

LOCKE AND THE DOCTRINE OF SIN

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Perhaps one of the greatest disappointments among Locke's many accomplishments is his lack to provide a systematic treatise on theology. It was primarily questions of morality and religion that led him to draft his famous *Essay* in the first place. Such a concern would lead to the expectation of a similar robust treatment on theology, however Locke never took the time for such an endeavor. Although no such document was produced, Locke had sewn his thoughts on theology and morality throughout his various writings. In an attempt to systematically present these thoughts we will examine them under four sin-oriented worldview divisions: (1) Lockean Epistemology, (2) Lockean Theology, (3) Lockean Anthropology, and (4) Lockean Moral Philosophy. After developing the foundation of Locke's essential ideas that formulate a Lockean worldview, we will survey Locke's position on the origin, nature, consequence, and imputation of sin as it relates to his various intellectual commitments. We will then conclude with an evangelical critique regarding his hamartiological conclusions.

PART I: LOCKEAN WORLDVIEW

Locke's lack of a systematic treatment on theology has been problematic. He is critiqued and condemned by both the Calvinist and Rationalist Divines of his day. Some contemporaries accuse him of denying the Trinity, while others accuse him of not going far enough in his rationalism. In response to Locke's writings, J. Edwards would pen *Some Thoughts Concerning the several Causes and Occasions of Atheism*, as well as *Socinianism Unmasked*. In his critiques, he would accuse Locke of being a Socinian in his theology, calling him "the right Racovian

breed.”¹ Edwards would carry his critiques even further, stating,

A man cannot be a Christian without the knowledge and belief of these Truths [Christ's true nature, satisfying divine atonement, justification by faith and not by works, the resurrection, final judgment, and eternity] . . . Wherefore for any man to make up Christianity without the belief of these is a Ridiculous and absurd attempt.”²

What drove Edwards to make such claims? Specifically, it was Locke’s propagation of a need to confirming a ‘minimum of belief’. Locke sought to hold up some singular belief that, once embraced, made one a Christian. This is not to be confused with rejecting what “is necessary to be believed by every man to make him a Christian” versus “what is required to be believed” by every Christian, which Locke both affirmed.³ Locke would propose that the “fundamental article” is that Jesus is “the Messiah, our king”.⁴ However, Locke’s musings in theology, and his statement affirming ‘Jesus as Messiah’ to be the fundamental article, cannot be observed apart from his environment. Alan Sell reminds us of this when he state’s "Locke's quest of an indispensable minimum of belief was, then, prompted by his hatred of sectarianism, and by his conviction that toleration . . . requires tolerance where such matters are concerned."⁵ Locke witnessed terrible sectarian violence both abroad with the Huguenot refugees, and at home with the fallout of the Glorious Revolution. His environment was ripe with persecution and religious wars on the grounds of doctrinal disagreements, and this fueled his attempts to isolate one essential article. With these fundamental concerns in mind, we can turn to the epistemological, theological, anthropological, and moral components that formulate Locke’s worldview and

¹ Edwards, *Socinianism Unmask'd*. (London: J Robinson and J. Wyat, 1696): 2. References to the Socinians of southern Poland who published 1st Socinian Catechism, Racow (1605).

² *Ibid.* 25.

³ Locke, John. *A Second Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, in *Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke*. Edited by E. S. de Beer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976: VII, 194.

⁴ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, In *Works*, VI, 5.

⁵ Alan Sell, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 187.

contribute to his doctrine of sin.

On Epistemology: Against Innate Moral Principles

Locke's treatment of epistemology would become a major influence on his doctrine of sin. Locke developed his epistemology of *tabula rasa* mainly in his mentioned *Essay*, which taught that man was born as a blank slate, with sense experience and reflection writing the objects of knowledge called ideas upon the mind.⁶ The influence of such a 'blank slate' theology would contribute to his rejection of imputation, given man would enter into this life with no inherited sinfulness and guilt. In response to the claims of his contemporaries that morality was innate knowledge, Locke's epistemology would make no room for the claim, and instead he would argue that the law of nature "is not known through inscription or handed down by tradition but is known by reason through sense experience."⁷ In addition to aligning the discovery of moral laws through a Lockean understanding of epistemology, Locke would also siege the innate moralists with four main critiques. The first of these noted that conscience was simply opinion, with Locke claiming it "is simply one's opinion of the rightness or wrongness of one's own action, and one's opinions can come from education, or custom, or the company one keeps."⁸ Locke would also note that innate moral rules were refuted by a lack of consistent inner shame inline with the concept of an inner conscious, claiming "people frequently break basic moral rules with no inner sense of shame or guilt, thereby showing that the rules are not innate."⁹ Supporting the former two critiques was a third directed at the lack of a universally accepted

⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974): I.1.8: 47. "It being that Term . . . which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by Phantasm, Notion, Species, or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ'd about in thinking."

⁷ John Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 175.

⁸ Locke, *Essay*, I.3.9-13: 70-75.

⁹ Ibid.

statement of these allegedly innate rules. A fourth critique offered by Locke was that reason made innate morality useless. As Chappell summarizes Locke's warning of the danger involved in assuming an enthusiastic or authoritarian presence of innate moral knowledge, "to claim that certain principles are innate is to claim that there is no need for further thought about the matters they cover; and this in turn is an excellent tactic for anyone who wants certain principles taken on authority, without inquiry."¹⁰ With the difficulties and dangers of alleging an innate knowledge of moral laws established, Locke affirms the law of nature as right reason. Locke would therefore reject the equivocation of innate laws and the law of nature, stating instead that "there is a great deal of difference between an innate law and a law of nature; between something imprinted on our minds in their very original, and something that we, being ignorant of, may attain to the knowledge of, by the use and due application of our natural faculties."¹¹

On Theology: Creator, Creature, and Law

While both affirming the existence of laws of nature and rejecting them as innately sewn and known within man's conscience, Locke is left asking the question of their source and justification. In this, Locke is within the tradition of Christian Philosophers, regardless of the attempts of modernity to paint him as merely a humanist empiricist. Locke sets to continue Pufendorf's attempts at making God's role in morality central, and rejects the Hobbesian treatment by acknowledging God as the sole source of moral rectitude.¹² For Locke, God has a right to determine moral rules by virtue of his status as the Creator over we the creature. On

¹⁰ Chappell, Vere. *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 202.

¹¹ Locke, *Essay*, I.3.13.

¹² Locke, *Essay*, II.28.8: 352. "This is the only true touchstone of moral Rectitude; and by comparing them to this Law, it is, that Men judge of the most considerable Moral Good or Evil of their Actions; that is, whether as Duties, or Sins, they are like to procure them happiness, or misery, from the hands of the ALMIGHTY,"

establishing these laws of nature, Locke argued that God “has a right to do it, we are his Creatures: He has Goodness and Wisdom to direct our Actions to that which is best: and he has Power to enforce it by Rewards and Punishments, of infinite weight and duration, in another Life: for no body can take us out of his hands.”¹³

Morality for Locke thus focuses on obligations and laws, which furthers a discussion of the centrality of the Lawmaker. For Hobbes, law is simply affirmed in its legal positivist form, and as such obligation is focused on the earthly lawgiver. Locke fuses the solution to the dilemmas of obligation and God’s role in morality by noting a three-fold division of law, which he categorizes as “1. The Divine Law. 2. The Civil Law. 3. The Law of Opinion or Reputation, . . . By the Relation they bear to the first of these, Men judge whether their Actions are Sins, or Duties; by the second, whether they be Criminal, or Innocent; and by the third, whether they be Vertues or Vices.”¹⁴ God is thus the first and only perfect lawgiver whose ability and obligation requires “a life after this observable one, since it is plain that he does not make us obey him by rewarding and punishing in our present life.”¹⁵ Locke’s morality is thus grounded on “the will and law of a god, who sees men in the dark, has in his hand rewards and punishments, and power enough to call to account the proudest offender.”¹⁶ For Locke, sin is then the breaking of these divine laws against the will of the Creator. With this foundational premise of Creator/creature, and Divine Law with its eternal sanctions established, the analysis may move to the agent of moral actions.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. II.28.7: 352.

¹⁵ Ibid. I.5.8: 87-88; I.3.12: 74.

¹⁶ Ibid. I.3.5.

On Anthropology: Moral Psychology of Desire and Duty

Locke would come to develop a more optimistic moral psychology that would revise Hobbes and others by focusing on redirecting the inner response of desire. Locke affirmed that man was to pursue happiness, yet rejected both a pessimistic understanding of passion as sinful self-love, and the calls of ancients such as Cicero to extinguish desire. As Marshall notes regarding Locke's moral psychology, Locke turned "not to an account of men as sinfully passionate because they were dominated by a corrupt self-love, but instead, as so often, to a naturalistic account of men based upon commitment to God's bounty."¹⁷ Sin occurred when man was motivated to wrong actions by the passions, and "by not focusing upon God's rewards and instead preferring terrestrial pleasures, allowing their reason to be led by the passions."¹⁸ Men are to pursue pleasures because God placed desire within them, however they are to utilize their rational capacities to mold their passions after God's eternal divine law. Locke both affirmed a duty to pursue the passions, yet noted that these passions did not imply a solely terrestrial hedonism, but a God-centered pursuit.¹⁹ Given God's role as Lawgiver, and the presence of rewards and punishments in eternity, man's reason should lead him to the reality that the greatest pleasure and greatest punishment resides not in the sanctions of a state, but in the sanctions and solace of a divine Sovereign. A terrestrial hedonism was thus converted into a celestial variation.²⁰ As Sell explains, "utility is not the criterion of virtuous action, the will of God is."²¹ The prospect of an agent's happiness provokes desire, and provoked desire prompts questions of

¹⁷ John Marshall, *John Locke Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 186.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁰ Alan Sell, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 115.

²¹ *Ibid.*

the greatest pleasure.²² Pleasure is thus proper when pointed by reason to pursue God, given His divine moral prescriptions and principles, and the justification of these principles by the prominence and principality of the sovereign Creator.

On Moral Philosophy: The Moral Science of Unease and Action

With his epistemology, theology, and anthropology surveyed and serving as a foundation for an understanding of Locke's hamartiology, Locke defined ethics as "the seeking out of those rules and measures of human actions which lead to happiness, and the means to practise them."²³ For Locke this is hardly a static study of "bare speculation and knowledge of truth . . . [but] right and a conduct suitable to it."²⁴ Even in regards to theology, Locke's primary focus is one of moral, and thus political, behavior. Locke is focused on providing a moral philosophy that motivates not simply reflection but implementation, affirming as necessary to any real morality the rule of prescriptivity.²⁵ Locke then makes two conclusions stemming from his moral psychology and epistemology: (1) The ancients' *Summum Bonum* fails prescriptivity; and (2) The will is not determined by belief and innate claims, but uneasiness. Regarding the *Summum Bonum*, Locke argues there is no point in discussing the highest good of the ancients. The question of 'which life would give us the most happiness', such as presented by Epicurus ('the most satisfying one'), is derailed in light of the different degrees of desires and likings. Happiness is agreed to be the goal, but pains and pleasures "to different Men, are very different

²² Locke, *Essay*, II.11.41-42: 258-259.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.21.3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Louis Pojman, *Ethics Discovering Right and Wrong* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990), 5. "Prescriptivity refers to the practical or action guiding nature of morality . . . They are intended for use, to advise and to influence to action."

things.”²⁶ This then cannot possibly adhere to his rule of prescriptivity that actions must be practical and action guiding. In addition,

The will is not determined by our beliefs about what course of action would bring us the greatest amount of good. If it were, Locke argues, no one would sin, since the prospect of eternal bliss or torment would outweigh every other. . . . only thoughts of pleasures and pains can arouse uneasiness, so that laws not backed by sanctions would be quite pointless. They could not move us to act.²⁷

Ethics was thus a science of action that focused on the “attainments of things good and useful . . . [relying on the] skill of right applying of our own powers and actions.”²⁸

On Moral Philosophy: The Moral Calculus

Locke sought to place the focus of this science of action on action words, or 'notions'. These action words, such as hypocrisy, justice, adultery, and murder, could be learned by observation, however they are mainly obtained by having them explained to us.²⁹ These notions are primarily definitional and prescriptive, and secondarily descriptive. The precision of these action words leads Locke to conclude there exists a mathematical precision to ethics, whereas falsity of the action words are impossible, and instead something can only be said to relate to the notions in degrees or wrong naming of instances.³⁰ The action words set up a definitional ideal, which leads the observer to implement the notions with others through conceptual analysis.³¹ An example of Locke's definitional calculus of morals would work as follows: (1) Property is defined as "a right to anything," (2) Injustice is defined as "the invasion or violation of that

²⁶ Locke, *Essay*, II.11.55: 269.

²⁷ Chappell, *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, 204.

²⁸ Locke, *Essay*, IV.21.3.

²⁹ Locke, *Essay*, II.22.9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, III.11.17.

³¹ Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding*, 161.

right", (3) Thus, the proposition is certain, that "where there is no property there is no justice."³² Essentially, Locke's goal was to provide a reasonable and real morality that examined the divine laws evidenced in nature as gained through sense experience and rational reflection.

PART II: LOCKEAN HAMARTIOLOGY

Having briefly surveyed Locke's views on epistemology, theology, anthropology, and morality, several points are worth noting prior to a systematic division of his hamartiological views. It has been noted that his tabula rasa epistemology sets up a diminished role of a Calvinistic 'total depravity', as well as a rejection of the imputation of sin. It has also been noted that his theological emphasis of Creator/Creature accentuated God's sovereignty in establishing Divine laws of behavior, as well as their associated punishments and rewards. Finally, his anthropology emphasized a replacement of classical 'total depravity'. Instead, Locke argued that desire was itself a good thing when properly applied, however humans misapply this desire in favor of actions against reason and revelation. With his great focus on developing a view of morality that fulfills the condition of prescriptivity, Locke then ventures to formulate some form of moral calculus in which to guide individuals against sin.

On the Origin of Sin

Having supplied Locke's general worldview with an emphasis on how it influenced his understanding of sin, we may now turn to addressing a more systematic treatment of his hamartiology. In addressing Locke's position on sin, it is useful to analyze and quote his various paraphrases of Scripture. One in particular that proves beneficial in analyzing Locke's position on sin's origin is his paraphrase of Romans 5:12:

³² Locke, *Essay*, IV.3.18.

You must know, that as by the act of one man Adam the father of us all, sin entered into the world, and death, which was the punishment annexed to the offence of eating the forbidden fruit entered by that sin for that Adams posterity thereby became mortal (Rm 5:12).³³

Locke is not saying that sin is present within a federal headship in Adam, but rather that through Adam's disobedience came the actual performance of sin, as well as the introduction of death.

As Sell summarizes Locke's position, "what Adam lost was immortality and the happiness of unsullied Eden."³⁴

On the Nature of Sin

Death then found its origin with the Fall of Adam, which led both to Adam's loss of immortality and his further descent into sin. As will be discussed later, sin originates individually within every person's willful decision to reject God's law, and the origin of our earthly death is located within Adam's rebellion. The second question then to be asked is what did Locke believe about the nature of sin? As Sell summarizes, for Locke sin was "that which deflects human beings from their proper course."³⁵ The 'proper course' is that set by the divine laws of God, as revealed in Scripture. This is evidenced in another one of Locke's paraphrases of Paul on 'the flesh':

For the inclinations and desires of the flesh are contrary to those of the spirit: And the dictates and inclinations of the flesh are contrary to those of the flesh; so that under these contrary impulses you do not do the things that you propose to yourself.³⁶

Locke explains what was meant by 'flesh' further, commenting that "By flesh is meant all those vitious, and irregular appetites, inclinations, and habitudes whereby a man is turned from his

³³ Locke, *A Paraphrase*, in *Works*, II 523.

³⁴ Alan Sell, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 231.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 230.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 230.

obedience to that eternal law of right, the observance whereof god always requires and is pleased with."³⁷ Locke's understanding of the nature of sin is thus akin to acting against a law opposite of God's will, and he understands Paul's references to the flesh to be the appetites that incline us to disobey these laws. Although Locke would not embrace a Calvinistic understanding of depravity, given his earlier explicated position of 'tabula rasa' epistemology, he didn't share the anthropological optimism of contemporary rationalists. Sell summarizes Locke's position as follows:

Indeed, there is a strong hint in Locke's epistemology and ethics as propounded in the Essay that left to their own devices human beings are in an important sense impotent. He there concedes that although human beings have "Light enough to lead them to the Knowledge of their Maker, and the sight of their own duties . . . I am forced to conclude, that good, the greater good, though apprehended and acknowledged to be so, does not determine the will, until our desire, raised proportionally to it, makes us uneasy in the want of it."³⁸

On the Imputation of Sin

It has been seen that Locke believes physical death had its origin in Adam's sin, and also that man does not inherit punishable guilt from Adam. However, Locke still confesses that somehow man is 'uneasy' towards following the precepts of the law, and still in need of redemption. The next question to be asked in light of his understanding of origin and nature is his position on the imputation of sin. As hinted earlier, Locke rejected both a federal headship view, and a view that Adam's guilt is imputed upon us. Although "[We] all die in Adam . . . none are truly punished, but for their own deeds."³⁹ Locke supports this understanding by supplying

³⁷ Locke, *A Paraphrase*, in *Works*, I 153.

³⁸ Alan Sell, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 232.

³⁹ Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*, in *Works*, VII, 8.

Romans 2:6, where he quotes it as saying “God will render to every one . . . According to his deeds,” (Rm 2:6).⁴⁰ In opposition to an imputation view, Locke is then objecting to the understanding that “all Adam's posterity [is] doomed to eternal, infinite punishment, for the transgression of Adam, whom millions had never heard of, and no one had authorised to transact for him, or be his representative.”⁴¹ Although in this understanding, Locke does not deny that in some way we have been incapacitated by the fall, and thus in necessary need of Christ for salvation. Although Locke insisted on the role of human rationality in preventing sin and propagating righteous moral behavior, Locke never lost sight of the reality of man’s moral weakness. As Sell then summarizes, “Locke concludes that sin is universal in that every person actually sins, and that each person's guilt is the consequence of freely willed sinful behavior, and not the result of the imputation of Adam's guilt.”⁴²

On the Consequence of Sin

Finally, the last concern to be addressed from the Lockean perspective is the consequence of these sins. Individuals are responsible for their sinful acts, and in their state of ‘uneasiness’ and ‘moral weakness’, are in need of the Messiah who brings about the kingdom. What is then the result of being counted among Christ’s righteous, or among those law-breaking rebels? Given God is the sovereign ruler of the universe, and has established divine laws, it is to be expected that there exists some form of divine punishment upon the breakage of such laws. Locke notes that God does not directly punish every breakage of his Divine law, and in addition with the revelation of Scripture, argues that it is reasonable to assume some punishment in

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* VII, 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* VII, 4.

⁴² Alan Sell, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 230.

eternity. As he states regarding this post mortem condition,

It seems the unalterable purpose of the divine justice, that no unrighteous person . . . should be in paradise: but that the wages of sin should be to every man, as it was to Adam, an exclusion of him out of that happy state of immortality, and bring death upon him . . . Immortality and bliss, belong to the righteous . . . but an exclusion from paradise and loss of immortality is the portion of sinners.⁴³

Although Locke does mention the transgression of the law includes some punishment “upon pain of hellfire,” what is lacking in this quote is notable: the eternality of punishment.⁴⁴ Here we discover that, although Locke affirms the eternal bliss of the righteous, he holds to an annihilationist view of the soul. Sin is then punished after death to a degree that reflects the celestial crimes committed. Sell summarizes Locke’s conclusion on the eternal consequence of sin, stating,

The question which presses . . . is, does Locke think that 'punishment in eternity' is synonymous with 'never-ending eternal punishment'? It would seem that he does not, and that after a measure of post mortem punishment the wicked will simply die, or be annihilated. This is the conclusion of his paper, '*Resurrectio et quae sequuntur*' of c. 1699.⁴⁵

PART III. CONCLUSION

Having surveyed Locke’s general worldview, as well as a condensed systematic treatment on his doctrine of sin, the following can be concluded: (1) Locke rejected the imputation of Adam’s guilt, (2) Locke believed that Adam’s fall in some manner incapacitated and morally weakened individuals, (3) Locke believed individuals were responsible for their sin and that guilt originated upon the first transgression of God’s divine law, and (4) Locke held to a post-mortem annihilationism, believing that individuals were rewarded with eternal life in Christ,

⁴³ Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*, in *Works*, VII, 10. Note what is not mentioned here: The possibility of eternal punishment for the wicked.

⁴⁴ Locke, *The Reasonableness of the Christian Religion*, in *Works*, 115.

⁴⁵ Alan Sell, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 264.

or punished post mortem until their crimes paid for where they were then annihilated. Although not quite the socinianism J. Edwards accused him of, given the lack of anthropological optimism normally seen among the ‘racovians’, Edwards does seem justified in some critiques and reservations. With that said, Locke cannot be separated from his political underpinning. Chief among these were his fore-mentioned goal of a single ‘minimum of belief’ article, as well as his motives of writing against Filmer’s monarchial governmental philosophy, which all sought to propagate a ‘toleration’ among Christians. Even then, Locke’s hamartiology leaves much for evangelicals to desire. Specifically troubling is his post-mortem annihilationism, as well as the ambiguity of his understanding of man’s moral weakness. Perhaps a fairer critique of Locke is found in his contemporary Richard West, who wrote a fitting evangelical critique on Locke’s doctrine of sin, stating,

But as he makes Adam's Punishment to consist only in a Temporal Death, or a total ceasing to be; so does he confine the End and Design of our Saviour's coming into the World, to the freeing us from such a Death only, and restoring to us that Immortality, which our First Parents lost. Which overthrows the Notion of our Saviour's redeeming us from an Eternity of Torments, and makes the effect of Original Guilt no more than becoming subject to Death; and so destroys in a great measure the Doctrine of Christ's Satisfaction.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ West, Richard. *Animadversions On a late Book entituled the Reasonableness of Christianity As delivered in the Scriptures* (Oxford: L. Lichfield for G. West and A. Piesley, 1697): 2-3.

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