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 Nicholas Wolterstorff
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CHAPTER I

Rationality in everyday life

“We should not judge of things by men’s opinions, but of opinions by things.”

(*Conduct of the Understanding*, §24; *Works* II, 363).

“God has made the intellectual world harmonious and beautiful without us; but it will never come into our heads all at once; we must bring it home piece-meal, and there set it up by our own industry, or else we shall have nothing but darkness and a chaos within, whatever order and light there be in things without us.”

(*Conduct of the Understanding*, §38; *Works* II, 385)

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(a) Introduction

Early in 1671, John Locke had a discussion with some five or six friends in his apartment at Exeter House in London on matters of morality and revealed religion.¹ The discussants, says Locke, “found themselves quickly at a stand by the difficulties that arose on every side. After we had awhile puzzled ourselves, without coming any nearer a resolution of those doubts which perplexed us, it came into my thoughts that we took a wrong course, and that before we set ourselves upon enquiries of that nature it was necessary to examine our own abilities, and see what objects our understandings were or were not fitted to deal with” (*Essay*, Epistle to the Reader). This thought, says Locke, “was that which gave the first rise to this *Essay* concerning the *Understanding*” (1,1,7).

¹ See Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (London, Longman, 1957), pp. 140–1.

Locke's resolution was also a rejection. He did not propose consulting the textual tradition so as to be nourished on its wisdom. Neither did he propose reading Sacred Scripture. For about a thousand years Western intellectuals had been schooled to consult the texts bequeathed them, when they found themselves in quandaries as to what to believe on matters of morality and religion, and more besides, so as to extract from those texts answers to their quandaries. Ever since Abelard's *Sic et Non* (*Yes and No*), every European intellectual had been vividly aware of the appearance of significant contradictions in the textual tradition. Almost all remained convinced, however, that on a wide range of issues, this was only appearance. Of course, it was recognized that there were heresies, errors, and disputed questions; some, such as the followers of the *Via Moderna*, were more inclined than were the Thomists and Scotists to identify errors in the tradition. Nonetheless, the conviction remained that if one assigned the proper priorities among the texts (with the Bible being preeminent), selected the right senses, used the appropriate strategies of interpretation, and made the right distinctions, a richly articulated body of truth would come to light. St. Paul and Virgil, Aristotle and Augustine, would all be seen to fit together. Where once the texts had appeared contradictory, now they would be seen as getting at different facets of the complex truth. Many medievals also held that a dialectical appropriation of this tradition was the best preparation for engaging in that highest of intellectual activities, the practice of *scientia*.

In the sixteenth century, this view of the textual tradition was battered from all sides; as a consequence, by Locke's time and in Locke's situation, the latter half of the seventeenth century in England and the Netherlands, no one was any longer espousing it. Nobody supposed that Protestants in their various sects were all getting at different aspects of one complex truth, let alone that Protestants and Catholics together were doing so. And even the view that the *pre-Reformation Christian tradition* presented a unified body of truth had fewer and fewer defenders. What was handed down was fractured and seen as such. Here is Locke:

since traditions vary so much the world over and men's opinions are so obviously opposed to one another and mutually destructive, and that not only among different nations but in one and the same state – for each single opinion we learn from others becomes a tradition – and finally since everybody contends so fiercely for his own opinion and demands that he be

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believed, it would plainly be impossible – supposing tradition alone lays down the ground of our duty – to find out what that tradition is, or to pick out truth from among such a variety, because no ground can be assigned why one man of the old generation, rather than another maintaining quite the opposite, should be credited with the authority of tradition or be more worthy of trust; except it be that reason discovers a difference in the things themselves that are transmitted, and embraces one opinion while rejecting another, just because it detects more evidence recognizable by the light of nature for the one than for the other. Such a procedure, surely, is not the same as to believe in tradition, but is an attempt to form a considered opinion about things themselves; and this brings all the authority of tradition to naught.²

Thus a chasm, wrought by the revolutionary developments of the sixteenth century, yawns between Locke and the medievals in their attitude toward the textual tradition. Locke was modern, alienated from that tradition. He did his philosophizing, and perceived himself as doing his philosophizing, in a situation of cultural crisis, a crisis induced by the widespread consensus that the European moral and religious tradition was fractured and that new “foundations” for knowledge and belief had to be discovered. The wisdom of a (supposedly) unified tradition could no longer be consulted to resolve one’s quandaries. Inescapably there was on the cultural agenda the question, “How do we go about deciding what to believe?” “How do we conduct our understandings?” That is one of the fundamental questions to which Locke addressed himself in his epistemology. Locke was not an academic addressing academics on purely academic topics but an intellectual addressing intellectuals in a situation where they could no longer say: Let the wisdom of the unified tradition be your guide.³ Let Reason be your guide, said Locke; in everything, be guided by Reason.

It must be added that in the *Essay* Locke repeatedly expresses the conviction that all traditions up to his time, *unified or not*, are infected with a disease which makes them incapable of serving as satisfactory guides. Selecting *some particular tradition* is not the solution to the crisis

² *Essays on the Law of Nature*, ed. W. von Leyden (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 129–31.

³ The writer who has most clearly seen the social and political intentions of Locke in his *Essay* is Neal Wood in *The Politics of Locke’s Philosophy* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983). Wood remarks that “Far from being an arcane manual for a restricted audience of academicians and experts, the *Essay* was intended for ordinary educated readers of common sense: peers, landed gentry, merchants, manufacturers, administrators, physicians, lawyers, clerics, men of letters. The *Essay* was conceived primarily to aid them in their everyday lives, to guide them in the great practical concerns of religion, morality, politics, and law, and in normal intercourse” (p. 2). That is exactly correct!

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caused by the fracturing of the tradition. That fracturing is not itself the disease, but a symptom. The disease is that people have not conducted their understandings properly; as a consequence, all traditions are repositories more of error than of wisdom. That “by which men most commonly regulate their assent, and upon which they pin their faith more than anything else . . . is, *the opinion of others*; though there cannot be a more dangerous thing to rely on, nor more likely to mislead one; since there is much more falsehood and error amongst men, than truth and knowledge. And if the opinions and persuasions of others, whom we know and think well of, be a ground of assent, men have reason to be heathens in Japan, Mahumetans in Turkey, Papists in Spain, Protestants in England, and Lutherans in Sweden” (iv,xv,6).

We can specify more precisely the crisis which Locke addressed.⁴ It was not merely that the grand textual tradition was no longer perceived as presenting a unified body of wisdom on moral and religious matters. In their situation of fractured tradition, people were being schooled into becoming unreflective partisans of *their own party and of its particular tradition*. They were being schooled into uncritical acceptance on sayso of the deliverances of the leaders of their own faction. Traditions had replaced tradition; the religious wars were a consequence: “if anyone should a little catechize the greatest part of the partisans of most of the sects in the world, he would not find, concerning those matters they are so zealous for, that they have any opinions of their own: much less would he have reason to think, that they took them upon the examination of arguments, and appearance of probability. They are resolved to stick to a party, that education or interest has engaged them in; and there, like the common soldiers of an army, show their courage and warmth, as their leaders direct, without ever examining, or so much as knowing the cause they contend for” (iv,xx,18).

Locke did not view the existence of these schooled practices as inadvertent. If we dig beneath the practices so as to uncover the

⁴ In thus interpreting Locke as responding to a crisis, I agree with James Tully, “Governing Conduct,” in Edmund Leites (ed.), *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988). The crisis to which Leites points was social as well as cultural; he calls the whole a “legitimation crisis.” I entirely agree that in the totality of his work Locke was responding to a social, as well as to a cultural, crisis. I furthermore agree that the cultural crisis to which he was responding contributed to the social crisis; there was indeed a “legitimation crisis.” But in my discussion I shall be focusing my attention almost entirely on Locke’s response to the great cultural crisis threatening his society, that of intense partisanship in a situation of fractured tradition.

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motives of those who urge and inculcate them, we regularly discover that the practices are instruments of power:

it was of no small advantage to those who affected to be masters and teachers, to make this the principle of principles, that principles must not be questioned: For having once established this tenet, that there are innate principles, it put their followers upon a necessity of receiving some doctrines as such; which was to take them off from the use of their own reason and judgment, and put them upon believing and taking them upon trust, without farther examination: In which posture of blind credulity, they might be more easily governed by, and made useful to some sort of men, who had the skill and office to principle and guide them. Nor is it a small power it gives one man over another, to have the authority to be the dictator of principles, and teacher of unquestionable truths; and to make a man swallow that for an innate principle, which may serve to his purpose, who teacheth them. (I,iv,24; cf. I,iii,22–7; and *Conduct*, §41; *Works* II,389)

We must look to historians for a detailed account of why European humanity in the sixteenth century came to see its textual tradition as always having been fractured and why the fracturing became rampant. But a few brief observations may be in order. The increasing contact of Europeans with non-Europeans certainly played a role in loosening the grip of their own tradition on Europeans and in suggesting alternative ways of thinking, as one can see from the writings of Montaigne. But it didn't, as such, lead Europeans to see their own tradition as always having been riddled with inconsistencies. And for those contacts to play even the role that they played in Montaigne, a fundamental change of attitude toward The Other was required. There had always been contacts with other peoples, though few, indeed, compared with the number now occurring; but seldom were these contacts experienced as unsettling. The "others" whom the Europeans met were regarded as pagans or infidels and their traditions accordingly rejected as inferior – compatible at certain points with the European tradition, but otherwise, misguided. Seldom did travelers return home loosened from their own religious and moral convictions.

It was principally internal factors which caused the perception of disunity; likewise, it was principally internal factors which caused the increasing fragmentation. At the very heart of medieval European intellectual life were the Christian Scriptures, along with the tradition of councils, popes, and church Fathers. It was the perception of *that core of the tradition* as contradictory that was principally responsible for

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the crisis in the minds and hearts of Europeans, this perception itself leading to further and obvious fracturing. In turn, it was especially Luther's rebellion against the magisterium that caused this new perception and fracturing. Luther succeeded in persuading a great many Europeans that the tradition of the councils, popes, and Fathers was filled with fault lines.

Initially Luther defended his theological convictions from within the tradition by offering a new interpretation of Scripture and tradition. Those who first answered him also did so in the traditional way; they contested his interpretation by citing other Fathers and other passages from Scripture and dialectically weaving a different interpretation. Though Luther's attack on the standard interpretation of Scripture and tradition was aimed at a very deep point, he might nonetheless eventually have won this exegetical debate, at least if the debate had been purely intellectual. Of course it was not; Luther was attacking the powers. But in any case, rather than continuing the debate in the traditional fashion, Luther broke things wide open in his rejoinder: He asserted that the magisterial tradition was in *fact contradictory*, not just apparently so; and that many of its real contradictions were not trivial but fundamental. The tradition was filled with fundamental falsehood. It was, accordingly, merely human; we ought to renounce our dependence on it and return to *God's book* – the Bible.⁵ Probably the new reading habits cultivated by the humanists, habits and attitudes which broke with the practices of exegesis, distinction, interpretation, and so on which had been developed by the medievals for extracting unified truth from disparate texts, helped to make Luther's claim persuasive.

We must recall that the traditional understanding of the textual tradition itself invited Luther's call to return to the Bible; for the tradition of councils, popes, and Fathers was officially a hermeneutic of the Bible. Thus the Catholic response to Luther's move was not that it was wrong to go back to the Bible, but that it was useless to do so unless one also had available an authoritative interpretation of the Bible. And so it was that there arose the bitter debate between Catholics and Protestants over the so-called "rule of faith": Is the Bible alone to be our authority, or is the Bible as authoritatively interpreted by the church to be that?

Luther was branded a heretic. Many people before him had been

⁵ See Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979), chap. 1.

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branded heretics. What made Luther's heresy different was that he had powerful political support at the right times, and that the defenders of the tradition were widely perceived as corrupt.

But though it was the emergence of Protestantism, incited by Luther's rebellion, that was mainly responsible for leading Europeans to conclude that their textual tradition had never contained a unified body of moral and religious thought, there were other movements as well which contributed significantly to the increasing fragmentation – in addition, that is, to the tendency, already noted, to see more worth in the thought and practices of other peoples than had been typical of the Europeans. There was, for one thing, the increasing dissatisfaction with Aristotelian natural philosophy and science, and the emergence of new methods and new science in the hands of – to mention only a few major figures – Galileo, Bacon, and Descartes. And there was the recovery and publication, at the hands of the humanists, of many lost and forgotten texts from antiquity, with the consequence that Platonism, Epicureanism, skepticism, and Stoicism all began to make their presence felt on the intellectual scene.

The consequence of all these developments together was that by the middle of the seventeenth century there was available to the European intellectual a wide variety of more or less internally coherent, but mutually incompatible, modes of thought. Some, such as the new mechanistic and mathematical sciences, were in ascendancy, others were in decline; and flashpoints of tension leaped about from place to place.

The England of Locke's day was a special case. In some parts of Europe, the Netherlands in particular, a social *modus vivendi* had emerged by the early part of the seventeenth century among parties adhering to different frameworks of conviction. Not so in England. Here the religious antagonisms erupted into civil war. After a period of intense hostility between Protestants and Catholics, a variety of Protestant sects began to do battle not only with the established Church of England but with each other – some, though not all, of these sects exemplifying the “enthusiasm” which Locke and his Latitudinarian friends found so alarming. In the background of Locke's epistemology was the general European crisis to which I have pointed; in the foreground was the specific, intensely antagonistic, form which that crisis was taking in English culture and society in Locke's day.

To this fragmentation Locke's attitude was, in one way, eminently

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“Protestant”: We must not follow the Catholic strategy of trying to recover the authoritative position of one tradition and of one interpretation of that tradition, but must appeal to something outside all tradition. For Locke, however, that “something” was not the Word of God, but Reason, coupled with insight in general – and the Bible when, but only when, Reason supports it; for Reason and insight take us to the things themselves. Locke regarded the new natural philosophy coming to birth in his day as a concrete paradigm of how we should conduct our understandings; there one saw, already in place, the practice which bore the promise of resolving our anxiety.

But before we construct, we must engage in critique, so as to discover how much of a “fit” there is between our abilities and the things themselves. Otherwise human beings, “extending their enquiries beyond their capacities, and letting their thoughts wander into those depths, where they can find no sure footing; ’tis no wonder, that they raise questions, and multiply disputes, which never coming to any clear resolution, are proper only to continue and increase their doubts, and to confirm them in absolute scepticism” (I,i,7).

Skepticism as to the possibility of getting to the things themselves seems not to have caused Locke any personal anxiety. Nonetheless, the existence of skepticism as a cultural movement played an important role in the shaping of his strategy: No longer can we simply assume a nice fit between reality and our capacities for discovering reality. We must stand back and *ask whether there is* such a fit. Skepticism encouraged Locke to place *the self* on center stage; that is the significance of the resolution he took when the discussion with his friends came to a standstill. Though he urged that we conduct our understandings so as to get to the things themselves, his own talk was more of us than of the things.⁶

Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was, for one thing, an enquiry into human knowledge – into its certainty, grounds, and extent, and into the origin of the ideas which (on Locke’s view) make up our knowledge. As to the scope of our knowledge, Locke’s conclusion was that, compared to “the vast extent of things” (I,i,5), our knowledge is, and must forever remain, “very short and scanty” (IV,xiv,1).

⁶ As already mentioned, skepticism also played a role in bringing about that cultural anxiety which Locke addressed. A full account of the contribution of the resurgence of skepticism to that anxiety, under the stimulus of the recovery of the ancient skeptical writings, would trace the interaction between “the problem of the criterion” posed by the skeptics, and the disputes by religious parties over “the rule of faith.” (See Popkin, *ibid.*)

Locke realized that complaint and lament over the absurdity of our fate would be seen by many as the appropriate response to this measured skepticism concerning the scope of knowledge. His own reaction was different. *Contentment* is the appropriate response: “to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things, which, upon examination, are found to be beyond reach of our capacities,” to “learn to content ourselves with what is attainable by us in this state” (1,i,4). Part of the rationale for such contentment is that discontent with not doing what one knows one cannot do makes no sense. Close scrutiny of the contours of our knowledge uncovers, however, a more specific rationale for contentment: Our knowledge is adequate for our fundamental moral and religious concerns. God our Maker has placed within the scope of the knowledge of human beings “the knowledge of their Maker, and the sight of their own duties” (1,i,5). Contentment with the adequacy of our knowledge is thus appropriately accompanied by gratitude to our Maker: we “have cause enough to magnify the bountiful author of our being, for that portion and degree of knowledge he has bestowed on us . . .” (1,i,5). In short,

We shall not have much reason to complain of the narrowness of our minds, if we will but employ them about what may be of use to us; for of that they are very capable: And it will be unpardonable, as well as childish peevishness, if we undervalue the advantages of our knowledge, and neglect to improve it to the ends for which it was given us, because there are some things that are set out of the reach of it . . . If we will disbelieve everything, because we cannot certainly know all things; we shall do much-wisely as he, who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly . . . 'Tis of great use to the sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean. 'Tis well he knows, that it is long enough to reach the bottom, at such places, as are necessary to direct his voyage, and caution him against running upon shoals, that may ruin him. Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct. (1,i,5-6)

Recommending grateful contentment with our limits, on the ground that our knowledge is sufficient for our needs, was not, however, Locke's only response to what he saw as the limited scope of human knowledge. He recommended contentment as well because, where knowledge is absent, God has graciously made opinion (belief, assent, judgment) available.

Opinion is riddled with error, however. So when it comes to opinion, what is of prime importance is that we learn to conduct our understanding *rightly*. Accordingly, Locke says that after discussing

the origin of ideas, the nature of knowledge, and “the bounds between opinion and knowledge,” he will “examine by what measures, in things whereof we have no certain knowledge, we ought to regulate our assent, and moderate our persuasions” (1,i,3). “If we can find out those measures, whereby a rational creature put in that state, which man is in, in this world, may, and ought to govern his opinions, and actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled, that some other things escape our knowledge” (1,i,6).

The focus of our attention in what follows will be on Locke’s discussion concerning the governance of opinion in Book iv of the *Essay*, and in his *Conduct of the Understanding*, originally intended as part of the *Essay*; it is in these that Locke more fully articulates and defends the thesis that we must take Reason as our guide. Moreover, as should be clear from the foregoing, we are following Locke’s own estimate of importance in emphasizing this part of the *Essay*. Locke was motivated to write the *Essay* for the sake of his discussion in Book iv of the nature and scope of knowledge and the governance of opinion. And given his firm conviction that in most affairs of life we must be content with opinion, knowledge being beyond us, his own view was clearly that, within Book iv, it is the second part (from chapter xvi onwards) that is of greatest importance. As we shall see, emphasizing Book iv of the *Essay* (along with its companion *Conduct of the Understanding*) yields a rather different picture of Locke’s thought from that yielded by the traditional school-book practice of emphasizing Book ii of the *Essay*. The undeniable empiricist strands in his thought will be seen to be balanced, if not outweighed, by the rationalist strands.

Incidental comments along the way in the *Essay*, plus the fact that in the *Essay* the only sustained application Locke made of his general proposal for the governance of belief was to matters of revealed religion, make clear that the originating impulse of the *Essay* in a stalemated discussion on matters of morality and revealed religion continued to sustain and direct Locke’s reflections.⁷ It is not accidental, then, that Locke’s best brief account of his conviction that we must take Reason as our guide in the governance of our belief-forming faculties should occur in the context of his discussion of faith and Reason. Locke observes that, in ordinary parlance, faith and Reason are treated as “opposed.” In reality they are not opposed. For

⁷ See Richard Ashcraft, “Faith and Knowledge in Locke’s Philosophy,” in John W. Yolton (ed.), *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969).