

"THE ETHICS OF JOHN LOCKE"

prepared for

Master's Degree

by

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I. Locke's conception of the moral relation in general. All moral relation according to Locke consists in "the conformity or disagreement man's voluntary actions have to a rule to which they are referred."¹⁾

All moral actions must be viewed under two aspects:

- 1) As being made up of a collection of simple ideas, just as any other concept. This is their positive aspect.
- 2) As conforming or not conforming to a given standard, their relation to which determines whether they are morally good, bad, or indifferent. This is their relative aspect.²⁾

Much of the loose judgment concerning the actions of men is due to the substitution of the first aspect for the second.³⁾ This relation existing between an act and the standard to which it is referred is a true one whether the standard be correct or not. I may by accepting a wrong standard judge amiss as to the moral rectitude of the act, but this does not impair the validity of the relation as such.⁴⁾

The results that follow conformity or non-conformity to these laws Locke is careful to distinguish from any natural consequences of our acts. These he maintains can follow of themselves without a law. He thus emphasizes the personal source of these laws. They are sprung from an intelligent supreme being and enacted for a purpose, and to ensure the attainment of this purpose this supreme being has ordained that rewards and punishments shall be attached to them; not as natural consequences of our attitude toward them but as something directly applied to each one of us according to our deserts.⁵⁾

Good and evil as we shall see are only pleasure and pain or that which produces them. Now, it depends upon our attitude toward the laws enacted by the supreme lawgiver whether he shall by his will and power,⁶⁾

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- 1) B. II. Ch. 28, Sect. 4.
 - 2) B. II. Ch. 28, Sect. 15.
 - 3) B. II. Ch. 28, Sect. 16.
 - 4) B. II. Ch. 28, Sect. 20.
 - 5) B. II. Ch. 28, Sect. 6.
 - 6) B. II. Ch. 20, Sect. 2.
Ch. 21, Sect. 42.

inflict pain, i.e. evil upon us, or grant us pleasure, i.e. Good.¹⁾ By our attitude towards these laws we do not thus as agents produce our pleasure or pain, our good or evil, as intrinsic effects of our conduct; but we earn them as a child would receive an apple or a whipping respectively depending upon his attitude toward his mother's command to stop crying.

How the relation of our ideas and actions to the standard is discovered he explains as follows: "This rule being nothing but a collection of several simple ideas the conformity thereto is but so ordering the action that the simple ideas belonging to it may correspond to those the law requires."²⁾ The comparison thus takes place between the elements of each and the moral character of each element is determined before it, by union with others, forms a concept or an action.

II. Nature of the Moral Law. (Practical Principles) There are three kinds of law that admit of the moral relations:

1. The Divine law, according to which an act is a sin or a duty.
2. The civil law, according to which an act is a crime or not.
3. The law of opinion, according to which an act is a vice or virtue.³⁾

These three laws have this in common that they are all as we have already seen composed of simple ideas; but as to their respective sources they are entirely distinct.

The divine law is given us through the light of nature or the voice of revelation.⁴⁾ By the light of nature is understood the rational process of weighing evidence to determine what is true and what is false. By this means alone can we determine conclusively what is true. Even the authenticity of Revelation must be tested by this means, and reason must be our final judge and guide in all things.⁵⁾ By Revelation he naturally means God's revealed word as found in the Scriptures.

1) B.II.Ch.28, Sect.5.

2) B.II.Ch.28, Sect.14.

3) B.II.Ch.28, Sect.7.

4) B.II.Ch.28, Sect.8.

5) B.IV.Ch.19, Sections 13,14.

The civil law takes its rise in the commonwealth and consists in the enactments of this body, for the protection of life, liberty and property.¹⁾

The law of opinion or reputation arises in society and depends for its nature upon what in any given locality is considered praise - or blameworthy, while the estimation of this in turn depends upon what is found to be convenient or inconvenient for the locality. The members of a community conform to it out of concern for their reputation.²⁾ Each of these three laws naturally carries with it its own peculiar rewards and punishments.

III. Our Knowledge of these Practical Principles. Our knowledge of them is not due to any imateness on their part. In no respects do they fulfill the requirements of something that is innate. To be such they would have to be universally received without doubt or question; they would have to be self-evident maxims.³⁾ Such Locke proceeds to show they are not for:

(a) They "require reasoning and discourse and some exercise of the mind to discover the certainty of their truth⁴⁾ and "are capable of demonstration." The fact that they require demonstration, he maintains is no derogation of their truth. Their proof would be the same in nature as that of mathematics and would be of equal certainty. He farther shows that anyone may justly demand a proof of the validity of any moral rule that is presented to him, which would be absurd if it were innate.⁵⁾ Locke in no instance, however, attempts to carry out his process of demonstration and is content with the bare assertion of its possibility.

(b) The conception of justice and keeping of faith varies widely with different communities and organizations, and these are the principles if any that would be most likely to be innate. Both robbers and saints

1) B.II.Ch.28,Sect.9.
2) B.II.Ch.28,Sect.10.
3) B.I.Ch.3,Sect.1.
4) B.I.Ch.3,Sect.1.
5) B.I.Ch.3,Sect.4.

practice then, each according to their conception of their meaning.¹⁾

(c) These principles cannot be tacitly assented to while openly contradicted in practice; for in the first place many men openly profess to deny their existence, and in the second place it would be absurd to possess practical principles that should terminate in thought merely.²⁾

(d) The conception of practical principles varies widely in scores of instances. For example: The motives for keeping of contracts vary with the Hobbist, the christian and the philosopher, and must thus be of secondary origin.³⁾ The conception of virtue varies with what we conceive to be profitable, and with this varies also the moral standard. The conception of obligation shows no such certainty as its innateness would demand.⁵⁾ Even conscience assents to rules only which agree with the customs and beliefs of the community and what is considered an enormity in one locality is practiced with a good conscience in another.⁷⁾ There is scarcely a single principle that is not thus actually subjected to different interpretations.⁸⁾ And it is impossible to conceive that rules known to be unconditionally true by every one, should be distorted and broken by all.⁹⁾

(e) If a rule of action is not innate as a principle it is much less innate as a truth, for a practical truth must be put in the form of a proposition and then would involve the idea of duty. But the idea of duty presupposes a law, and a law a lawgiver with rewards and punishments. Now as punishment in most cases does not follow immediately upon the act, if the truth were to be innate there would have ~~to~~ to be joined with the idea of duty involved the ideas of law, of God, of obligation, of punishment, of a life after death, etc. But since these ideas are not found

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- 1) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.2.
 - 2) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.3.
 - 3) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.5.
 - 4) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.6.
 - 5) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.7.
 - 6) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.8.
 - 7) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.9.
 - 8) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.10.
 - 9) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.11.

clearly defined in the minds of the most studious persons we cannot expect to find them such in the minds of the indolent. Thus innate truths are not to be found.¹⁾

(f) Those who urge the existence of innate principles cannot point them out and some men even come to conclude that we not only have no innate moral principles but have no moral principles at all, being, as they say, mere mechanisms.²⁾

(g) If innate principles were to be found at all they would most certainly be found most clear nearest to the fountain, i.e. in children and in illiterate persons. This is not found to be the case, however,³⁾ thus there seems to exist no innate practical principles.

How are these principles then acquired? They are inculcated from earliest infancy by our nearest associates; mothers, nurses, teachers, etc. We come to look upon these principles as innate and believe them to be implanted in our minds by a higher power because having received them in our infancy we have no recollection of the process of acquiring them.⁴⁾

It may not be amiss here to consider in what relation, respecting the manner of their reception, these practical principles, or rules of action, stand to those conceptions of our minds that are referred to them as standards. As to the manner of this reception into our minds of the simple ideas of the rules of action and of our other simple ideas respectively there seems to be no difference. Of the former he says, "moral -- notions are founded on and terminate in these simple ideas we have received from sensation and reflection" and "this rule being nothing but a collection of several simple ideas." Of the latter, speaking of what simple ideas of our own constitute the idea of murder, before by reference to a standard it has received its moral signification, he says, "we shall find them to amount to a collection of simple ideas de-

1) B.I.Ch.3.Sect.12.

2) B.I.Ch.3,Sect.14.

3) B.I.Ch.3,Sect.20.

4) B.I.Ch.3,Sect.22.

rived from reflection or sensation" and "they consist only and are made up of collections of simple ideas which are originally received from sense or reflection.¹⁾ Now as we have seen Locke admits of no innate ideas. Reflection naturally cannot take place before the mind has received some content. The sensuous impressions supply the content and the relations existing among them give rise to such reflection. It would thus appear that even the Divine law can be received in no other way than by means of sensuous impressions, which in turn give rise to reflection, causing the formation in our minds of the law in question, as a reproduction of it, in its positive existence.

IV. Source of the Authority of the Moral Law (practical principles) giving rise to obligation. Normally the specified end or aim of any moral action should constitute all the authority necessary to create obligation, and should embody all the coercion required to produce conformity to it. This end or aim should likewise constitute the touchstone by which should be determined whether any action were morally good or bad, right or wrong. On both of these points Locke assumes a double attitude. While he unquestionably accepts happiness to be the end of all action, he endeavors to make positive laws, laws received from without and springing from active agents who possess the power of enforcement by means of rewards or punishments, both the source of authority for the performance of any action, and the touchstone for determining whether it is morally right or wrong. Formally he is a legalist, a jural moralist. In essence, though tacitly only, and perhaps unconsciously he is a utilitarian.

Thus in discussing this section we may look at the subject from two points of view: the legalistic, or external, and the psychological, or internal point of view.

1. From the Legalistic or External point of view. Tho' there are in

1) B.II.Ch.28, Sect.14.

practice three different sources of moral standards all are in the end referred to God as their source who makes them known either through revelation or by the light of nature. In the following paragraph will be seen what stress is laid upon these positive laws and upon their source as being an active agent having in his hands rewards and punishments.

We can have no conception of duty (obligation) without a law, and a law cannot be supposed without a lawmaker nor without rewards and punishments.¹⁾

Without the conception that God has set up a law (as the personal creator of the same) the breach of which he will certainly punish (as an active agent) to the ill bargain of the transgressor, no idea of duty can exist in any given case. The rewards and punishments of the moral law must overbalance the satisfaction we may find in following our own desires and breaking the law, if they are to be an incentive and a curb respectively.²⁾

By the employment of reason, the light of nature, we may attain to a moral life on the basis that reason must necessarily, recognize our self evident duty toward God. Thus we may live a moral life without knowing that we actually do act upon the only true ground of morality: the will and law of a God who sees in the dark and has ~~XXXX~~ in his hands rewards and punishments.³⁾

Wherever we suppose a law we must also suppose annexed to it some reward and punishment. It would be vain to suppose a rule for the free action of men without also supposing connected with it some good or evil to determine their will. And this good and evil must in all cases be something other than the natural consequences of the act.⁴⁾

Moral good and evil then is only the conformity or disagreement of our voluntary actions to some law whereby good or evil is drawn upon us by the will and power of the lawmaker which good or evil, pleasure or pain attending our observance or breach of the law by the decree of the lawmaker is what we call reward and punishment.⁵⁾ Thus we see what great

1) B. I. Ch. 3, Sect. 12.
2) B. I. Ch. 3, Sect. 13.
3) B. I. Ch. 3, Sect. 6.
4) B. II. Ch. 28, Sect. 6.
5) B. II. Ch. 28, Sect. 5.

stress he lays upon the law being, so to speak, a codified body created at the will of an active agent who inflicts punishments and grants reward according to desert.

God has given us a rule to follow. This rule embodies what in his goodness and wisdom he sees is best for us. This is the ~~only~~ true touchstone of moral rectitude: "He has power to enforce it (the rule) by rewards and punishments of infinite weight and duration in another life" and also this, that men judge of whether an act is good or bad by "whether as duties or sins they are apt to procure them happiness or misery from the hands of the Almighty."¹⁾

These rewards and punishments thus seem to be means used respectively to attract us by rewards and to force us by threats to strive for out true welfare and happiness in spite of our inclination to the contrary. And the making of these means, backed by the authority for their application, the touchstone of what is right and wrong when happiness is admitted to be the end of all action seems an artificial forcing together of two contradictory points of view. This double attitude is further illustrated in²⁾ where he says: "If a christian who has a view of happiness and misery in another life be asked why a man must keep his word he will give this as a reason: Because God, who has the power of eternal life and death requires it of us (me)" If Locke had caused his christian to answer: "Because God -- requires it of us (me)" simply, then he could with full consistency have admitted his touchstone of morality as above; but back of his "God requires it" lurks what he himself admits to be the true end, and ought thus also to be admitted as the only touchstone, if consistency were to be preserved, the statement of which might be expressed thus: I keep my word because it will bring me the greatest happiness, and that independent of whether in conforming to it I obey any command or not.

2. From the Utilitarian, or Psychological point of view. If our endeavor is to shape Locke's ethics into a consistent system we must take into

1) B.II.Ch.28, Sect.8.

2) B.I.Ch.3, Sect.5.

account as little as possible his utilitarian tendency; but if our object be to truly understand just what occurred in the mind of the man we must carefully investigate even this side of the question. The following paragraphs will show his attitude toward a utilitarian standard:

A desire for happiness and an aversion to misery, qualities of appetite, are found universally, and are the constant springs and motives of all our actions.¹⁾

A christian believes in a future life with either happiness or misery. God has in his power the disposal of this happiness and misery. The christian is represented as doing a given morally good act because God requires it.²⁾ Evidently here the real motive for doing the good act is the fact that it will bring happiness, and it is not done because of God's command as such. Locke seems to be careful not to admit any natural consequences of an act, but insists upon such consequences being directly applied to the individual by a personal God who is personally favored or wronged. What we term natural consequences he looked upon as punishments or rewards by direct agency and decree attached to given acts.

The accepted moral rules, further, differ in accordance with the happiness men aim at, and God has given inseparably joined the pursuit of virtue with happiness, so that if we truly exercise our "light of nature" so as to discover what really constitutes our happiness we may by pursuing it arrive at a moral life though without in such a case, according to Locke, exercising it on its only true basis.³⁾

Happiness is the final consideration, and although the threat of the possibility of missing eternal happiness and bringing upon ones self eternal misery is meant to urge us to seek true happiness, yet the matter of choosing between different kinds of happiness is in the end referred to reason. A life in accordance with God's law, with a prospect

1) B.I.Ch.3.Sect.3.
2) B.I.Ch.3,Sect.5.
3) B.I.Ch.3,Sect.6.

of eternal happiness as a reward on one side of the balance, and a choice of present happiness gained by means contrary to the law of God, with the prospect of eternal punishment on the other side of the balance, constitutes a rational process and calls for a decision.¹⁾ The promises and threats may thus be looked upon as items that enter in to tip the balance in favor of deferred happiness. Such extra weights on the side of deferred happiness is naturally necessary if we shall choose it; for such deferred happiness is at the moment of choice simply felt in expectation and not actually, while present happiness even if resulting from a life contrary to God's law, exists in feeling, strong and vivid at that moment. If we but consider carefully and honestly enough the relative weights of a life that will bring eternal happiness in the end though possibly for the present not the most enjoyable, and a life for the present full of enjoyment, but that will bring eternal misery, we cannot but decide in favor of the former.²⁾

Virtue and vice, in so far as they coincide with God's law stand for what is right and wrong in itself.³⁾ But in practice the term virtue is applied to what is advantageous, what is a general good. Now nothing so visibly advances the general good of mankind as obedience to God's law and anything is good only in so far as it brings pleasure while pleasure constitutes happiness.⁴⁾ Thus even virtue finds its measure in happiness and God's law itself exists only for the purpose of urging us toward the true happiness that is the end of all action.⁵⁾

Happiness alone is able to excite in us a desire or an uneasiness.⁷⁾ These in turn alone are the immediate springs to the exercise of our will and will is necessary to every action. Thus happiness is the motive force in our activity and is the end "which we all aim at in all our actions."⁸⁾

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- 1) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.70.
 2) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.70.
 3) B.II.Ch.28, Sect.10.
 4) B.II.Ch.28, Sect.11.
 5) B.III.Ch.21, Sections 42, 61.
 6) B.II.Ch.21, Sections 42, 54, 55.
 7) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.41.
 8) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.37.
 9) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.36.

The final end is happiness and the relative value of the different happiness presented to us both in respect to quantity and quality is determined by rationally balancing them together, when also God's threats and promises are added to tip the balance.¹⁾

Thus we see how the consideration of happiness is in fact Locke's only standard of value. In proportion as any rules or maxims conduce to the highest happiness they are valuable; its pursuit constitutes the function and the highest perfection of our noblest faculty, reason; and even God's own laws exist for no other purpose than to aid us in its attainment.

At this point we may perhaps appropriately consider in a few words what is Locke's conception of freedom or liberty and what he considers to be the source of error.

He insists in the first place that it is the person that is free,²⁾ and not the will. To speak of the latter as being free is absurd. Freedom "consists in the dependence of the existence or not-existence of any action upon our volition of it" as contrasted with our mere preference or wish of the same.³⁾ As to what constitutes liberty and what is the source of error he says: "For the mind having in most cases -- a power to suspend the execution and satisfaction of any of its desires and so all, one after another; is at liberty to consider the objects of them, examine them on all sides, and weigh them with others. In this lies the liberty man has; and from the not using of it right comes all the variety of mistakes, errors and faults which we run into in the conduct of our lives. --- We have a power to suspend the prosecution of this or that desire. --- This seems to me the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that which is called free will,"⁴⁾ and further "This is standing still where we are not sufficiently assured of the way; examination is

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- 1) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.50.
 - 2) B.II.Ch.21, Sections 16,21.
 - 3) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.27.
 - 4) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.47.

consulting a guide. The determination of the will upon inquiry is following the direction of the guide; -- such determination abridges not that power wherein liberty consists" and "the constant desire of happiness and the constraint it puts upon us to act for it nobody I think accounts an abridgement of liberty, or at least an abridgement to be complained of."¹⁾

Neither liberty nor freedom thus exists outside of the rational process and if this process of balancing the relative values of the goods presented to us be only thorough enough, and exhaustive enough any possibility of error would be thereby excluded.

V. Nature of this Happiness.

It consists in pleasure.²⁾ This pleasure is sought in two distinct spheres; the mental and the sensual; pleasure of mind and pleasure of body, with a great variety within each sphere.³⁾ Still in the end both properly spring from the mind" though some have their rise in the mind⁴⁾ from thought, others in the body from certain modifications of motion.

This pleasure, further, is not determined by the nature of the object in itself, but by the nature of the palate of the subject and the greatest freedom from pain, and the greatest degree of pleasure received constitutes the greatest happiness.⁵⁾

The main argument in favor of rapt, eternal happiness seems to be its permanence, its durability,⁶⁾ and the valuation of any given happiness seems as a rule to be simply quantitative. A man can apparently find his complete momentary pleasure in almost anything as long as it suits his palate. It is true his point of view may be defective, and it may be a bad happiness he enjoys in view of what results it will bring; but as far as actual momentary enjoyment goes "pushpin" according to Locke

1) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.50.

2) B.II.Ch.21, Sections 42, 54, 55.

3) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.43.

4) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.41.

5) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.55.

6) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.60.

would seem to be 'as good as poetry.'¹⁾ Still in B.II.Ch.21, Sect.41, his language seems to imply that he accepted a qualitative difference in the matter of happiness. He speaks there of our having experienced "degrees" of both happiness and misery and promises, for a future life, a happiness "the utmost bounds of which we know not" quoting concerning it the Scripture passage "eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive."

In B.II.Ch.21, Sect.51, he points out that the pursuit of true and solid happiness constitutes the highest perfection of our intellectual nature, but further on in B.II.Ch.21, Sect.36, he points out that if this pursuit is to take place, an uneasiness and desire for that given happiness must precede to arouse our wills to activity. Bare intellectual consideration will not do it.²⁾ The removal of this uneasiness constitutes the first step in the attainment of that happiness, but after that as we have seen above in Sections 54 and 55, it receives a positive element of pleasure and delight.

VI. "The Good."

After a thorough discussion of happiness as the end much of what is to be said concerning "the Good" must necessarily be repetition. In what does "the Good" consist!

In B.II.Ch.21, Sect.42 Locke says: "What has an aptness to produce pleasure in us to what we call good and what is apt to produce pain in us we call evil, for no other reason but for its aptness to produce pleasure and pain in us", and in B.II.Ch.21, Sect.61 he continues:

"That which is properly good or bad is nothing but barely pleasure or pain," and further "Things then are good or evil only in reference to pleasure or pain. That we call good which is apt to cause or increase pleasure or diminish pain in us; or else to procure or preserve us the possession of any other good or absence of any evil.³⁾ The real good and

1) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.54, 55.
2) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.37.
3) B.II.Ch.20, Sect.2.

evil thus seems to be only pleasure and pain as such, while things are called good and evil only in so far as they produce these effects.

The greatest good is "an unalterable pursuit of happiness in general", a rational pursuit of a fixed kind of happiness, our true happiness, as our end.¹⁾ If this pursuit is truly rational the happiness we pursue can but be one: the perfect durable happiness of a hereafter.²⁾

But the good need not be found in things only that give immediate pleasure, but also in things that ~~give~~ will bring it upon us at a distance. "Therefore things also that draw after them pleasure and pain are considered as good and evil."³⁾

Here Locke seems to give room for a spirit of self-sacrifice, and self-renunciation. Even pain itself could become a good if it would ensure pleasure as its consequence, and by virtue of the fact that it would thus lead us to the end, happiness, as consisting in pleasure.

Now lastly, under what conditions do "goods" exist for us?

In their capacity, as such, of producing pleasure things do not move us. That is, transient intellectual attention to such things does not move our wills to their pursuit as being "goods."⁴⁾ Only those things move a man that are "considered and taken to make a necessary part of his happiness." And as we have seen, nothing can be considered by us to be a necessary part of our happiness unless desire or uneasiness has been aroused for it. Only those things thus move us as goods for which desire and relish has been awakened.⁵⁾

Now if we are truly concerned about our welfare we will feel it our duty to seize every opportunity to arouse such desire or relish for anything that may be presented to us as a good, i.e. as a means, for the attainment of the greatest happiness.

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- 1) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.51.
 - 2) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.60.
 - 3) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.61.
 - 4) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.46.
 - 5) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.42.
 - 6) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.53.

Fashion and common opinion have settled wrong notions, and education and custom have produced ill habits so that "the just values of things are misplaced and the palates of men corrupted" but "men may and should correct their palates". It is thus possible to arouse a due relish for any good presented to us. In some cases this can be done by due consideration of it merely, but if this is not sufficient "practice, application and custom will accomplish it in most"¹⁾, and if a man does not improve his opportunities to develop such relish for what will lead to his true happiness but allows his own palate to become "vitiated"²⁾ he is responsible for whatever consequences may follow.

1) B.L.L.Ch.21, Sect.69.

2) B.II.Ch.21, Sect.56.

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