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Locke: The Development and Critique of Deism

Introduction

The culture and society of the present times is being beset and widely affected by the vast problem of modern atheism. Anti-theistic ideas have seeped into the way of thinking, and consequently, the manner of life of society as a whole. In intellectual circles, inherently atheistic principles were brought forth on both a theoretical and practical level, changing not only the philosophical world but also beyond the study of philosophy. In this presentation, the philosophy of the British philosopher John Locke will be explored. Although Locke desired to defend religion, particularly Christianity, his philosophy is essentially deistic; his starting principles are empirical, which leads to materialism; and his understanding of God and the Divine Omnipotence merges the material and spiritual realms. Thus, Locke's philosophy eventually ends in atheism.

Personal Life

John Locke was born at Wrington near Bristol in 1632.¹ He was the son of an attorney who had served as a captain in the Parliamentary army of the English Civil War. He received his education at Westminster School, where he received a B.A. degree in 1656 and later his M.A. at

¹ Copleston, Frederick, *A History of Philosophy Volume V: Modern Philosophy, The British Philosophers from Hobbes to Hume*, Image Books: Doubleday, New York, NY, 1994, p. 67

Christ Church, Oxford, two years later. From 1661 to 1664 Locke lectured at the university of Oxford on Greek, rhetoric and philosophy.² In addition to this, he also became involved in public affairs. Among the offices he held under some noble dignitaries included acting as secretary to a diplomatic mission,³ adviser, part of the Royal Society and secretary of the Council of Trade. He lived in the Netherlands from 1682 to 1689 until he returned to England, where he spent the rest of his life publishing and writing his philosophical works and ideas.⁴ He died in October 1704, as the Psalms were being read to him.⁵

His most known written works were: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), where he investigated the origin, certainty and extent of human knowledge; *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), on his thoughts pertaining to the Christian religion; *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690), thought to be written to justify one of his patron's opposition to the government of Charles II; and *Letters Concerning Toleration* (1689, 1690 and 1692), speaking of the need of defending free inquiry and toleration.⁶ The first two are more related to the issue of atheism and will be referenced in this presentation.

Philosophy: English Empiricist

Locke belongs to the school of philosophy known as English Empiricism. Influences that helped shape his philosophy to a greater or lesser degree go back to his philosophical studies at Oxford. There he became exposed to Aristotelian Scholasticism. Unfortunately, it was a watered-down type of Scholasticism: "...he found there a debased and rather petrified form of

² Brauer, Jerald C., *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History*, Westminster Press: Philadelphia, PA, 1971, p. 506

³ Copleston, p. 67

⁴ Brauer, p. 506

⁵ Copleston, p. 68

⁶ Brauer, p. 507

Scholasticism for which he conceived a great distaste..."⁷ However, he was more influenced by it than he himself was aware.⁸ He said that the human mind is a "tabula rasa," or clean slate, and that knowledge comes through experience and reflection.⁹ Unlike Scholasticism, Locke would take knowledge as coming through experience so far as to reduce it all to sense experience, denying the Aristotelian abstraction of the intelligible.¹⁰

Another influence on his philosophy was that of Descartes. Even more than Aristotelian philosophy, Descartes was of greater interest to Locke: "...his interest in philosophy was aroused by his private reading of Descartes rather than by what was then being taught at Oxford."¹¹ That is not to say that Locke was a Cartesian.¹² Locke is greatly influenced by Descartes and rationalism, but more as a reaction against them, going from doubting anything one sensed to only believing everything one sensed. Nevertheless, a parallel can be drawn between Descartes' famous doubt, whether what he senses is actually in reality, and Locke's questioning if thought is distinct from matter. What was before-hand pre-supposed (the distinction between matter and thought, or spirit, and what one experiences through the senses as the start of knowing reality) is now doubted.

As an empiricist, Locke believed that our knowledge came only from our senses, in what we experienced and perceived. For him, experience consisted of two things: sensation, the perception of the external phenomena caused by the senses; and reflection, the perception of

⁷ Copleston, p. 67

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Brauer, p. 506

¹⁰ Fabro, Cornelio, *God in Exile Modern Atheism*, Newman Press: New York, NY, 1968, pp. 275-276

¹¹ Copleston, p. 67

¹² Ibid

the internal phenomena, of the activity of the understanding itself.¹³ Locke considered that from these two sources comes forth all our ideas.¹⁴ Reacting against the rationalism of Descartes, Locke affirms that our knowledge is supplied by sense-perception (which is right). Our ideas are grounded in experience. However, he goes so far as to reduce everything to sense experience, even abstract ideas.

Theory of Knowledge

Locke's theory of knowledge is made more apparent by tracing it to his starting principle based on experience. All knowledge comes from experience and all experience comes from the sensible, but at the cost of denying the process of abstraction, the Aristotelian abstraction of the intelligible. Aristotle, who asserts that the senses are the prime source of knowledge, posits an intellect 'separate' from the body as superior to the senses and alleges this intellect to have as object the universal, thus 'separate' from the empirical individuality of the contents of experience.¹⁵ In contrast, Locke reduces intelligence to a mere 'reflection on sense data' and accepts the nominalist thesis on universals.¹⁶ As a nominalist in regards to universals, he says that "thought" adds nothing new to sensation. In the end, it is all just a vague type of picture of reality, which hangs together really only because of and in the common 'name.'¹⁷ This type of abstraction does not lead to a real knowledge of the thing itself: "it leads not to the knowledge

¹³ Turner, William, *History of Philosophy*, Ginn and Company: Boston, MA, 1929, pp. 487-488

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 488

¹⁵ *God in Exile*, p. 276

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

of a real constitutive nucleus of stability but only to the formation of a representative 'schema'."¹⁸

Again, for Locke, sensation is the only experience of reality. Because what is sensed is what is material, he asserts that matter is the proper object of the human mind: "...the senses are the sole windows and doors through which the mind communicates with the real, and sensations consequently constitute the primary attestation of reality and existence. Now the realm of sensations is the world of matter and material modifications; this material world is thus the primary and proper object of the human mind..."¹⁹

Making the material world the proper object of the human mind, Locke establishes materialism as the direct consequence of his sense-perceptionism:²⁰

It is no cause for astonishment therefore that the Encyclopedists, Voltaire, d' Holbach, and later the dialectical materialists should appeal to Locke and consider him the founder of the new notion of reality. Even as Bayle can be said to have opened the field for the ingress of atheism by shattering the link between morality and religion, Locke can be said to have prepared the ground by showing that the only reality that man can comprehend and of which he can speak is that which presents itself to the senses via sense impressions and perceptions: the material world.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 276-277

²⁰ Ibid, p. 277

²¹ Ibid

It was only a matter of time before later English Deists and sense-perceptionists were to strike down the last theological restrictions connected to Locke's sense-perceptionism.²²

Deism: the fruit of Locke's theories

Locke considered himself to be a Christian. His writings give this impression: "...in his *Reasonableness of Christianity*, he accepts and proves from Sacred Scripture that Christ claimed to be the Messiah, that he rose from the dead for man's salvation and that man is saved by faith in Christ and by good works."²³ However, without recognizing it, Locke falls into deistic types of thoughts with his own spin on it. Deism is a belief in a personal God founded on reason and not on revelation or authority.²⁴ Locke encourages a direct recourse to the Sacred Scriptures but limits the analysis of Scripture to reason alone, cutting out systems of theology.²⁵ Although Locke professed to be a Christian and did not believe he was a deist, the methodology in his system proved deistic.

Locke radically reduces his 'reasonable Christianity' to a couple of truths and over-exalts the role of reason: there is a God, Jesus Christ is the Messiah, and man can ascend to God by reason alone, worshipping Him by simply following the natural law.²⁶ Therefore, Christ's mission as Messiah sent by the Father is nothing more than teaching a natural religion and ethic.²⁷ Other truths, like the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus Christ, etc., as presented by theology, are the work of man and not absolutely necessary to salvation.²⁸ There may be other truths in

²² Ibid, p. 275

²³ Ibid, p. 274

²⁴ Laux, John, *Church History*, Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., Rockford, IL, 1989, p. 517

²⁵ *God in Exile*, p. 273

²⁶ *God in Exile*, p.274

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid, p. 275

Scripture besides these two (that there is a God and Jesus Christ is the Messiah), but since there is no agreement among the theologians on their interpretation, they are not binding and can be left out without incurring any guilt of sin.²⁹ Thus, we have a 'Christianity of reason' resting solely on the existence of God and on a life to come.³⁰

It is curious to note that while Locke wished to defend Christianity, he was positing Christianity devoid of all elements that make it Christian. His stand towards Christianity proved shaky: "...on the one hand, he claimed to be defending the religion and moral personality of Christ against the critique of the libertarians; but on the other hand he admitted only the rational elements in Christianity, rejecting implicitly but nonetheless categorically the specific and typical elements of Christianity as a historical revealed religion."³¹ His belief and defense of the existence of God is inconsistent because by his own theory, knowledge can only be of sensible experience. By saying this, it follows that one cannot really know God because He is beyond human modes of knowing. Later Deist philosophers would consider Locke as one of the founders of Deism.³²

Doubt about radical opposition between matter and thought

Locke's stance and understanding of the Divine Omnipotence brings a whole other host of problems. Influenced by Scotus and Ockham's philosophies, Locke believes that God can do whatever He wants, since He is omnipotent, even giving qualities to something that do not have natural or necessary connections: "...for Locke the will of God can shatter the confining circumferences of essences and attribute to a material substance operations and properties

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid, p. 275

that are spiritual.”³³ He is also influenced by voluntarism: in Locke’s hypothesis, if God so decided, matter can have the faculty of thought.³⁴

The fact is, for Locke, we only know sense perceptions and reflections on those perceptions; thus, he denies the certainty we can have that spirit and thought are distinct from matter. Our ideas cannot tell us: “...we can know with certainty that the circle is not identical with a square. We have likewise the idea of thought and matter but *probably we shall never be in a position to know if some material being might not be able to think*. That is the famous doubt of Locke, comparable in its consequences to the doubt of Descartes.”³⁵ For Locke, it is impossible to know without revelation if God could have given to some disposed matter the faculty of thought by simply contemplating our ideas.³⁶ The reason for this incertitude lies in that Locke does not know what the faculty of thought is: “...we simply do not know wherein the faculty of thought consists, not yet upon what species of substance the almighty may have deigned to confer this power which cannot be in any created being except by the gratuitous benevolence of the creator.”³⁷ Thus, Locke sees no contradiction in that God can give, at his good pleasure, to certain systems of matter some degree of sense, perception and thought.³⁸

Locke held that neither a material nor spiritual substance includes action in the essence as such,³⁹ that both are intrinsically inactive; so God can add any power to either substance: “The point is that both of these substances have been created devoid of thought, and neither has of

³³ Ibid, p. 279

³⁴ Ibid, p. 281

³⁵ Ibid, p. 277

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 277-278

³⁷ Ibid, p. 278

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid, p. 280

itself the faculty of thinking. Thus, God can confer such a capacity upon either of them according to his good pleasure, for he is omnipotent.”⁴⁰ Locke posits this theory by holding that no one can deny God the ability to confer the power of thought on a material substance as well as on an immaterial one, if it pleases Him, since neither of these substances can give themselves this power and we cannot conceive how such a power can be in either of them.⁴¹ Even if it cannot be understood and it seems contradictory, God can still give the aforementioned capacities to either substances because He is omnipotent.

Locke arrives at these conclusions based on his starting principle: the principle of experience. He reduces the idea of bodies to mean just extension and solidity, and the idea of spirit to the mere sense of the human mind, to acts of feeling, thought, and will.⁴² He makes everything solely dependent on God, on his belief in the Divine Omnipotence of God and voluntarism.⁴³ Fabro said that because life and sensibility are seen in the greater part of corporeal substances and not yet necessarily connected with the ‘idea’ of corporeality, this is where Locke went astray:⁴⁴ “instead of deducing the error in his own theory of knowledge and correcting that error, Locke plunged straight into the much more serious error of making the operations of things dependent solely on God, on divine decree, so that everything could do anything, because there was no genuine and proper necessary nexus between the reality of a nature and the quality of its actions and operations.”⁴⁵ In the end, we have as a result a

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid, p. 282

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

philosophy and theology of outright causal extrinsicism, if not occasionalism as such.⁴⁶ Thus, Locke's foundation of voluntarism, the Divine Omnipotence of God and the principle of experience led him to such conclusions.

Locke's hypothesis of matter having the capacity of thought will result in disastrous consequences, namely, the loss of distinction between matter and thought, body and soul and the need to say that man has a spiritual principle. Fabro says in regards to this: "The importance of the hypothesis and the danger of this concession would be obvious to everyone: for with the collapse of the barrier between matter and thought there was likewise doomed to fall the distinction between body and soul, with a consequent disappearance of the need of positing in man a spiritual and immortal principle, distinct from the body."⁴⁷ Locke seems aware of these implications, but thinks it highly probable that man does have immateriality. But, thinking is not necessarily immaterial.

By giving matter the capacity of thought, Locke throws open the doors to sense-perceptionism and materialism that will end with the 18th century French Enlightenment philosophy.⁴⁸ From this philosophy, personages like Voltaire, who claimed to be one of Locke's most ardent admirers,⁴⁹ will take the latter's thoughts and entirely exclude God. Locke's empiricism moves Deism to materialism and explicit atheism. It will be pointed out that Locke did make assertions about the real distinction between the material and spiritual. However, by saying that matter could think effectively eliminates any such distinction. Thus, Locke's

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 278

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 283

⁴⁹ Ibid

hypothesis that matter could think, possible only because of God, becomes a thesis for atheists; there is no need for God or spirit because matter has these qualities in itself: "...Locke's hypothesis is based entirely on the existence of God and his omnipotence, it is true; but his followers, gleeful at the long-awaited breaching of the frontier between matter and spirit, convert the hypothesis into a thesis and assert outright the inherent capacity of matter not only to move itself, but also to feel, to understand and to will."⁵⁰

As a result of Locke's Deism, philosophers like John Toland will develop Locke's Deism to the point of criticizing all historical religion and accepting atheism, as well as develop Locke's sense-perceptionism to an overly materialistic outlook.⁵¹ He will take Locke's hypothesis and make it into a fact. Toland would say matter is the constitutive basis of reality,⁵² that "matter is eternal and uncreated, impenetrable and indestructible."⁵³ This is the logical consequence of Locke's "thinking matter," only that it went from matter being subject to God in its being and operation, according to Locke, to matter having this capacity of thought on its own.⁵⁴ Toland adds a dynamism to the nature of matter, that is, the capacity for motion and thought, something called "dynamic materialism."⁵⁵ This would become the precursor of Marx and his "dialectical materialism,"⁵⁶ where the identification of matter and thought, of a "spiritualized matter" or "active matter" is the necessary principle.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 284-285

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 285

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid, p. 286

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 289

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 290

Conclusion

Fabro casts aside atheism under its different masks of deism, materialism, and the principle of immanence by concluding that there is only one valid notion of God: “We must conclude that there is but one genuine notion of God and, consequently, but one valid form of theism, namely, that which admits God as the supreme Being, distinct from the world created by him, and who is simultaneously the supreme spiritual Principle, i.e., a knowing and a willing and hence a personal Being, therefore the all-embracing and free cause of the world.”⁵⁷

Although Locke gives the impression of being a believer in God, a theist, a Christian and defender of Christianity, his system seems to be the basis of Deism, sense-perceptionism, materialism and of the English Enlightenment, which directly leads to the explicit atheism found in later materialism. His philosophy paved the way for others after him to bring his conclusions to their full consequences, with the result of excluding God entirely.

Looking at Fabro’s overall analysis of atheism, one can see how Locke fits into it. Fabro says that the beginnings of modern atheism are found in Descartes’ *cogito*, the modern concept of the knowing self,⁵⁸ where the grounds of reality are altered from being to the *cogito* so that only what I know exists.⁵⁹ Paralleling this to Locke, the latter’s identification of matter and spirit was a revolution *as great as cogito*. Failing to distinguish the differences between the material and spiritual realms results in not being able to transcend the finite world of experience and thus inevitably ends later in atheism.⁶⁰ Locke, by reducing Christ’s mission to the teaching of a

⁵⁷ _____. *Studia Fabriana, Cornelio Fabro Essential Thinker, Philosopher of Being and of Freedom*, Cornelio Fabro Cultural Project: Chillum, MD, 2017, p. 147

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 139

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 141

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 142

natural religion and ethic, introduces a “Christianity of reason” that strips it of its elements as a historical revealed religion: “For this reason Locke is considered one of the founders of Deism.”⁶¹ And this same Deism ends in atheism: “Distancing the God of the philosophers from the God of Abraham, to use the famous contraposition of Pascal, makes of deism simply a ‘momentary halt on the bridge toward atheism’, since deism is ‘the assertion of God often reduced to the status of universal cosmic Reason or Mind.’ The final passage to atheism will consist in the translation of that cosmic mind into human reason which, once divinized, takes the place of God.”⁶²

⁶¹ *God in Exile*, p. 275

⁶² *Studia Fabriana*, p. 150