation, who do not acknowledge it'.⁷ Christ, in a number of places, had revealed what reason alone could not discover; and the cause of Christianity was not helped by dogmatic and intolerant scholastic metaphysicians who, like those ancients who believed their reason to be all-sufficient, failed to grasp mankind's need for the assistance of revelation. In contrast to those who turned the world upside down in the name of revelation and inspiration, however, Locke was also concerned to show that the Christian revelation was only credible insofar as its teachings could be shown to build upon the insights of reason: insights the nature and limits of which had been most productively identified by Cicero.

⁵ For Erasmus's particular veneration for Cicero's moral philosophy, see Rabil, 'Cicero and Erasmus'. Erasmus is the subject of Ch. 1 in this volume, by Brian Cummings.

⁶ Locke to Thomas Herbert, earl of Pembroke, 28 Nov. 1684, in *Correspondence of Locke*, ii, pp. 661-6 (italics added).

⁷ Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity* [1695], in Nuovo (ed.), *Writings on Religion*, p. 200.

i. *Ancient philosophy: in search of the summum bonum*

Locke was witheringly, and insistently, critical of the ancient philosophers. In the early 1660s, Locke's primary interests lay in natural philosophy and medicine. A manuscript of 1669, entitled 'De Arte Medica', indicates Locke's conviction that the ancient philosophers had contributed little of value to either field. Locke observed that 'the beginning & improvt, of useful arts, & the assistances of human life have all sprung from industry & observation[;] true knowledg grew first in the world, by experience & rationally operations'. Rather than rely on 'tryalls' and 'observation', thereby restricting themselves to an investigation into secondary causes, the ancients were determined to 'penetrate into the hidden causes of things [and] lay downe principles & establish maximes [...] about the operations of nature'. In short, the ancients were addicted to ungrounded 'systems & hypotheses'. Their authority had exercised a baleful influence on the subsequent study of medicine and the natural world, at least until the turn to an empirical, experimental method in recent decades.⁸ This contempt for the ancients was broadly shared by the pioneers of the experimental method, and was expressed particularly forcefully by Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society* (1676).⁹

For Bacon, Boyle, Sprat and many other experimental natural philosophers, it was nonetheless the desire to pry into *moral* good and evil which had precipitated man's fall from grace; and they vindicated their natural philosophical endeavours by claiming that the search for secondary causes in nature was benign in a way moral philosophising was not. The experimental natural philosopher, they maintained, recognised the limits of reason in the face of God's omnipotence. Locke shared their view that the pathological attraction of the ancients to hypothetical theories which could 'penetrate the hidden causes of things' had also corrupted philosophical enquiry in the realm of ethics. He nonetheless rejected their insinuation that it was not mankind's business to seek to uncover the foundations of their moral duties: this, indeed, was their primary purpose as rational beings. In the *Essay*, Locke repeatedly emphasised that morality is, in fact, 'the proper Science, and Business of Mankind in general; (who are both concerned, and fitted to search out their *Summum Bonum*)' (EHU 4.12.11). Mankind had a duty to employ their rational faculties for the purposes intended by their Creator: to understand the origins and nature of the duties they owed to Him and to one another. In this regard, Locke observed that the ancient philosophers had been deeply, and legitimately, committed to this task. All of the late Hellenistic sects had attempted to provide a definition of man's *summum bonum* (true end and happiness), and to teach their disciples to exercise the self-discipline which was required in order to attain the goal of true virtue and tranquillity. The ancient philosophers were not wrong to seek such knowledge. Rather, they had looked for it in the

⁸ TNA 30/24/47/2, f. 49v ('De Arte Medica'). An accurate transcription can be found in Walmsley, 'Locke's Natural Philosophy', pp. 232-9.

⁹ For discussion, see Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*.

wrong place, something their dogmatism and aversion to doubt and uncertainty had precluded them from recognising.

To understand why they had failed so dismally, it is necessary to grasp the normative character of Locke's moral theory, the most fundamental principles of which he expressed in his early lectures on the law of nature of 1663-4: 'even if God and the soul's immortality are not moral propositions and laws of nature, nevertheless they must necessarily be presupposed if natural law is to exist'.¹⁰ The origins of all law and obligation lay, for Locke as for voluntarist natural law theorists such as William of Ockham, in the will of an external legislator; not, as for 'intellectualist' theorists such as Thomas Aquinas and (to an extent) Hooker, in human nature or reason.¹¹ Actions only possessed a genuinely moral quality insofar as they were recognised to represent the will and command of a divine legislator, whose attributes entitled him to govern his Creatures, and who would reward or punish them accordingly. Locke was, from an early stage, critical of a 'modern' tradition of natural law with which he has frequently been aligned by scholars, and whose most important initial exponent was Hugo Grotius (1583-1645).¹² Grotius denied any meaningful role for God or eternal sanctions in his theory of moral obligation. In the Prolegomena to his immensely influential *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (1625), Grotius famously maintained that his account of moral obligation would hold 'even if we should grant, [...] that there is no God, or that he takes no Care of human Affairs'.¹³ In *De Officio Hominis et Civis* (1673), Samuel Pufendorf (1632-94) similarly declared that natural law (and so ethics) was 'confined within the orbit of *this* life': knowledge of God's attributes and the existence of a future state was delivered by revelation, not ascertained by reason, and might reinforce men's sense of moral obligation but was not essential to it.¹⁴

Locke's strident, lifelong opposition to non-theological ethical theories was articulated, in part, through his pronounced scepticism regarding the general value of ancient moral philosophy. Rather than locating the origins of moral duty in God's will and sanctions, the ancients had sought it in human nature, thereby denying mankind's dependence upon their creator. It followed that their ethical theories flatly contradicted the ethical and soteriological teachings of revealed Christianity. Locke made this point particularly strongly in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695): '[t]is plain in fact, that humane 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*'. The 'true ground' of

¹⁰ *Essays on the Law of Nature* [1663-4], [lect.] V: p. 173; cf. III: p. 151. Locke's lectures were delivered in his capacity as Censor of Moral Philosophy at Christ Church, Oxford.

¹¹ On the divisions in the Christian natural law tradition between these two explanations of the origins of law, see Bouwsma, 'Two faces'; Krayer, 'Moral philosophy'; and Oakley, *Natural Law*.

¹² Tuck, "'Modern' tradition"; and idem, *Natural Rights Theories*.

¹³ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace* [1625], i, 'Preliminary Discourse', §XI, p. 89.

¹⁴ Pufendorf, *On the Duty of Man and Citizen* [1673], p. 8 (italics added); cf. *De Jure Naturae* [1672], p. 224.

morality lay in God's will; He prescribed moral rules and would hold individuals accountable for their actions before this law on the Day of Judgment: 'Upon this foundation, and upon this only, Morality stands firm, and may defy all competition'. Yet the ancients had failed to locate the origins of obligation in God's will, and '[t]heir thoughts of another life were at best obscure'. Cicero, it is important to note, was included by Locke among those who had failed to uncover the 'true foundations' of ethics and stood in need of enlightenment by Christ.¹⁵

This explains why, in his lectures of 1663-4, Locke rejected unequivocally the doctrine of universal consent invoked by natural law theorists such as Hooker and Grotius: the claim that all the best and wisest of men had broadly identified and agreed upon the content and obligatory character of natural law.¹⁶ Following Quintilian's method of acquiring certainty, Grotius argued that this supposedly universal testimony of the philosophers – by whom he meant primarily the ancient Stoics and Cicero – was sufficient to establish the normative authority of natural law.¹⁷ Locke disagreed with this verdict, for three reasons. First, the ancient philosophers had not reached any agreement as to the foundations of ethics. Rather, they had divided into sects, which offered contradictory definitions of the *summum bonum*: 'What use is it to turn to philosophers? For Varro produces more than two hundred of their notions about the highest good, and there can be no fewer opinions about how to reach happiness, that is, about the law of nature'.¹⁸ Second, and crucially, even if the ancients had been able to reach agreement, this would by no means attest to the truth of their ethical theories, for the simple reason that they lacked knowledge of a theistic God who created the world and would reward or punish His creatures for their conduct on the Day of Judgment: 'What sort of thing is the opinion of the Greeks, the Romans, and the whole heathen world concerning the gods? [...] Is it surprising that such a general consent about gods on the part of men has contributed nothing at all to the proper foundation of morals? For what are these people, pray, if not disguised atheists?'¹⁹ In this regard, Locke indicated his thoroughgoing disdain for the kind of apologetic approach later adopted by Ralph Cudworth in his remarkable *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1676). Cudworth's objective was, in part, to show that the fundamental tenets of Trinitarian Christianity had been identified by various of the heathen philosophers, and so might be defended upon the basis of philosophical reasoning.²⁰

¹⁵ *Reasonableness of Christianity*, pp. 195-6; 203-4; 196.

¹⁶ For the ancient origins of this philosophical doctrine, see Obbink, "What all men believe".

¹⁷ For Grotius's debt to Quintilian's rhetorical method in *De Inventione*, see Straumann, *Roman Law*, Ch. 3.

¹⁸ Locke, *ELN*, V: p. 175. The reference to Varro is drawn from Augustine's discussion in *City of God*, 19.1, pp. 909-14. (Augustine actually specified that Varro had identified two hundred and eighty-eight different theories regarding the supreme good.)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ For the full complexity and ambition of Cudworth's undertaking, see Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, pp. 86-90, 171-80, 355-68, 418-27, 509-13.

Locke's third objection was methodological, and concerned how certainty might be acquired. The individual who would identify a true guide by which to live needed to investigate into 'things themselves' (*rebus ipsis*): a refrain repeatedly sounded by Bacon and the experimental philosophers, but repurposed by Locke and applied in the sphere of religion and ethics.²¹ 'For surely', Locke declared, 'each single person has to infer the law of nature from the first principles of nature, not from another person's belief'. By natural law, Locke argued, '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'. Locke did not doubt that should he do so, 'he can attain to the knowledge of this law *without any teacher instructing him in his duties, any monitor reminding him of them*'. To be guided by the teachings of others was 'to be guided by belief and approval, not by the law of nature', even as the two might potentially coincide.²² As Locke would later put this point in the *Essay*, 'the floating of other Mens Opinions in our minds makes us not one jot more knowing, though they happen to be true' (*EHU* 1.4.23). Clearly enough, however, the ethical teachings of the ancient philosophers did *not* 'happen to be true', and to follow them was assuredly to be led into error: by failing to 'ground' moral obligation in God's commands and sanctions, their theories lacked all foundation. It was for this reason that, in the *Essay*, Locke declared that 'the philosophers of old did in vain enquire, whether the *Summum bonum* consisted in Riches, or bodily Delights, or Virtue, or Contemplation: And they might have as reasonably disputed, whether the best Relish were to be found in Apples, Plumbs, or Nuts' (*EHU*, 2.21.55).

We have already seen that, on Locke's account, Cicero was no exception to the rule that the ancient philosophers had signally failed to identify the true grounds of moral obligation in God's will and sanctions. It is nonetheless clear that, in other regards, Cicero *was* an exception. He may not have established truth; but, on Locke's reading, it is clear that he had not embraced erroneous 'systems & hypotheses'. In short, it seems clear that Locke read Cicero not as a Stoic or Platonist, as did many of his contemporaries, but as an academic sceptic: an approach to philosophy which probed the limits of reason but refused to push beyond them, thereby resting content with probability where certainty was unattainable.²³ In his philosophical dialogues, Cicero subjected the ethical and religious theories of his dogmatic contemporaries to sustained critique; and these writings unquestionably provided a source for Locke's own criticisms of the ancient philosophers. In *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero drew attention to the profound disagreements between the various sects, and noted 'how few philosophers are found to

²¹ The motto of the Royal Society was, after all, *nullius in verba*.

²² Locke, *ELN*, VI: p. 177; II: pp. 123, 127, 129 (italics added).

²³ For the productive intellectual consequences of earlier readings of Cicero as an academic sceptic, see Schmidt, *Cicero Scepticus*. For the development of academic scepticism in the Hellenistic world, see Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 88-106, 229-31.

be so constituted and to have principles and a rule of life' that they were actually able to follow in practice. Worse still, these false philosophers misled those who looked to them for ethical guidance: 'he stumbles in the duty of which he aims at being the teacher and fails in the conduct of life though professing to give the rule of life'.²⁴ Partly as a consequence of the errors of the dogmatic philosophers, Cicero emphasised the need for, and duty of the individual to seek moral truth for himself, in a famous passage of the fragmentary *De Republica* upon which Locke clearly drew in 1663-4:

We cannot be freed from its [natural law's] obligations by senate or people, and *we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder or interpreter of it*. And there will not be different laws now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and all times, and there will be one master and ruler, that is, God, over us all, for he is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge. Whoever is disobedient is fleeing from himself and denying his human nature, and by reason of this very fact he will suffer the worst penalties, even if he escapes what is commonly considered punishment.²⁵

In his lectures of 1663-4, Locke was already a committed empiricist: the only route to knowledge lay in the individual's active use of his rational faculties to process and order the data derived from the senses.²⁶ The task facing reason, for the moralist as for the physician or natural philosopher, was thus 'to find a way from perceptible and obvious things into their hidden nature', something which required 'careful reflection, thought and attention by the mind'.²⁷ Here again Locke echoed Cicero's claim, in *De Legibus* (a work much admired by Locke), that: 'Nature has [...] not only equipped man with nimbleness of thought, but has also given him the senses, to be as it were, his attendants and messengers; she has laid bare the obscure and none too obvious meanings of a great many things, to serve as the foundations of knowledge'.²⁸ Cicero nonetheless drew attention to the labour, pains and industry which were required of the individual who would pursue truth. He also emphasised that in many areas, not least that of greatest importance (ethics), the individual might have to rest content with probability, rather than certainty – an insight which the dogmatic philosophical sects refused to acknowledge, but which the academic sceptic always bore in mind.²⁹ In Cicero's most comprehensive account of academic scepticism as a discrete philosophical approach (the *Academica*), he noted that 'even though many difficulties hinder every branch of knowledge, and both the subjects themselves and our faculties

²⁴ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.4.11-13. Locke later transcribed this passage into his journal: Bodleian Library, MS Locke Film 77, p. 93 (1698).

²⁵ Cicero, *De Republica*, 3.22 (italics added). Von Leyden notes Locke's debt to *De Republica* in *ELN*, p. 127 n. 4. Rivers observes how commonly this passage was drawn upon in early modern theological and moral discussion: *Reason, Grace and Sentiment*, i, pp. 60-61.

²⁶ As noted by Colman, 'Locke's empiricist theory', p. 119.

²⁷ Locke, *ELN*, II: pp. 133-5; cf. IV: pp. 155-7.

²⁸ Cicero, *De Legibus*, 1.9.26.

²⁹ *Academica*, 2.3.7-8. From the mid-seventeenth century an interest in probable reasoning occupies an increasingly central place across a range of disciplinary discourses: see Batsaki, Mukherji & Schramm (eds.), *Fictions of Knowledge*; Daston, *Classical Probability*; Hacking, *Emergence*; Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*; and Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories*, pp. 101-18.

of judgement involve such a lack of certainty', the academic sceptic refused to 'abandon in exhaustion our zeal for study'. His aim was, instead, 'by arguing on both sides [of a question] to draw out and give shape to some result that may be either true or the nearest possible approximation to the truth'.³⁰ Cicero also foregrounded the essential point that it was the pursuit, rather than necessarily the *acquisition* of truth which defined 'a blessed life': an insight perhaps echoed in Locke's statement that the individual was 'both concerned, and fitted to search out', rather than necessarily to identify, 'their *Summum Bonum*' (EHU, 4.12.11).³¹ The individual could not blindly follow others, nor profess to lead them: everyone was fallible, and accountable for their own errors. This insight underpinned what, Cicero proclaimed, were the fundamental features of academic scepticism:

Nor is there any difference between ourselves and those who think that they have positive knowledge except that they have no doubt that their tenets are true, whereas we hold many doctrines as probable, which we can easily act upon but scarcely advance as certain; yet we are more free and untrammelled in that we possess our power of judgement uncurtailed, and are bound by no compulsion to support all the dogmas laid down for us almost as edicts by certain masters. For all other people in the first place are held in close bondage placed upon them before they were able to judge what doctrine was the best, and secondly they form judgments about matters as to which they know nothing at the most incompetent period of life, either under the guidance of some friend or under the influence of a single harangue from the first lecturer they attended, and cling as to a rock to whatever theory they are carried to by stress of weather.³²

In 1663-4, Locke endorsed the academic sceptic's emphasis on the importance of individual inquiry, most especially in ethical questions, in unmistakably Ciceronian terms: 'For these opinions about moral rightness and goodness which we embrace so firmly are for the most part such as, in a still tender age, before we can as yet determine anything about them or observe how they insinuate themselves, stream into our unguarded minds and are inculcated by our parents or teachers or others with whom we live'.³³ In the *Essay*, meanwhile, Locke placed Cicero's insights within a Christian providentialist framework. So long as the individual laboured for truth, even if it did not lead them to certainty, they would assuredly receive God's mercy and favour:

So, in the greatest part of our Concernment, [God] 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 liableness 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

³⁰ *Academica*, 2.3.7-8.

³¹ *De Officiis*, 1.4.13.

³² *Academica*, 2.3.8. For a similar statement of probability as sufficient to guide 'the wise man' in all his actions, see *De Natura Deorum*, 1.5.12.

³³ Locke, *ELN*, III: p. 142.

to a State of greater Perfection. It being highly rational to think, even were Revelation silent in the Case, That as Men employ those Talents, God has given them here, they shall accordingly receive their Rewards at the close of the day, when their Sun shall set, and Night shall put an end to their Labours. (*EHU*, 4.14.2)

As Locke's warning that we must 'check our over-confidence and presumption' suggests, the greatest danger lay in refusing to rest content with the limited insights of philosophy, in order to seek certainty where it could not be had. The ancient moralists, with the notable exception of Cicero, had succumbed to an inherent frailty within human nature which compelled the individual to avoid at all costs the anxiety caused by doubt and uncertainty. This was why they had devised, and sought dogmatically to defend, their non-theological (and hence groundless) definitions of moral obligation.

Locke's pronounced admiration for Cicero's ethical handbook *De Officiis* needs to be understood in this context.³⁴ In the work, Cicero quite explicitly set to one side the intractable question of the true foundations of moral obligation. The 'virtues' discussed by Cicero related directly and explicitly 'to considerateness and to the approbation of our fellow men', rather than to a normative standard of moral rectitude. Cicero advocated virtue on account of the benefits and pleasure that accrued to the upstanding individual. In particular, Cicero drew attention to the individual's desire for esteem: that is, for the good opinion of one's neighbours. This, he argued, was the source of pleasure to every individual; and the enjoyment of a good reputation further empowered and incentivised individuals to exert themselves on behalf of the community of which they were a part. Cicero actively encouraged his reader to perfect the 'art of winning and retaining the affections of our fellow-men', because the ability to 'glide into the affections of the many' was advantageous both to the individual and to the community. 'It is chiefly and indispensably necessary', Cicero insisted, 'that we should possess the faithful affections of those friends who love our persons and admire our qualities', because 'we never find real advantage except in good report, honour [and] virtue; therefore we esteem these things first and chief'.³⁵

For Aristotle and the Stoics, this separation between moral motivation and obligation was untenable: true virtue required the individual to do the right thing for the right reason – that is, for a rational love of virtue (the *summum bonum*) for its own sake, not out of a concern for the praise of others. This objection was made even more vociferously by early Christian apologists, most notably Augustine: the true foundations of all moral virtue lay in a love of God, not a desire for the esteem of other (inherently

³⁴ For Locke's reverence for this work, see Marshall, *Religion and Responsibility*, pp. 157-204, 292-326; and Mitsis, 'Locke's offices'.

³⁵ *De Officiis*, 1.4.12-13; 1.35.126-8; 1.40.143; 2.6.19-31; 2.8.30; 3.28.101.

sinful) men. In making this point, Augustine took aim at precisely the passages from *De Officiis* quoted above:

There are, then, those who bridle their baser desires by means of the desire for human praise and glory, and not with the faith of godliness and the love of intelligible beauty given by the Holy Spirit. These are not, therefore, yet holy; they are only less vile. [...] Cicero himself was not able to conceal this fact [...]. Not only, then, did the men of old not resist this vice: they even considered it worthy to be aroused and kindled, supposing that it would be of benefit to the commonwealth. Not even in his philosophical books does Cicero conceal this pestilential opinion. Indeed, his admission of it there is as clear as day.³⁶

In marked contrast, Locke followed Cicero in drawing attention to the beneficial consequences of the individual's natural concern for praise – which, in the *Essay*, he argued in practice acted as the most powerful motive in encouraging them to adhere to the moral rules by which their communities were regulated. Men's ideas of virtue and vice, Locke declared, denominated 'nothing else, but that, which has the allowance of publick Esteem' (*EHU* 2.28.10-11). In Locke's writings the commonplace link between a craving for esteem and concupiscence was all but severed: the desire for reputation was an essential part of man's divinely-created nature, rather than a consequence of post-lapsarian sin and depravity. It served a beneficial purpose, ensuring that Hobbes's inherently self-interested and asocial individual came to take pleasure in acting in ways which contributed to the common good of their community, without the need for coercion by an all-powerful sovereign. In *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1693), *De Officiis* was the only work of moral philosophy recommended by Locke, seemingly complementing rather than competing with the New Testament (the ultimate source of moral guidance). Locke recommended *De Officiis* for precisely the reason that Augustine rejected it:

The Knowledge of *Vertue*, all along from the beginning, in all the Instances of which he is capable of, being taught him, more by Practice than Rules; and the love of Reputation instead of satisfying his Appetite, being made habitual in him, I know not whether he should read any other Discourses of Morality, but what he finds in the Bible; or have any System of *Ethicks* put into his Hand, till he can read *Tully's Offices*.³⁷

This brings us to the two, most fundamental reasons why Locke identified Cicero's moral philosophy as *uniquely* valuable. The first relates to the vexed relationship between reason and revelation, with which we began. When it came to ethics, Christ's revelation had provided what philosophy (and the ancient moralists) had not: a comprehensive account of men's moral duties; an explanation of why they were obligatory; and a description of the sanctions enforcing them. Cicero's marginalisation of the question of moral obligation in *De Officiis* reflected, for Locke, the extent to which his methodological

³⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, 5.14, p. 213.

³⁷ Locke, *Some Thoughts*, § 185, p. 239.

approach (academic scepticism) allowed him to identify the *limits* of reason and philosophy in the ethical realm. Locke quite nakedly identified his methodological approach in his ‘epistemological’ works, the *Essay* and *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1707), with Cicero’s own: both carried epigraphs from Cicero’s writings, which emphasised the importance of recognising the limits of human understanding.³⁸ Precisely because of his willingness to accept the limits of reason, Cicero advocated virtue with reference to the pleasure all men derived from a good reputation, rather than on the basis of its normative character, which remained unknown prior to Christ. From Locke’s perspective, Cicero focused on ‘secondary’ rather than ‘primary’ causes in the moral world, recognising the latter to remain hidden from view. Here, once again, Locke placed Cicero’s distinctively positive appraisal of a desire for recognition within a Christian providentialist framework. Due to God’s goodness and concern for the well-being of His creatures, there was a harmony between those ideas of ‘virtue’ generated endogenously within societies on account of their communal utility, and the normative commands embedded in natural law. God had, ‘by an inseparable connexion, joined *Virtue* and publick Happiness together; and made the Practice thereof, necessary to the preservation of Society, and visibly *beneficial* to all, with whom the Virtuous Man has to do’ (*EHU* 1.3.6). A concern for reputation, it followed, allowed the socialised individual to be habituated to virtue, even as they failed to understand the true reasons why they were obligated to lead an ethical life. In the *Essay*, Locke touched upon this point quite explicitly: ‘It must be allowed that several Moral Rules, may receive, from Mankind, a very general Approbation, *without either knowing, or admitting the true ground of Morality*’ (*EHU* 1.3.6: italics added).³⁹ Moral practice was possible in the absence of moral knowledge, which relied upon the correct identification of the *summum bonum*. As *Some Thoughts* suggests, in a Christian age such an individual might (and should) then turn to the Gospels which, when read in the manner advocated by Locke, explained in the most comprehensive and comprehensible manner what the ancient moralists had not: the true reason why the individual *ought* to live virtuously, as God’s creatures concerned for righteousness and salvation.

Second, and relatedly, Locke intimated that by pushing reason as far as it could go, but no further, Cicero would have recognised both the reasonableness and the necessity of the Christian revelation. From the perspective of practically every other ancient moralist, Locke suggested, Christ’s moral teaching would have appeared flatly to contradict reason, by locating the origins of moral duty in an external law of divine authorship rather than in human nature and reason. Their trenchant commitment to their erroneous moral theories would thereby have precluded them from appreciating the extent to

³⁸ The inverted commas indicate an acceptance of Richard Serjeantson’s insight that ‘epistemology’ is an anachronistic category, and that Locke’s *Essay* most clearly sits within the field of semiotics: ‘Genre of Locke’s *Essay*’.

³⁹ For a very similar statement, see MS Locke c.28, f. 113r (1693).

which the Christian revelation enlarged upon – but did not contradict – the insights of true philosophy. As an academic sceptic, committed to a cautious, empirical and insistently self-critical philosophical approach, Cicero alone among the ancient moralists would have been receptive to the delivery of divine truth by Christ.

ii. *Christian apologetic in a philosophical age: doubt and faith*

This point is well brought out if we examine Locke's polemical exchanges with the most prestigious of his many contemporary critics: the Bishop of Worcester and renowned classical scholar, Edward Stillingfleet (1635-99).⁴⁰ Stillingfleet drew attention to what Locke's contemporaries immediately recognised to be a deeply troubling aspect of his philosophy. We have seen that the existence of a divine legislator and a future state of rewards and punishments were essential to Locke's moral theory. In 1663-4, Locke appears to have been supremely confident that these fundamental tenets could be established by 'the light of nature alone': that is, through empirical reasoning, and on the basis of natural theology.⁴¹ The *Essay*, however, signally failed to bear out this claim, despite Locke's continual insistence that such knowledge might be possible by this means.⁴² This indicates how the development of Locke's thinking on human psychology, language and epistemology complicated and circumscribed his account of the reach and limits of reason in the ethical sphere.⁴³ Instead, in the *Essay* Locke offered proofs for the existence of God which were considered, quite understandably, by his critics to be inconclusive and inadequate. Similarly, and perhaps more troublingly still, Locke launched a withering critique of the doctrine which was conventionally deployed in order to establish the existence of a future state: the immateriality of the soul. He did not offer anything like a philosophically-robust alternative in its place: something which does not appear to have troubled him unduly, despite the continual admonishment of his friends that this was a shortcoming which had to be rectified.

What was Locke up to? It is revealing to note that Locke's proofs for the existence of God, and his treatment of the immortality of the soul, were quite explicitly modelled on Cicero's discussion of these issues in his philosophical writings. This debt has, to my knowledge, escaped the attention of scholars. In his rehearsal of philosophical arguments establishing God's existence, Locke drew directly from *De Legibus* (EHU 4.10.6). Meanwhile his discussion of immortality, upon which I focus, followed *Tusculan*

⁴⁰ For this exchange, see Stewart, 'Stillingfleet'.

⁴¹ Locke, *ELN*, I: pp. 111-12; cf. II: p. 123.

⁴² See, for example, Locke to Molyneux, 20 Sept. 1692, in *Correspondence of Locke*, iv, pp. 522-5 (italics added): 'Though by the view I had of moral ideas, whilst I was considering that subject, I *thought* I saw morality might be demonstratively made out, yet *whether I am able so to make it out is another question*. Every one could not have demonstrated what Mr. Newton's book hath shewn to be demonstrable [...].' This is, of course, a tacit admission by Locke that he had failed to do so in the *Essay*, published three years previously. Newton himself later accused Locke of a dangerous ethical relativism on account of precisely this failure: Newton to Locke, 16 Sept. 1693, in *Correspondence of Locke*, iv, pp. 727-8

⁴³ This point is well treated by Dawson, *Locke and Language*.

Disputations closely. In the *Essay* Locke declared that the question of the immateriality of the soul ‘seems to me to be out of the reach of our Knowledge: And he who would give himself leave to consider freely, and look into the dark and intricate part of each Hypothesis, will scarce find his Reason able to determine fixedly’ one way or the other. Locke emphasised that he did not intend ‘to lessen the belief of the Soul’s immateriality’. He merely sought to show ‘how far our knowledge does reach’, since ‘the state we are at present in, not being that of Vision, we must, in many Things, content our selves with Faith and Probability’ (*EHU* 4.3.6). In his treatment of the soul, Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* was Locke’s prime source in establishing ‘how far our knowledge does reach’. The fundamental point Locke sought to make was identical to Cicero’s own in that work: ‘we ought not to be over-confident in any thing, for we are often influenced by some cleverly-drawn conclusion, we waver and change our opinion even in questions that are comparatively clear: much more in this question, for it has an element of obscurity’.⁴⁴ Immortality could not seriously be doubted; immateriality, however, invited precisely such doubt.

In his response to Stillingfleet’s criticisms, Locke drew attention to this debt to Cicero. Cicero had ‘examined all the arguments his vast reading and great parts could furnish him with’ regarding the nature of the soul. Yet he remained ‘so far from being certain, so far from any thought he had, or could prove it, that he over and over again professes his ignorance and doubt of it’. Subjecting the arguments of others to critical interrogation, Cicero was content only to exclude the two gross elements of earth and water from the soul’s nature: ‘so far he is clear and positive: but beyond this he is uncertain; beyond this he could not get’.⁴⁵ Stillingfleet’s insistence that Cicero had affirmed the metaphysical arguments in favour of immateriality advanced by his ‘Master’, Plato, in *Phaedo* was quite mistaken. ‘Cicero’, Locke replied, ‘was willing to believe the soul immortal, but when he sought in the nature of the soul itself something to establish this his belief into a certainty of it, he found himself at a loss’. Plato’s faith in his ‘all-sufficient reason’, as Cicero noted, led him to assert the pre-existence as well as immortality of the soul. This precluded the possibility of Creation, the Day of Judgment, and a future state.⁴⁶ Metaphysical arguments led to true atheism. Physical arguments (an analogy with the natural world) encouraged, as Epicurean materialists showed, a denial of immortality and even of a God possessed of moral attributes who governed the world. Only Cicero was able to identify – even as he probed – the limits of reason on this point; and it followed that, unlike the Platonists, Epicureans and Stoics, he had not embraced errors which flatly contradicted revealed Christian truth. He would, as a consequence, have recognised how Christ had revealed what philosophy could not discover:

⁴⁴ *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.32.78.

⁴⁵ Here Locke is paraphrasing Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.9.17: ‘further than likelihood as I see it I cannot get [...]. Certainty will be for those who say such things can be known and who claim wisdom for themselves’.

⁴⁶ Locke, *Second Reply* (1697), in *Works of Locke*, iii, pp. 488-9.

So unmoveable is that truth delivered by the spirit of truth, that though the light of nature gave [Cicero] some obscure glimmering, some uncertain hopes of a future state; yet human reason could attain no clearness, no certainty about it, but that it was “JESUS CHRIST alone who brought life and immortality to light through the gospel”. Though we are now told, that to own the inability of natural reason to bring immortality to light, or, which passes for the same, to own principles upon which the immateriality of the soul (and, as it is urged, consequently its immortality) cannot be demonstratively proved; does lessen the belief in this article of revelation, which JESUS CHRIST alone has brought to light, and which consequently the scripture assures us is established and made certain only by revelation.⁴⁷

In the *Essay*, Locke famously declared that his aim was to serve as ‘*under-Labourer [...], removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge*’ (EHU, ‘Epistle to the Reader’, p. 10). Much of this detritus had been foisted upon men’s minds by scholastic metaphysicians. Their erroneous defence of Christianity on the basis of philosophical arguments which were incapable of supporting the weight placed upon them had concealed the strongest evidence for the truth of Christianity: that it delivered what reason alone had, and could, not. Locke turned to Cicero in order to show how far ‘our knowledge does reach’ – and *had reached* – in the absence of revelation. Only thus might the necessity of Christ’s teachings and the harmony between true philosophy and revealed theology once again come into view, a contention which similarly informed Locke’s endeavour in the *Reasonableness*:

[...] many are beholden to Revelation, who do not acknowledge it. ’Tis no diminishing to Revelation, that Reason gives its Suffrage too to the Truths Revelation has discovered. But ’tis our mistake to think, that because Reason confirms them to us, we had the first certain knowledge of them from thence, and in that clear Evidence we now possess them. The contrary is manifest, in the *defective morality of the Gentiles* before our Saviour’s time [...].⁴⁸

iii. *Conclusion*

This essay has focused upon Locke’s interest in the relationship between heathen moral philosophy and revealed Christian moral theology: an aspect of his thinking which has received relatively little scholarly attention, but which reflects his close engagement with questions which deeply preoccupied his contemporaries. The most important concerned the relationship between reason and revelation as the two sources of man’s knowledge. Locke offered a narrative of richness and complexity, which indicated how man’s natural desire for certainty, in both the classical and Christian worlds, had corrupted their ability to read both the book of nature *and* the book of Scripture aright. If Locke offered Cicero as a proxy for the extent and scope of mankind’s cognitive faculties, then he also appreciated the importance attached by the heathen philosopher to the heuristic value of doubt. Locke argued that, at

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 489 (Locke cites 2 Tim. 1:10).

⁴⁸ Locke, *Reasonableness*, p. 200.

every step, the individual had to guard against their ineradicable, even pathological desire to know *too much*, whilst nonetheless committing themselves to an unceasing search for truth and meaning. For Locke, doubt had to be accommodated into the very fabric of both philosophy and religious belief. Only thus might the word of God, to which men had access through both reason and revelation, be distinguished from the teachings of those men who sought to usurp His authority.

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