

## Hedonism and Natural Law in Locke's Moral Philosophy

Foreword:

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Abstract:

I argue that God's providential arrangement of pleasure and pain, according to Locke, gives us insight into the ends that God has set for us. And insight into these ends ultimately gives us insight into the content of the natural law. Others have convincingly argued that the moral theory of Locke the hedonist and Locke the natural lawyer represent a coherent whole. The distinctive contribution that I make in this paper is to describe the indicative role that pleasure and pain play in the promulgation of the duties of the natural law.

Keywords:

John Locke; Ethics; Hedonism; Natural Law; Demonstration; God

Main Text:

## Introduction

According to some interpreters of John Locke's moral philosophy, there is an inconsistency between Locke's adoption of hedonism and his commitment to a natural law view of ethics. Indeed, Locke is not fully explicit about the relationship between pleasure and pain and the natural law in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. But the thesis I defend in this paper is that the idea of *convenientia*, according to which God harmonizes the natural law with human nature, can be used to understand how Locke synthesizes the hedonism he adopts in the 1670s, and ultimately expresses in Book II, chapter 20 of the *Essay*, with the natural law doctrine he maintains over the course of his lifetime. As I argue, God's providential arrangement of pleasure and pain, according to Locke, gives us insight into the ends that God has set for us. And insight into these ends ultimately gives us insight into the content of the natural law. Others have convincingly argued that the moral theory of Locke the hedonist and Locke the natural lawyer represent a coherent whole.<sup>1</sup> The distinctive contribution that I make to this discussion is to describe the indicative role that pleasure and pain play in the promulgation of the duties of the natural law. By examining these features of Locke's moral epistemology, I add support to the claim that there is no inconsistency between his hedonistic description of human psychology and his account of moral obligation in terms of the natural law. While Locke never felt satisfied with his treatment of a demonstrative science of morality, I conclude the paper by offering a new insight into how the arrangement of pleasures and pains

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<sup>1</sup> See John Colman, *John Locke's Moral Philosophy*, 235-237 and Alex Tuckness, "The Coherence of a Mind", 86-88.

and the idea of bottoming principles – which Locke advances in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* – might allow us to have moral knowledge in the way that he envisions in the *Essay*.

### 1: Locke's Idea of *Convenientia*

[The law of nature] is a fixed and permanent rule of morals, which reason itself pronounces, and which persists, being a fact so firmly rooted in the soil of human nature. Hence human nature must needs be changed before this law can be either altered or annulled. *There is, in fact, a harmony between these two*, and what is proper now for the rational nature, in so far as it is rational, must needs be proper for ever, and the same reason will pronounce everywhere the same moral rules.<sup>2</sup>

Locke says that there is a harmony – or *convenientia* – between human nature and the natural moral law given by God. And there is a necessity involved in this harmony, for presuming that human nature remains the same, the natural law is immutable. Furthermore, not only is the law immutable, it is also necessary in the sense that it could not have been otherwise (upon the supposition that God creates human nature the way that God has in fact created it). Indeed, as the law depends upon the “eternal order of things” and not on “an unstable and changeable will”, Locke says that the principles of the natural law (i.e. our duties) are necessary and cannot be other than they are.<sup>3</sup> Locke does admit that God could have fashioned human nature differently; but given how God has made human beings, the natural law necessarily follows from our constitution (*Essays on the Law of Nature*, Essay VII, 199). Locke is clear that God could alter the natural law by altering human nature, but that is something that God would not wish to do (*Essays on the Law of Nature*, VII, 201).

There is a question here, though, about in what sense the natural law is necessary. John Colman describes the necessity pertaining to the natural law, in

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<sup>2</sup> Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, Essay VII, 199. “[Lex naturae est] fixa et aeterna morum regula, quam praesenti commodo datum, quam dictat ipsa ratio, adeoque humanae naturae principiis infixum haeret; et mutetur prius oportet humana natura quam lex haec aut mutari possit abrogari; *convenientia enim est inter utramque*, quodque jam convenit naturae rationali, quatenus rationalis est, in aeternum conveniat est necesse, eademque ratio easdem dictabit ubique morum regulas.” *Essays on the Law of Nature*, VII, 198.

<sup>3</sup> *Essays on the Law of Nature*, VII, 199. “Non enim ex fluxa et mutabili voluntate pendet haec lex, sed ex aeterno rerum ordine; mihi enim videntur quidam immutabiles esse rerum status et quaedam officia ex necessitate orta, quae aliter esse non possunt...”, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, VII, 198. This text, taken on its own, might seem to support an intellectualist understanding of the natural law insofar as the law depends on the “eternal order of things” and not on an “unstable and changeable will”. But we can read the phrase “unstable and changeable will” (*ex fluxa et mutabili voluntate*) in one of two ways: first, Locke could be saying that the law is independent of the divine will; or second, he could be saying that the law does not depend on a will that is unstable and changeable, though it may depend on a will that is stable and immutable. Once we see what Locke has to say about the effective and terminative aspects of the natural law, the latter interpretation will emerge as more plausible.

the *Essays on the Law of Nature*, as hypothetical and not absolute, given that the content of the law depends upon the supposition that human beings are created in a certain way.<sup>4</sup> Colman does not really discuss the idea of hypothetical necessity in any detail, but an example will help to illustrate the difference between absolute and hypothetical necessity. Supposing that God freely makes a promise to do a certain action that would otherwise be contingent and that God is a perfect promise-keeper, we can describe God's performance of that action as hypothetically necessary. God is not under an absolute necessity to perform that action, for it is possible that God may not have made a promise concerning it. Likewise, God freely fashions human nature in a certain way and then necessarily commands a natural law commensurate to that nature, for to do otherwise would represent an imperfect form of providence.<sup>5</sup>

Locke recognizes the divine will as the source of our obligation to obey the natural law. As a result of this view, Locke could not subscribe to Hugo Grotius' impious hypothesis – according to which the natural law would still obtain even if God did not exist<sup>6</sup> – since there would be no natural moral law without God's command. Indeed, Locke thinks that, prior to the decree of the divine will, everything is morally indifferent: he argues in the *Second Tract on Government* – written in 1662, two years prior to the *Essays* – that all things are indifferent prior to an act of legislation (63). Furthermore, it is law that determines moral goodness and badness (*Second Tract*, 62). Morality, then, represents something imposed onto nature. And prior to the legislative decree of a superior, we are under no obligations. Concerning the binding force of the natural law, Locke makes an important distinction between effective and terminative obligation (*Essays on the Law of Nature*, VI, 185). Effective obligation refers to the source of an obligation, while terminative obligation refers to the content of an obligation. An intellectualistic or naturalistic view of the natural law would hold that both the effective and the terminative obligation consist in reason.<sup>7</sup> But Locke is clear that the effective obligation of the natural law consists in God's sovereign will (*Essays*

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<sup>4</sup> Colman, *John Locke's Moral Philosophy*, 43. G.A.J. Rogers makes a similar point in his "Locke, Law, and the Laws of Nature", 157.

<sup>5</sup> Tuckness makes a related point in his discussion of Locke's view of the natural law and how certain principles could be ruled out from forming part of the content of the natural law:

Someone claims that a principle P is an enforceable natural law. If it is the case that if all persons attempt to follow P as a law of nature the result is hindering the goal that P was intended to promote, one must infer a lack of wisdom or foresight on the part of the legislator who enacted P. But God, by definition, does not lack wisdom or foresight so the previous reasoning must be false. P cannot, therefore, be a law of nature.

*Locke and the Legislative Point of View*, 41

Tuckness's point here is that, for Locke, the law has a teleological aspect. It realizes the end it is set up to promote in the best possible way as God is a perfect legislator. Thus, for instance, if we consider P to be the principle 'commit acts of theft', we can rule this out from the natural law since it does not realize the end of sociability given to us.

<sup>6</sup> *On the Rights of War and Peace*, Prologomena, sec. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II question 90, article 1, "Whether law is something pertaining to reason?".

on the *Law of Nature*, VI, 185).<sup>8</sup> The upshot of all of this is that knowing the obligations of the natural law involves being aware of some determinate content (i.e. the actions we should perform and avoid) and also recognizing that the basis of this content is God's legislative decree. Locke says that these are the two things we need to determine in order to have knowledge of the natural law:

First, in order that anyone may understand that he is bound by a law, he must know beforehand that there is a law-maker, i.e. some superior power to which he is rightly subject. Secondly, it is also necessary to know that there is some will on the part of that superior power with respect to the things to be done by us, that is to say, that the law-maker, whoever he may prove to be, wishes that we do this but leave off that, and demands of us that the conduct of our life should be in accordance with his will.<sup>9</sup>

Locke is clear that knowledge of these things come from reason and sense-experience, and not from innate ideas or tradition. Indeed, the *Essays* can plausibly be seen as a draft of much of what Locke says in Book I of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Concerning the first aspect of the natural law, Locke provides a proof that uses a combination of teleological and cosmological arguments to show that God both exists and has a right to command us.<sup>10</sup> Locke's use of the teleological argument is important, for it relates to how we can have insight into the second aspect of the natural law – namely, the specific duties assigned to us. In designing and creating the world, God sets ends for creatures, including human beings. The question, though, is how we recognize what ends God has set for us. Locke thinks that there are two ways we can go about this. First, God creates the world for God's own glory: this suggests that we have a duty to promote God's glory. While Locke is not explicit about this, it seems that the content derived from this consideration would be broadly synonymous with the first table of the Decalogue (i.e. that which involves commands directly pertaining to our relationship with God, such as worshiping only God and refraining from idolatry).<sup>11</sup> Second, we can also infer some of the content of the natural law from a consideration of our nature:

Partly also we can infer the principle and a definite rule of our duty from man's own constitution and the faculties with which he is

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<sup>8</sup> Colman argues that this distinction rebuts an intellectualistic interpretation of the natural law in the *Essays*, for an act of will on God's part is necessary to have a complete obligation (*John Locke's Moral Philosophy*, 42).

<sup>9</sup> *Essays on the Law of Nature*, IV, 151. 'Primo igitur, ut se lege teneri quisquam cognoscat, scire prius oportet esse legislatorem, superiorem scilicet aliquam potestatem cui jure subjicitur. Secundo scire etiam oportet esse aliquam superioris illius potestatis voluntatem circa res a nobis agendas, hoc est legislatorem illum, quicumque is demum fuerit, velle nos hoc agere illud omittere, et exigere a nobis ut vitae nostrae mores suae voluntati sint conformes.' *Essays on the Law of Nature*, IV, 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Essays on the Law of Nature*, IV, 151-157 *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> It is quite common in the natural law tradition to identify the moral duties of the Decalogue with those of the natural law. While they share similar normative content, the difference between the two is the mode in which they are promulgated: the Decalogue is known through revelation while the natural law is known through reason.

equipped. For since man is neither made without design nor endowed to no purpose with these faculties which both can and must be employed, his function appears to be that which nature has prepared him to perform.<sup>12</sup>

In the same section, Locke also expresses the idea that our constitution shows us that we are sociable beings, for whom society is necessary in order to preserve ourselves. And since God has designed our constitution, we know that God has made us to be sociable. From this we infer that we have a duty to be sociable.<sup>13</sup> What undergirds this inference is the idea of *convenientia*, for we know that God will harmonize the natural law with our constitution. God will not decree a law that frustrates the ends set for creatures. Accordingly, we can determine the content of the natural law, i.e. the terminative obligation of the law, from a consideration of our capacities. And as we know that the content derives from God's will, we also have an effective obligation to follow the law. What I next argue is that Locke's later moral epistemology, including his adoption of a form of hedonism, constitutes not a divergence from this basic picture but rather a development of it.

## 2: Hedonism, Convenientia, and Locke's Later Moral Epistemology

In the 1670s, Locke begins to adopt a hedonistic account of human psychology, according to which things are understood as good and evil depending on their respective propensities to cause us pleasure or pain. In a 1676 journal note, Locke says the following:

In *voluptas* and *dolor*, pleasure and pain, I mean principally that of the mind, there are two roots out of which all passions spring and a centre on which they all turn. Where they are removed, the passions would all cease, having nothing left to wind them up or set them going. To know our passions, then, and to have right ideas of them, we ought to consider pleasure and pain and the things that produce them in us, and how they operate and move us.

"Pleasure, Pain, and the Passions", 238

The contents of this journal entry represent an early draft of parts of the *Essay*: the idea that pleasure and pain represent the foundation of the passions is expressed

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<sup>12</sup> *Essays on the Law of Nature*, IV, 157. "... partim etiam officii nostri rationem certamque regulam colligere possumus ex hominis ipsius constitutione et facultatum humanarum apparatu; cum enim nec temere factus sit homo nec in nihilum his donatus facultatibus quae exerceri et possunt et debent, id videatur opus hominis ad quod naturaliter agendum instructus est ..." *Essays on the Law of Nature*, IV, 156. Wolfgang von Leyden's translation of the last clause here uses 'nature' as a noun, but no agency should be ascribed to nature, for this clause involves the adverb 'naturaliter'. A slightly more literal translation would be 'the duty of man appears from what he is naturally prepared to do'. It is clear from context that God is preparing human nature for certain ends.

<sup>13</sup> Once again, while Locke is not explicit about this, the duty to be sociable is broadly synonymous with the second table to the Decalogue (i.e. which involves commands that have to do with human-human interactions, such as the prohibition of murder, theft, etc.).

in *Essay*, II.20.3-18; and Locke considers how pleasure and pain motivate and direct us in his chapter “Of Power”, *Essay*, II.21.

Based on his adoption of hedonism, one line of interpretation sees Locke as developing something of a proto-utilitarian position in his middle and later years.<sup>14</sup> And in this interpretation, Locke’s proto-utilitarian views seem to conflict with the commitment to the natural law that Locke expresses in his early *Essays* and the *Two Tracts*. As von Leyden argues, Locke’s emphasis on the importance of rewards and sanctions conceived of in terms of pleasures and pains grows with his increasing commitment to hedonism (“Introduction”, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, 71). James W. Byrne argues that Locke, in fact, undermines the basis of his natural law doctrine by denying that we have knowledge of the real essence of human beings (“The Basis of the Natural Law in Locke’s Philosophy”, 55). He thinks that Locke does away with any rational basis for the natural law by construing good and evil in terms of pleasure and pain (rather than as conformity or non-conformity to our rational nature); his basic conclusion is that Locke moves in the direction of later utilitarian thinkers and, if Locke were consistent, he would have abandoned a natural law approach to ethics.<sup>15</sup>

In the *Essay*, Locke is clear that we do not have knowledge of the real essences of human beings: we may form the complex idea of a creature with sense and reason that moves voluntarily and has a certain shape, but this merely represents the nominal essence to which we attach the name ‘man’ and it does not yield knowledge of the actual constitution of human beings.<sup>16</sup> On the surface,

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<sup>14</sup> See James W. Byrne, “The Basis of the Natural Law in Locke’s Philosophy”, 52-62 and von Leyden, “Introduction”, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, 71. Straussians also argue that Locke’s adoption of hedonism undermines his commitment to the natural law since the rationality of obeying the law depends on rewards in the afterlife that cannot be known with certainty (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 203). For an explicit rebuttal of this point, see Tuckness, “The Coherence of a Mind”, 86-88.

<sup>15</sup> One could also, of course, suggest that Locke’s commitment to hedonism conflicts with his natural law approach to ethics and that he should have abandoned his hedonistic view of human psychology. This, though, presumes that a commitment to the natural law is more important to Locke than a commitment to hedonism. It could also be the case that he is equally committed to both and has two inconsistent ethical positions. But I don’t think that one needs to determine which is more important to Locke, for I argue that these commitments are complementary rather than conflicting. Indeed, the contribution that my paper makes to scholarship on Locke’s ethics is to show how these two commitments can work together for him in a coherent moral epistemology.

<sup>16</sup> *Essay*, III.6.3. While we don’t know the real essence of human beings, Locke is explicit that God has this knowledge (and angels likely do as well). Our lack of knowledge surrounding the actual constitution of human beings follows from our general lack of knowledge of the real essence of substances. Locke is clearly an anti-essentialist when it comes to our knowledge of substances, but it is unclear whether or not he thinks that nature really is carved up into distinct essences. Robert Pasnau argues that Locke is an anti-essentialist by thinking that the real essence of a thing includes the entirety of its constitution (i.e. there is nothing accidental); and as real essence refers to everything, it in effect refers to nothing (*Metaphysical Themes*, 660-661). Any divisions supposed in nature, then, would be purely conventional. Matthew Stuart, though, argues that Locke really holds two views about this, one bold and one more modest. The first is the view already described that nature has no real divisions and the second is that, even if nature does have some divisions, our kind terms are conventional as we lack knowledge of the real divisions (*Locke’s Metaphysics*, 154-162). However we understand Locke’s view about this, it is still the case that moral knowledge

this seems to generate a problem for our knowledge of the natural law. If we infer the principles of the natural law from the makeup of our constitution, ignorance of our real essence as human beings entails ignorance of the natural law. But Locke thinks that moral knowledge is possible and he emphasizes that morality “is the proper science, and business of mankind in general” (*Essay*, IV.12.11, 646). And he also thinks that the divine law – promulgated both through reason and revelation – represents the “only true touchstone of moral rectitude” (*Essay*, II.28.8, 352). In other words, moral knowledge ultimately consists in the law given to us by God. It would thus be quite a serious inconsistency in the moral epistemology of the *Essay* if knowledge of the natural law depended upon knowing the actual constitution of human beings.

Locke’s view would be inconsistent if it were the case that the real essence of human beings was the only possible signpost of divine intent. In the *Essays on the Law of Nature*, Locke is clear that our constitution gives us evidence of the ends set for us by God (and thus of the terminative obligation of the natural law). But it is really these ends that we need to know in order to have insight into the content of the natural law. Consequently, if we had some other insight into God’s teleological design, we could determine the content of the natural law. As I will argue, it is the providential arrangement of pleasure and pain that provides us with insight into the ends that God has set for us. It is this, and not knowledge of the real essence of human beings, that points toward the terminative obligation of the natural law.

Locke is clear that we can have moral knowledge without substantial knowledge. And it is worth quoting Locke at length here:

*Morality is capable of Demonstration, as well as Mathematicks: Since the precise real Essence of the Things moral Words stand for, may be perfectly known; and so the Congruity, or Incongruity of the Things themselves, be certainly discovered, in which consists perfect Knowledge. Nor let any one object, that the names of substances are often to be made use of in Morality, as well as those of Modes, from which will arise Obscurity. For as to Substances when concerned in moral Discourses, their divers Natures are not so much enquir’d into, as supposed; v.g. when we say that *Man is subject to Law*: We mean nothing by *Man*, but a corporeal rational Creature: What the real Essence or other Qualities of that Creature are in this case, is no way considered. And therefore, whether a Child or a Changeling be a *Man* in a physical Sense, may amongst the Naturalists be disputable as it will, it concerns not at all the *moral Man*, as I may call him, which is this immoveable unchangeable *Idea, a corporeal rational Being.**

*Essay*, III.11.16, 516-17

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(at least our moral knowledge) will not involve the real knowledge of substances. Divine or angelic moral knowledge, on the other hand, may include knowledge of substances.

Moral knowledge does involve real essences, but these are the real essences of mixed modes, to which we can have epistemic access (unlike substances).<sup>17</sup> Locke is well aware that we cannot have true and demonstrative knowledge of morality if it requires adequate knowledge of the real essence of human beings understood as substances. The most plausible interpretation of the “moral man” is that the idea we have of it is a mixed mode; the moral truths that agree with this idea would apply to any creature that was corporeal and rational (including, say, a rational monkey).<sup>18</sup> According to Locke, moral knowledge consists in taking the ideas we have of voluntary actions (these being mixed modes) and comparing them to a rule to see whether or not they agree or disagree with it.<sup>19</sup>

One of the central questions here is how we come to know the rule that God has set for us in the natural law. To find out what is required of us, Locke thinks that we can turn to revelation, for it contains the precepts of the natural law: indeed, in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke concedes that the Gospel gives us the best insight that we can have into our duties, given that the discovery of moral principles by the natural light is quite difficult. This, though, doesn’t constitute proper knowledge for Locke as revealed texts can only give us probable knowledge: the knowledge of God and our duties to God that we have by the light of nature constitutes natural religion, and Locke thinks it is much clearer than revealed religion (*Essay*, III.9.23). The consequence of this, according to Locke, is that we ought to be more tolerant of different interpretations of revelation and devote more energy to discovering the duties that God has made plain to the natural light and to living according to them. It is natural religion, then, that affords us knowledge, properly speaking, of our duties. In “Of Ethick in General”, a draft intended to be the final chapter of the *Essay*, Locke describes what is involved in knowing the duties of natural religion:

To establish morality, therefore, upon its proper basis, and such foundations as may carry an obligation with them, we must first prove a law, which always supposes a lawmaker: one that has a superiority and right to ordain, and also a power to reward and punish according to the tenor of the law established by him. This sovereign lawmaker who has set rules and bounds to the actions of men is God, their maker, whose existence we have already proved [i.e. in IV.10]. The next thing then to show is, that there are certain rules, certain dictates, which it is his will all men should conform their actions to, and that this will of his is sufficiently promulgated and known to all mankind.

“Of Ethick in General”, §12, 304

Locke ends “Of Ethick in General” here, and he does not elaborate on the “next thing” (i.e. the content of the law of nature); in the preceding section of “Of Ethick

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<sup>17</sup> Steven Forde notes that there are some close parallels between Locke’s view of morality and mixed modes and Pufendorf’s view of moral entities; given these parallels, Forde thinks it is reasonable to think that Pufendorf had a significant influence on the development of Locke’s moral thinking (“‘Mixed Modes’ in John Locke’s Moral and Political Philosophy”, 592-597).

<sup>18</sup> *Essay*, III.11.16. Cf. Antonia LoLordo, *Locke’s Moral Man*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Essay*, II.28.4. See also “Of Ethick in General”, §11, 303.



in General”, Locke says that he will only suppose that there is a rule “till a fit place to speak to these, viz. God and the law of nature” (§11, 303). Locke never felt satisfied with his treatment of the natural law, which is evident from the fact that he never published his early *Essays*, despite pleas from his friend James Tyrrell, nor did he develop “Of Ethick in General” in this regard and include it in later editions of the *Essay*. But given that he continued to make some attempts at a more substantive discussion of the content of the natural law, it is reasonable to assume that he did not consider moral science to be out of our reach, but simply that he did not consider himself up to the task of developing it.<sup>20</sup> While this was a task that Locke never properly executed, I do think that he made some headway in showing how we can determine the content of the natural law.

My basic argument is that pleasure and pain can function as signposts of divine intent, in addition to giving us motives to act morally. To be sure, the rewards and sanctions that God annexes to the natural law consist respectively in pleasure and pain<sup>21</sup>, but the hedonistic elements of our psychology also point toward the ends that God has set us. Pleasures and pains, on their own, don’t give us moral knowledge: rather, they indicate features of God’s design. Steven Forde notes that, in Locke’s view, empirical facts “are not the source of the moral principles, but are signposts or indications of divine intent”.<sup>22</sup> In the 1676 journal entry referred to above, Locke is explicit that pleasure and pain affect us in ways suitable to God’s design:

God has framed the constitutions of our minds and bodies [so] that several things are apt to produce in both of them pleasure and pain, delight and trouble, by ways that we know not, but for ends suitable to his goodness and wisdom.

“Pleasure, Pain, and the Passions”, 238

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<sup>20</sup> In a letter to Locke, sent 6 September 1692, William Molyneux pressed Locke for a treatise of morals done according to the demonstrative method of mathematics (*Corr.* 1530). In his reply to Molyneux, sent later that month, Locke admits the difficulty of this task, but promises to apply himself to it:

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Every one could not have demonstrated what Mr. Newton's book hath shewn to be demonstrable: but to shew my readiness to obey your commands, I shall not decline the first leisure I can get to employ some thoughts that way; unless I find what I have said in my Essay shall have stir'd up some abler man to prevent me, and effectually do that service to the world. (*Corr.* 1538)

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In 1692 and the years following, Locke produced a number of short drafts pertaining to ethics, some of which involved some brief attempts at laying out the lineaments of a demonstrative science of ethics, but they are all unfinished – see ‘Ethica B’, MS Locke c.28, ff. 141-142 and ‘Morality’, MS Locke c.28, ff.139<sup>r</sup>-140<sup>v</sup> (printed in *Political Essays*, 267-269). Goldie dates the ‘Morality’ fragment to c. 1677-78, but Paul Schuurman suggests that it relates to Locke’s discussion with Molyneux and dates it to c. 1692-96. Despite the uncertainty of the date of this paper, it is reasonable to assume that Locke was spurred on by his discussion with Molyneux to reflect on the project of a demonstrative science of ethics.

<sup>21</sup> For more on this theme, see Patricia Sheridan, “Pirates, Kings, and Reasons to Act: Moral Motivation and the Role of Sanctions in Locke’s Moral Theory”.

<sup>22</sup> “Mixed Modes” in John Locke’s Moral and Political Philosophy”, 598. Forde gives an example of how this works: the duty of parents does not derive from their desire to procreate, but this desire gives an indication of a divine plan whose fulfillment involves carrying out this duty.

What I wish to highlight here is that, from the outset, his adoption of a hedonistic account of our psychology represents an account of how God has designed us. In the *Essay*, Locke is clear that God has annexed pleasure to the actions we should perform and pain to those we should avoid. Indeed, as Victor Nuovo argues, the fact that pleasures and pains are superadded to certain perceptions by God implies that “there must be something divinely normative in the affects as well as in our judgments about them”.<sup>23</sup> In other words, pleasures and pains are not merely natural consequences of certain things but are added to these things according to God’s purposes. Building on Forde and Nuovo’s position, my view is that a recognition of the normative aspects of our hedonistic psychology can ultimately yield insight into the content of the law that God has given to human beings.

We might, though, think that the case of someone consistently deriving pleasure from unsociable actions would serve as a counter-example to the view. Consider Hieronymus Bosch’s depiction of gluttony in his painting, *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*. In this painting, a corpulent glutton sits at a table feasting while ignoring the pleading of a starving child by his chair. The glutton is so taken by the sensory pleasures of eating that he is oblivious to the suffering of others. If one can derive such pleasure from gluttony (or other vices), then it seems that God has not annexed pleasure to the actions we should perform. Furthermore, we might think that even if we don’t behave as insensibly as the glutton that we still sometimes incur a loss to ourselves by acting sociably. Colman, for instance, says that “it is difficult to see how a regard for others founded in hedonism can extend to actions in which we do good to others knowing it to be at our own loss”.<sup>24</sup> If this is the case, sociable actions may not maximize our individual happiness. Locke, though, makes a distinction between pleasures of sensation and pleasures of reflection (a distinction that Colman does not discuss in his essay). It is the latter that produce the most pleasure and that correspond to the duties of the natural law. In an entry in one of his commonplace books (printed as “Ethica A” in *Political Essays*, 318-319), Locke says the following:

Pleasures are all of the mind, none of the body, but some consist in motions of the body, some in contemplations and satisfactions of the mind separate, abstract and independent from any motions or affections of the body. And these latter are both the greatest and more lasting. The former of these we will for shortness sake [call] pleasures of the senses, the other, pleasures of the soul, or rather, material and immaterial pleasures.

According to Locke, material pleasures subside quickly after the object of sense is gone, but immaterial pleasures last longer. And furthermore, in situations where

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<sup>23</sup> “Aspects of Stoicism in Locke’s Philosophy”, 190. While Nuovo draws some parallels between Stoicism and Locke’s views of education and natural philosophy, he recognizes a divergence between their respective axiologies when it comes to moral motivation.

<sup>24</sup> “Locke’s Empiricist Theory of the Law of Nature”, 118. I should emphasize that I fully agree with Colman’s broader thesis that Locke’s mature work in morality is reconcilable with his earlier treatments of morality and the natural law.

our senses are pleased, it is really the contemplative aspects of the situation that make it pleasurable, such as when we reflect on the enjoyment of a meal with friends. Locke is clear that immaterial pleasures, or pleasures of the soul, are annexed to sociable actions and loving others:

If then happiness be our interest, end, and business 'tis evident the way to it is to love our neighbour as ourself, for by that means we enlarge and secure our pleasures, since then all the good we do to them redoubles upon ourselves and gives us an undecaying and uninterrupted pleasure. Whoever spared a meal to save the life of a starving man, much more a friend, which all men are to us who we love, but had more and much more lasting pleasure in it than he that ate it. The other's pleasure died as he ate and ended his meal. But to him that give it him 'tis a feat as often as he reflects on it. Next, pleasures of the mind are the greatest as well as most lasting. Whoever was so brutish as would not quit the greatest sensual pleasure to save a child's life whom he loved? What is this but pleasure of thought remote from any sensual delight? Love all the world as you do your child or self and make this universal, and how much short will it make the earth of heaven?

The glutton, depicted in Bosch's painting, simply enjoys material pleasures that do not last beyond the presence of the object of the senses. The one who forgoes material pleasures for the sake of others obtains immaterial pleasures that are longer-lasting and greater in magnitude than the glutton or libertine. And Locke is clear that the greatest pleasure that can be found in this life comes from loving one's neighbour as oneself; and this principle represents the sum of the natural law of sociability.

Without the perception of pleasure or pain, Locke thinks that we would have no reason to prefer one action to another (*Essay*, II.7.3). Indeed, Locke is clear that God adds pleasure and pain to objects in order to direct us toward certain ends:

It has therefore pleased our Wise Creator, to annex to several Objects, and to the *Ideas* which we receive from them, as also to several of our Thoughts, a concomitant pleasure, and that in several Objects, to several degrees, that those Faculties which he had endowed us with, might not remain wholly idle, and unemploy'd by us.

*Essay*, II.7.3, 129

God adds pleasure and pain to objects in order to spur us to action and also to preserve and perfect us (*Essay*, II.7.4). Furthermore, God assigns degrees of pleasure and pain to the things that surround us. In this assignment, God makes it the case that temporal or earthly things yield only an incomplete happiness: this motivates us to seek complete happiness in God (*Essay*, II.7.5).

Now Locke admits that we can make wrong judgments about what best promotes our happiness, such as when we sacrifice a greater pleasure for an immediate pleasure (*Essay*, II.21.63). He thinks that we have the ability to suspend

our desires and deliberate about what will truly make us happy. And it is the misuse of this ability for which we justly incur punishment (*Essay*, II.21.56). If we examine correctly, we will see that the greatest pleasure can be obtained in eternity with God, and so we ought to be virtuous (i.e. follow the duties given to us by God) in order to be rewarded (*Essay*, II.21.70). But even in this life, the best way to be happy is to be virtuous, for it promotes sociability. Locke is explicit that God has designed us to be sociable creatures and that society is necessary for our preservation.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, social behavior yields happiness in this life and unsocial behavior yields misery (in the long run, at least). All of this is to say that we can infer from the fact that we need society to be happy that God has set us the end of being sociable (and from the fact that God has given us language). Given this, we can infer that we have a duty to be sociable. Indeed, Locke thinks that social happiness and the natural law are joined together:

For God, having, by an inseparable connexion, joined *Virtue* and publick Happiness together; and made the Practice thereof, necessary to the preservation of Society, and visibly *beneficial* to all, with whom the Virtuous Man has to do; it is no wonder, that every one should, not only allow, but recommend, and magnifie those Rules to others, from whose observance of them, he is sure to reap Advantage to himself.<sup>26</sup>

For Locke, it is the comparison of an action to a rule that makes that action virtuous or vicious (“Of Ethick in General”, §11, 303). In the case of the natural law, virtuous actions are those that agree with the rule that God has set for us (which is evident in nature). In the passage above, Locke emphasizes that it is in our interest to be virtuous, the reason being that virtue and happiness are joined together “by an inseparable connexion”. This “connexion” is hypothetically necessary, for it is grounded in God’s perfection: it would represent an imperfection in God if God required us to perform actions that made us miserable. In a 1680 journal entry, Locke says the following:

For since God is eternal and perfect in his own being, he cannot make use of that power to change his own being into a better or another state; and therefore all the exercise of that power must be in and upon his creatures, which cannot but be employed for their good and benefit, as much as the order and perfection of the whole can allow each individual in its particular rank and station; and therefore looking on God as a being infinite in goodness as well as

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<sup>25</sup> *Essay*, III.1.1. Locke thinks that the principal aim of language is to facilitate society, and much of Book III can be understood as prescriptions for the sociable use of language.

<sup>26</sup> *Essay*, I.3.6, 69. As Ruth W. Grant argues, this passage shows us that “interest, duty, and general happiness correspond in such a way that we can recognize what is right and wrong on the basis of experience” (*John Locke’s Liberalism*, 40). My argument represents an elaboration of this basic claim. While stating that pleasures and pains represent a “natural foundation for practical principles of social behaviour”, Grant recognizes that these pleasures and pains cannot alone provide a foundation for moral knowledge (*John Locke’s Liberalism*, 41). Indeed, we have to know that God exists and sets a law for us. In my interpretation, pleasures and pains serve as signposts that direct us to the content of the moral laws of nature.

power, we cannot imagine he hath made anything with a design that it should be miserable, but that he hath afforded it all the means of being happy that its nature and estate is capable of...<sup>27</sup>

If God were to require us to perform actions that made us miserable, this would represent a less than perfect form of benevolence, according to Locke. As God is perfectly benevolent, we know that God will require actions that make us happy rather than miserable. Supposing, then, that God provides obligations to a creature, God is necessitated to make it the case that following these obligations will yield happiness. What grounds this necessity is the perfect benevolence of the divine nature. Given that happiness and misery respectively consist in pleasure and pain, God will harmonize the content of the natural law with the hedonistic features of our psychology.

In addition to our eternal happiness, God will harmonize these duties with our temporal happiness. Concerning the former, Alex Tuckness argues that God's providential design of creation ensures that eternal rewards and punishments correspond appropriately to the duties required of human beings.<sup>28</sup> In other words, God's commands are rational because obedience to them will yield eternal pleasure in the next life. Indeed, Locke advances a version of Pascal's wager in the *Essay* (II.21.70) and holds that it is rational to follow the dictates of the moral law since it yields the possibility of infinite pleasure. But while eternal rewards and sanctions may motivate us to act morally, they do not give us any insight into the content of the natural law for knowledge of these rewards and sanctions either presupposes that we already have knowledge of our duties or it depends upon revelation. In either case, eternal rewards and sanctions cannot function as a method for promulgating the content of the natural law. But temporal rewards and sanctions (i.e. the happiness or misery that attends certain actions in this life) can be used by the natural light to discern our duties. In sum, what makes for our eternal happiness plays a motivating role in obeying divine commands – and in turn makes these commands rational from a hedonistic perspective; but what makes for our temporal happiness plays both a motivating role and an indicative role in coming to understand the commands that God has given in the natural law. In other words, while the connection between virtue and temporal happiness gives us a motive to be virtuous, it also gives us insight into the content of virtue. This represents an important dimension to Locke's moral epistemology for it

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<sup>27</sup> 'Of God's Justice', 277-278. Paul DeHart takes this journal entry to be an expression of views that are clearly anti-voluntarist because it suggests a limit to the exercise of the divine will ("Fractured Foundations: The Contradiction between Locke's Ontology and his Moral Philosophy", 145). The problem with DeHart's interpretation is that he conceives of voluntarism and realism (or intellectualism) in a binary fashion that does not admit of degrees within either position. DeHart's general argument is to show that Locke is committed both to certain voluntaristic claims concerning obligation and to other claims (such as in "Of God's Justice") that seem to moderate his voluntarism. DeHart concludes that "Locke's ethical theory seems to founder upon the shoals of self-contradiction" ("Fractured Foundations", 135). The main problem with DeHart's conclusion is that he does not consider the possibility of moderate voluntarism. Indeed, "Of God's Justice" should be read as a moderation of extreme voluntarism rather than a rejection of voluntarism.

<sup>28</sup> "The Coherence of a Mind", 86.

shows us how the content of the moral law can be promulgated through reason operating on the sense-experience of specific pleasures and pains.

There is, however, a worry here. Locke often seems to describe the rationality of obedience to the moral law in terms of our eternal happiness rather than our temporal happiness. In his discussion of the wager, for instance, Locke suggests that it would be reasonable to forgo temporal happiness for the sake of eternal happiness (*Essay*, II.21.70). We might, then, be tempted to think that Locke's considered position is that the prospect of eternal rewards and punishments is much more effective at securing obedience to the moral law than the temporal happiness or misery that attends certain actions and that there is not much of a connection between our duty and our happiness in this life. Furthermore, later on in the *Essay*, Locke stresses that a genuine law nature must have rewards and punishments annexed to it which are not the natural consequences of the action that is the subject of that law (II.28.6). All this seems to indicate something of a disconnect between the law of nature and what makes for our temporal happiness. And if the connection between these two things is uncertain, the inference from our temporal happiness to the content of the law of nature would also be uncertain. These objections, however, can be answered.

First, the main point of Locke's argument involving the wager is that, even if obedience to the moral law required forgoing temporal happiness, it would still be rational to obey the law based on the possibility of obtaining eternal happiness. Even if virtue yielded misery in this life and vice yielded happiness, Locke thinks that the possibility of eternal happiness alone should fix our judgment about these matters. Now while some might think that the life of virtue leads to misery in this life, Locke is explicit that the reality of things "is, for the most part, quite otherwise" (*Essay*, II.21.70, 282). In other words, virtue yields temporal happiness in addition to eternal happiness. This coheres with the wager argument, for if obedience to the moral law yields temporal happiness then it would, *a fortiori*, be reasonable to obey the law (since it would also yield eternal happiness).

Second, Locke's discussion of the nature of law in II.28.6 of the *Essay* is primarily about the efficacy of the law. In order for a law to be effective, it must have penalties attached to it: without rewards and punishments, Locke thinks that a law would be set "utterly in vain" as it would have no power to determine the will of moral agents who are moved by pleasure and pain (*Essay*, II.28.6, 351). Locke says that unnatural rewards and punishments must be annexed to a law since "a natural Convenience, or Inconvenience, would operate of it self without a Law" (*Essay*, II.28.6, 352). To be sure, Locke thinks that convenience and inconvenience on their own do not constitute a law; rather, a law requires referring actions to the will of a legislator. We might think that this passage implies that temporal pleasures and pains (which would represent conveniences and inconveniences) are not annexed to actions that fall under the scope of the natural law, but this interpretation is not warranted. Locke thinks that sensations of pleasure and pain are superadded to various actions by God and that they are not necessarily connected to these actions (*Essay*, II.8.13). God annexes these sensations in order to direct us to certain ends. It is reasonable to think that, in Locke's view, God adds both temporal and eternal pleasures and pains to various

actions and that following our duties leads to happiness in both this life and the next life. Locke's treatment of law in the passage discussed above may suggest that a consideration of eternal pleasures and pains is necessary to determine the will to obey the moral law. But this would only mean that temporal pleasures and pains, on their own, are insufficient to motivate us to act morally. Even if this were true, there is no reason why temporal pleasures and pains could not indicate the content of the moral law given that God annexes temporal pleasures and pains to the actions we ought to perform (in addition to eternal pleasures and pains). While temporal pleasures and pains on their own might not give us a sufficient incentive to act morally, they do still give us an additional incentive. As we saw earlier, Locke holds that pleasures of reflection – the highest form of pleasure possible in this life – attend the performance of sociable actions ("Ethica A", 318). Because these pleasures of reflection accompany sociable actions, we know that God requires us to be social (i.e. act broadly in conformity with the second table of the Decalogue). And this knowledge does not require revelation, for it can be acquired by reflecting on our sense-experience, namely the pleasures that attend sociable actions in this life. Since Locke only refers to pleasures of reflection in the "Ethica A" fragment, the question arises about whether or not it is prudent to think that this idea represents his considered opinion, as it does not appear in any of his published writings. Given that Locke connects pleasures of reflection with sociable actions in "Ethica A" and holds in the *Essay* (and elsewhere) that God both designs us to be sociable and annexes pleasure and pain to the actions that we ought to respectively perform and avoid, it is reasonable to think that Locke's considered position is that God adds pleasure to sociable actions and that these actions maximize happiness in this life.

From examining what yields pleasures of reflection in this life, we can discover the ends that God has set for us and thus the duties that God has given to us. In this way, it is possible for the natural light to discern some determinate content in the terminative obligation of the natural law. What grounds our inference from ends to law is the idea of *convenientia*: God harmonizes the natural law with our social nature, this nature being evident in the fact that society best makes for our temporal happiness. In a 1678 journal entry, Locke says the following:

If [man] finds that God has made him and all other men in a state wherein they cannot subsist without society and has given them judgment to discern what is capable of preserving that society, can he but conclude that he is obliged and that God requires him to follow those rules which conduce to the preserving of society?<sup>29</sup>

The inference here, from our social nature to the law of nature, follows the method laid out in the *Essays*. When writing this entry, Locke was already conceiving of human psychology in hedonistic terms, as he had written a journal entry on pleasure and pain two years prior. As I have argued, Locke's adoption of hedonism does not represent a divergence from a natural law view of ethics, but a development of it. Hedonism, for Locke, gives us insight into how we form our

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<sup>29</sup> "Law of Nature", 270.

ideas of good and evil and the motives we have for obeying the law. It also, though, gives us insight into the ends that God has set for us, as God has providentially annexed pleasure and pain to the actions that God intends us to respectively perform and avoid. And as God harmonizes the law with the ends set for us, we can know the content of the natural law (even without knowledge of substances). The next question is how the providential arrangement of pleasures and pains might possibly function in the kind of moral demonstration that Locke envisions. Before answering this question, it is necessary to first look at Locke's theory of demonstration in general.

### 3: Locke's Perceptual Account of Demonstration

According to Locke, knowledge consists in perception of the agreement or disagreement of the mind's ideas, and the highest degree of knowledge is found in intuition:

The different clearness of our Knowledge seems to me to lie in the different way of Perception, the Mind has of the Agreement, or Disagreement of any of its *Ideas*. For if we will reflect on our own ways of Thinking, we shall find, that sometimes the Mind perceives the Agreement or Disagreement of two *Ideas* immediately by themselves, without the intervention of any other: And this, I think, we may call *intuitive Knowledge*. For in this, the Mind is at no pains of proving or examining, but perceives the Truth, as the Eye doth light, only by being directed toward it. Thus the Mind perceives, that *White* is not *Black*, That a *Circle* is not a *Triangle*, That *Three* are more than *Two*, and equal to *One* and *Two*. Such kind of Truths, the Mind perceives at the first sight of the *Ideas* together, by bare *Intuition*, without the intervention of any other *Idea*; and this kind of Knowledge is the clearest, and most certain, that humane Frailty is capable of.

*Essay*, IV.2.1, 530-531

Locke is clear that the perception of agreement or disagreement in intuition is the foundation of all the certainty of our knowledge. But it is sometimes the case that we cannot immediately perceive the agreement or disagreement between two ideas; in this situation, we must rely on intermediate ideas which function as proofs:

Those intervening *Ideas*, which serve to shew the Agreement of any two others, are called *Proofs*; and where the Agreement or Disagreement is by this means plainly and clearly perceived, it is called a *Demonstration*, it being *shewn* to the Understanding, and the Mind made see that it is so. A quickness in the Mind to find out these intermediate *Ideas*, (that shall discover the Agreement or Disagreement of any other,) and to apply them right, is, I suppose, that which is called *Sagacity*.

*Essay*, IV.2.3, 532



We are now in a position to sketch out the basic features of Locke's perceptual account of demonstration. Demonstrative knowledge involves both sagacity and illation. The former describes our ability to discover and apply intermediate ideas and the latter describes our ability to order intermediate ideas in such a way that extreme ideas are held together and shown to either agree or disagree (cf. *Essay*, IV.17.2, 668). And in a demonstration, we intuitively perceive the immediate agreement or disagreement between ideas that are proximate in the chain. While Locke thinks that mathematics furnishes us with an exemplary model of demonstrative knowledge, he thinks that demonstration can be applied to any of our ideas wherein we are able to perceive agreement and disagreement:

It has been generally taken for granted, that Mathematicks alone are capable of demonstrative certainty: But to have such an agreement or disagreement, as may intuitively be perceived, being, as I imagine, not the privilege of the *Ideas* of *Number*, *Extension*, and *Figure* alone, it may possibly be the want of due method, and application in us; and not of sufficient evidence in things, that Demonstration has been thought to have so little to do in other parts of Knowledge, and been scarce so much as aim'd at by any but Mathematicians. For whatever *Ideas* we have, wherein the Mind can perceive the immediate agreement or disagreement that is between them, there the Mind is capable of intuitive Knowledge; and where it can perceive the agreement or disagreement of any two *Ideas*, by an intuitive perception of the agreement or disagreement they have with any intermediate *Ideas*, there the Mind is capable of Demonstration, which is not limited to *Ideas* of *Extension*, *Figure*, *Number*, and their Modes.

*Essay*, IV.2.9, 534-535

According to Locke, demonstrative knowledge is not limited to mathematics: it extends to any area where we can perceive the agreement or disagreement of ideas and find appropriate intermediate ideas. Indeed, Locke does not think that demonstration is limited to modes of extension, figure, and number. Locke, as we have seen, thinks that we can have demonstrative knowledge in both mathematics and morality; but we lack demonstrative knowledge in natural philosophy, at least in our current state. It is true that the former areas involve knowledge of modes and the latter involves knowledge of substances. But it is not primarily the fact that mathematics and morality involve modes that makes it possible to have demonstrative knowledge in these areas; rather, it is that our ideas, by virtue of being modal, are perspicacious to us in a way that ideas of substances are not, given the capacities that we have. There is, though, no in principle reason why an idea of a substance should not be perspicacious: this is simply a result of our epistemic limits – limits that neither angels nor perfected human beings have.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4: Morality and Demonstration

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<sup>30</sup> For more on this theme, see Rossiter, "Locke, Providence, and the Limits of Natural Philosophy".

Locke is clear that demonstrative knowledge can be applied to domains beyond mathematics. Morality is the example of a domain that he most often refers to in the *Essay*. While Locke gives two examples of moral demonstration in *Essay*, IV.3.18, the fullest example he gives is in *Essay*, IV.17.4. Locke provides a chain of intermediate ideas to prove the agreement between the proposition that “men shall be punished in another world” and the proposition that “men can determine themselves”:

In the instance above mentioned, what it shews the force of the Inference, and consequently the reasonableness of it, but a view of the connexion of all the intermediate *Ideas* that draw in the Conclusion, or Proposition inferr'd, *v.g.* *Men shall be punished*, – *God the punisher*, – *just Punishment*, – *the Punished guilty* – *could have done otherwise* – *Freedom* – *self-determination*, by which Chain of *Ideas* thus visibly link'd together in train, *i.e.* each intermediate *Idea* agreeing on each side with those two it is immediately placed between, the *Ideas* of Men and self-determination appear to be connected.

*Essay*, IV.17.4, 673

Admittedly, Locke only provides the lineaments of a proof here, for there are other things that need to be filled in, including the ideas that God exists, that God will judge some human beings worthy of punishment, that God’s punishment is just, and so on. But the main point is that we see the immediate agreement between ideas that are proximate to one another and that this in turn allows us to see the agreement between the extremes ‘human beings’ and ‘self-determining’. Locke has a polemic use for this example: in showing that we reason this way, he takes himself to be showing that that we do not, at bottom, reason in a syllogistic way. He suggests that we might be able to determine the conclusion of self-determination from the punishment of human beings by means of syllogisms but that this would be confusing and artificial. Furthermore, syllogisms don’t enlarge our knowledge in any way: they are, rather, parasitic on the perception of agreement and disagreement. And a failure to recognize this can lead to the construction of meaningless sophistries. Given Locke’s distaste for syllogisms and the scholastic method of disputation, it is unsurprising that he has nothing positive to say about general principles and maxims such as “Whatever is, is” (*Essay* IV.viii.2, 609).<sup>31</sup>

But Locke was not entirely skeptical about the use of principles in demonstrative knowledge. Indeed, in the first edition of the *Essay*, Locke states that morality is capable of demonstration and that it involves principles:

The *Idea* of a supreme Being, infinite in Power, Goodness, and Wisdom, whose Workmanship we are, and on whom we depend; and the *Idea* of our selves, as understanding, rational Beings, being

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<sup>31</sup> And, indeed, Peter Anstey notes that this is in keeping with Locke’s commitment to experimental natural philosophy and repudiation of speculative or innate principles and maxims (*John Locke and Natural Philosophy*, 148).

such as are clear in us, would I suppose, if duly considered, and pursued, afford such Foundations of our Duty and Rules of Action as might place *Morality amongst the Sciences capable of Demonstration*: wherein I doubt not, but from self-evident Propositions as incontestable as those of the Mathematicks, by necessary Consequences, the measures of right and wrong might be made out, to any one that will apply himself with the same Indifferency and Attention to the one, as he does to the other of these Sciences.

*Essay*, IV.3.18, 549

In the fourth edition of the *Essay*, Locke replaces the word ‘principles’ with the phrase ‘self-evident propositions’. The change may reflect Locke rendering his discussion of self-evidence more explicit in the chapter on maxims in the second and subsequent editions of the *Essay*. Locke describes self-evident knowledge as knowledge where the agreement or disagreement of ideas is perceived immediately without the use of any intermediates (*Essay*, IV.7.2). Self-evident knowledge, then, is intuitive knowledge. Locke’s characterization of self-evidence fits with his broader rejection of innate ideas, for he is clear that self-evident ideas are not innate. Given that Locke has mostly negative things to say about maxims, it is somewhat puzzling that he suggests that ‘the measures of right and wrong’ might be made out from self-evident propositions.

In *Essay* IV.vii.11, Locke describes the uses and misuses of maxims. In Locke’s view, maxims serve only two purposes: first, they are useful in teaching sciences and, second, they are useful in disputations “for the silencing of obstinate wranglers” (*Essay*, IV.7.11, 600). This second use seems to be presented ironically given the generally disparaging remarks that Locke makes about the scholastic method of disputation in his subsequent discussion. Locke describes three things for which maxims are ill-suited: first, they can’t be used to prove less general self-evident propositions; second, they cannot serve as the foundation on which to build a science; and third, they are of no use in the discovery of unknown truths. Concerning this third thing, Locke notes that Newton has demonstrated propositions that have advanced our knowledge in the sciences, but Locke makes certain to assert that the discovery of these propositions was not by general maxims but by the finding out of intermediate ideas and showing the agreement and disagreement between ideas in a demonstrative chain.

In the quote from *Essay*, IV.3.18 cited above, it may be, then, that Locke thinks that self-evident propositions have a didactic purpose in the teaching of morality. Indeed, if we interpret this quote as implying that self-evident propositions play a foundational role in morality, this would conflict with Locke’s discussion of maxims, namely the ill-suitedness of maxims to either found or advance our knowledge. But while Locke does have mostly negative things to say about maxims in the *Essay*, he comes to countenance the use of foundational principles in the *Conduct*.<sup>32</sup> And Locke thinks that mathematics furnishes us with the appropriate method for discovering these principles:

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<sup>32</sup> Anstey convincingly argues that Locke’s increasing appreciation of Newton led to him altering his views about the use of principles in natural philosophy (*John Locke and Natural Philosophy*, 149).

[I]n all sorts of reasoning, every single argument should be managed as a mathematical demonstration; the connexion and dependence of ideas should be followed, till the mind is brought to the source on which it bottoms, and observes the coherence all along, though in proofs of probability one such train is not enough to settle the judgment, as in demonstrative knowledge.

*Conduct*, §7, 222-223

In the *Conduct*, Locke still maintains the same basic idea that ideas are connected together in a demonstrative chain through the perception of agreement or disagreement, but he thinks that there are bottoming principles that lie at the root of these chains and that can serve as a foundation for scientific knowledge both in ethics and natural philosophy, as we will see.

An important question is how we discover these bottoming principles. Locke says that particular matters of fact serve as the foundation for our civil and natural knowledge:

Particular matters of fact are the undoubted foundations on which our civil and natural knowledge is built: the benefit the understanding makes of them is to draw from them conclusions, which may be as standing rules of knowledge, and consequently of practice.

*Conduct*, §13, 233

It is reasonable to include moral knowledge here, for elsewhere Locke groups moral and civil knowledge together (*Conduct*, §24, 249). In proofs of demonstration, we need only one train of ideas to find a genuine bottoming principle. It would seem, then, that in this case we could begin with one matter of fact and follow it to its base and be certain in finding the right principle. But in proofs of probability, multiple trains of ideas are necessary to establish a rule; it is unclear how many trains are necessary, but there should be enough to count as a “sufficient and wary” induction.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Locke thinks that there are two errors we are susceptible to in using particular facts in determining these standing rules. First, we can be too quick to form general principles by forming them from an insufficient catalogue of particulars. Second, we can be too slow and never make any effort to form principles from these particulars. Locke recommends a *via media*:

Between these, those seem to do best, who taking material and useful hints, sometimes from single matters of fact, carry them in their minds to be judged of, by what they shall find in history, to confirm or reverse these imperfect observations; which may be established into rules fit to be relied on, when they are justified by a sufficient and wary induction of particulars.

*Conduct*, §13, 234

Locke is not explicit about this here, but it would seem that this *via media* principally applies to the discovery of principles that are only probable. For if we have a demonstrative chain where the connection between each immediate idea is fully grasped, we can be certain about the principle that lies at the bottom of that chain without having to worry about whether or not it was accepted in haste.

In a famous passage, Locke speaks about bottoming principles as “teeming truths” and emphasizes that Newton’s description of universal gravitation serves as a foundational principle in natural philosophy:

There are fundamental truths that lie at the bottom, the basis upon which a great many others rest, and in which they have their consistency. These are teeming truths, rich in store, with which they furnish the mind, and, like the lights of heaven, are not only beautiful and entertaining in themselves, but give light and evidence to other things, that without them could not be seen or known. Such is that admirable discovery of Mr. Newton, that all bodies gravitate to one another, which may be counted as the basis of natural philosophy; which, of what use it is to the understanding of the great frame of our solar system, he has to the astonishment of the learned world shown; and how much farther it would guide us in other things, if rightly pursued, is not yet known.

*Conduct*, §43, 282

In Locke’s view, we begin with an idea and then follow it back to its ultimate foundation. And by means of this foundation we can then discover other truths that rest on it and, in so doing, enlarge our knowledge. While Locke thinks that universal gravitation serves to advance natural philosophy, he also discusses a bottoming principle in morality just after his discussion of Newton:

Our Saviour’s great rule, that ‘we should love our neighbour as ourselves,’ is such a fundamental truth for the regulating of human society, that, I think, by that alone, one might without difficulty determine all the cases and doubts in social morality. These and such as these are the truths we should endeavour to find out, and store our minds with.

*Conduct*, §43, 282-283

The golden rule – ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ – is a summary of the second table of the Decalogue, i.e. the portion of the natural law that concerns interactions between human beings. Locke holds that this rule is a bottoming principle that can serve to enlarge our knowledge of morality. The idea is that we can reason from this principle to other more specific features of morality (e.g. that we shouldn’t steal) by constructing demonstrations. In the next section, I show how such a demonstration might function, i.e. how we might arrive at the bottoming principle that we have an obligation to love our neighbor (in other words, to be sociable). And it is the providential arrangement of pleasures and pains that can serve as the particular matters of fact which lead to this principle.

## 5: Hedonism and Moral Demonstration

Locke thinks that moral knowledge involves comparing ideas of actions to a rule. The question, however, is how we know what rule obtains and what is included in its content. Earlier on in the paper, I argued that pleasure and pain serve as signposts of the rule that God has set for us in the natural law. As we see

that pleasure and pain are annexed to certain actions, this gives us reason to suppose that pleasurable actions – at least, maximally pleasurable actions in the long run – are those that are prescribed by the natural law. What I would like to argue is that the idea of pleasure being annexed to sociable actions ultimately bottoms out in the principle that we have an obligation to love our neighbor as ourselves, i.e. to be sociable. But first, it is worth discussing an objection to this general strategy of using bottoming principles in a moral demonstration.

We might think that Locke's commitment to theological voluntarism has the effect of severing the connection between a set of facts and the principles on which they are based, since the principles are not necessarily connected to the facts as God could will otherwise. If the natural law is somehow imposed onto the nature of human beings, it seems that we may not be able to reason from facts of our nature to bottoming principles that reveal an obligation to perform or refrain from certain actions. If we consider an extreme form of voluntarism, we can see that we cannot reason from particular facts about our nature to the content of the natural law, for God could apply any number of laws to our condition. For the extreme voluntarist, God could keep our nature the same but change the natural law such that it prescribed theft, murder, and adultery. The same facts about our nature would obtain, but the opposite law would be enjoined upon us. There would be no connection between our nature and the law that applies to us. Consequently, we could not reason from facts of our nature to the content of the natural law. There would be, in effect, no principle on which these facts bottom out. But as I have argued, Locke does not subscribe to this kind of voluntarism. While he admits that the natural law does not consist simply in facts about our nature, and must be imposed, it is not the case that God could apply any number of laws to our condition. Indeed, supposing that God creates a being with a certain nature, God must fashion a law appropriate to its nature. What underlies this 'must' is hypothetical necessity: God's perfection requires the ordainment of a law that it is commodious with the nature of the creatures that God has made. And this hypothetical necessity facilitates the demonstrative chain between particular facts of our nature to the moral laws of nature.

Given that hypothetical necessity depends on features of the divine nature, this means that a demonstrative chain relying on hypothetical necessity will include ideas of God and the divine perfections.<sup>34</sup> The lineaments of a proof for the natural law would then run as follows:

- 1) God annexes pleasure to actions.
- 2) The greatest pleasure is annexed to sociable actions.
- 3) God annexes the greatest pleasure to sociable actions.

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<sup>34</sup> This supports the idea, held by many interpreters of Locke's moral philosophy, that Locke is committed to a theistic form of ethics. In section 23 of the *Conduct*, Locke describes theology as the preeminent science since it directs all other knowledge to its true end. In keeping with this idea, it would be entirely appropriate for demonstrative moral knowledge to refer to the divine nature. Indeed, in IV.3.18 of the *Essay*, Locke holds that the existence and nature of God will play a foundational role in any demonstrative science of morality.

- 4) God annexes the greatest pleasure to the actions that we should perform.
- 5) God intends us to perform sociable actions.

The first proposition can be derived from Locke's proof for God's existence in IV.10.10 of the *Essay*, which includes the idea of God's providential government of all things in the world (including our makeup and the arrangement of things that respectively lead to either pleasure or pain). The second proposition is derived from seeing that the pleasures of reflection are attached to specific other-regarding actions (such as sacrificing a meal for a starving child, etc.) and then abstracting the general principle that these pleasures, which are the highest, are annexed to sociable actions in general. The derivation of the third proposition from the second involves Locke's proof for God's existence and seeing that God has designed the world including the attachment of pleasures and pains to various objects and actions. From the idea of God as designer, we see that God designs the world for certain ends and that these ends reflect the actions that we should perform. This generates the fourth principle, which in turn yields the proposition that God intends us to perform sociable actions. And we know that we have an obligation to perform the actions that God sets for us for we know that God has both the right and power to command us. Consequently, we determine that we have a duty to be sociable: this duty represents the natural laws that apply to interactions between human beings. And as we know some determinate content and the fact that the content derives from God, we have a complete obligation that includes both the terminative and effective aspects of the law. And then from the basis that we have a duty to be sociable – i.e. to love our neighbor as ourselves – we can infer from this bottoming principle further features of morality that were left unspecified prior to our determination of this principle (which would involve seeing which moral ideas agree or disagree with the duty to be sociable).

As we saw in the journal entry "Of God's Justice", Locke thinks that it would be inconsistent with the perfections of the divine nature for God to create a being who was obligated to perform actions that would make it miserable. This idea grounds the fourth proposition stated above and makes it necessary that sociable actions are the ones that we ought to perform, for these actions ultimately make us happy. The obligation to sociability is hypothetically necessary: supposing that God makes a being who derives happiness from sociable actions, God must in turn craft a commodious law that obligates us to perform the actions that make us happy. What undergirds this necessity is the perfect benevolence of the divine nature: God cannot act in a way that is inconsistent with this perfection.

This does, admittedly, represent only the lineaments of a proof of the natural law of sociability. A full proof would involve showing every idea in the demonstrative chain (and the immediate agreement of each idea with those proximate to it). But the propositions outlined above all represent things about which Locke thinks that we can form determinate ideas. It would be interesting to attempt a full proof of the natural law that fits with the lineaments sketched above, but my purpose in this section is to show how certain facts of our nature –

namely, the features of our hedonistic psychology – can serve as a foundation for the principle of sociability.

In this paper, I have argued that Locke's commitment to hedonism represents a development of his commitment to a natural law view of ethics and not a divergence from it. Furthermore, I have shown how these two commitments can be combined: the providential arrangement of pleasures and pains, for Locke, can play a foundational role in yielding demonstrative knowledge of the natural law of sociability. It is important to remember, though, that Locke recognizes that he hasn't delivered a demonstrative science of morality. Indeed, in a letter to Molyneux about the demonstrability of morality, he confesses that not everyone has the ability to demonstrate what Newton has shown to be demonstrable in the *Principia*.<sup>35</sup> But while Locke may not have been a Newton of the moral world, he did develop enough of a moral epistemology to show how we might have insight into our duties under the natural law.

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<sup>35</sup> Letter to Molyneux, 30 Sep 1692, *Corr.* 1538.



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