

Having examined the bounds of knowledge in *Essay* IV.i-xiii, and those of belief in *Essay* IV.xiv-xvi, Locke turned, after a brief digression on syllogistic reasoning in IV.xviii, to consider the bounds of faith in *Essay* IV.xviii-xix. Recall that faith is belief in testimony that is supposed to have come from God. Locke thought that there are limits to faith, and over these penultimate chapters of the *Essay* he set out to identify them. In the process, he distanced himself from both of the extremes in the Christianity of his day. *Essay* IV.xviii contains remarks implicitly critical of Catholicism, while *Essay* IV.xix attacks the foundations of extreme Protestantism.

### QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. Would Locke consider any merely probable judgment to be known by reason? Would he consider propositions known by intuition or sensation to be known by reason?
  2. Explain Locke's distinction between original and traditional revelation.
  3. What is required for us to put faith in a traditional revelation?
  4. What is required for us to put faith in an original revelation?
  5. If revelation tells us something that reason denies, which must we accept according to Locke and why?
  6. If revelation tells us something that reason tells us nothing about, which must we accept according to Locke and why?
  7. If revelation comes into conflict with a proposition that our reason judges to be probably true, which must we accept according to Locke? In virtue of what do we decide which we must accept?
  8. Could someone who comes to form a belief after an incomplete survey of all the evidence still be called a lover of the truth?
  9. What is the principal cause of intolerance?
  10. What is enthusiasm?
  11. Why does enthusiasm destroy the authority of revelation as well as reason?
  12. What is immediate revelation and what considerations lead people to suppose they have it?
  13. What are the chief causes of enthusiasm, according to Locke?
  14. What is the main question that must be asked about an immediate revelation?
  15. Why can immediate revelation not truly be "seeing?"
- Note:* "Son of the Morning" (IV.xix.13). Another name for the planet Venus, also called the morning star, is "Lucifer." Venus is the brightest object in the sky after the Sun.
16. How can we know that a revelation has in fact come from God?

### NOTES ON THE READING

When a revelation occurs, or is supposed to have occurred, we cannot simply accept it. We need to determine whether the revelation came from God. If the revelation has been transmitted to us by a tradition we further determine whether the content of the message has been corrupted in the process of transmission. These are not things that we can do by appeal to another revelation. The question whether that other revelation really came from God and was correctly interpreted simply resurfaces. Ultimately, we must found our faith on a revelation that is not in turn justified by



revelation, but is rather shown by our remaining powers of knowledge and belief — intuition, demonstration, sensation, and probable judgment based on analogy and eye-witness reports — to have come from God and to have been transmitted intact by a sound tradition.

Locke referred to these remaining knowing powers as our “natural” powers of knowledge and belief, and contrasted them with faith, considered as a supernatural source of belief. He also referred to our natural powers of knowledge and belief collectively as “reason.” (Locke sometimes used the term, reason, more narrowly to refer just to those powers of natural knowledge and belief that involve inference, namely, demonstration and probable judgment. However, in *Essay IV* xviii-xix he most frequently used it as a blanket term for all of our natural powers of knowledge and belief.)

When these natural knowing and believing powers are brought to bear on the question of whether a revelation has occurred they will naturally be employed to answer the two questions that arise concerning any revelation: Is there any evidence to prove that the revelation came from God? Supposing that there is, has the revealed message has been transmitted to us in a pristine state, or might its originally intended meaning have been corrupted? But there is another thing that we consider when we use our natural powers of knowledge and belief to assess the credibility of any report: the intrinsic probability of the report being correct. It is this third criterion, rather than the other two, that places the most important constraints on the bounds of faith.

Locke observed that revelations are not likely to concern matters that we could figure out for ourselves by intuition, demonstration, or recourse to the evidence of sensory experience, the testimony of other witnesses, or analogy. God would not bother to tell us about things we could discover by more reliable means, and revelation will never be as reliable a means of ascertaining the truth as intuition, demonstration, and sensation, if only because we can never know for sure that a purported revelation has in fact come from God, but can at best consider this to be a high probability by appeal to these other powers of knowledge.

Revelations should therefore be expected to tell us about things that either go beyond what any of our powers of knowledge and judgment can tell us (for example, that there will be an after-life where the good will be eternally rewarded and the wicked eternally punished), or that would not otherwise be considered by us to have any great likelihood (e.g., that a particular human being is in fact an offspring of the Deity). In these cases, as long as our reason can be satisfied that the revelation did in fact come from God (because the delivery of the message was accompanied by the well-attested performance of works that only God could be supposed able to do), and that the message has been preserved intact, the revelation, extraordinary though it might be, deserves our belief.

But there is a point beyond which the content of the revealed message becomes too extraordinary to command belief. This is the point where the revelation tells us something that is not only beyond reason, or contrary to what reason considers to be probable, but contrary to what our reason is intuitively or demonstratively convinced must necessarily and universally be the case. For example, were God or someone purporting to be God to reveal to us that one plus one is equal to one, or (a slight variant on this last claim) that one body could be completely and entirely in two different places at the same time and still be one and not two, then this would contradict our intuitive knowledge of the relations of ideas and assert something that, according to our reason, is not merely unknowable or unlikely, but evidently impossible.

In this case, Locke maintained, the revelation could not be believed. For, if a revelation is to be believed, reason needs to authenticate it, that is, to establish that the revelation in fact came from



God and is being correctly interpreted. But if the revealed message contradicts what reason itself teaches, there is no way reason could endorse that message. Reason would have to declare what it itself teaches to be false in order to declare the message true. But once reason has declared itself false, everything it says is rejected, including its claim that the revealed message is true. This is why the authority of revelation can never be considered to be higher than that of reason.

Therefore, while revelation can say anything that reason allows to be at least possible, however remote the possibility, it cannot declare something that is impossible according to reason to be true. Were it to do so, that revelation could not be accepted without overthrowing the authority of reason, and thereby overthrowing the one thing that we must rely upon in order to determine whether the revelation is authentic. Without respect for the authority of reason we are left with no means of authenticating revelation and, consequently, without any basis for faith in any revelation whatsoever.

It is noteworthy that, in making this point, Locke appealed to the principle that one body cannot be completely and entirely in two different places at the same time as an example of an intuitively obvious principle that no revelation could deny. This principle was, of course, denied by the Catholic Church in early modern Europe, which taught that the body and blood of Christ comes to be completely and entirely present in each and every part of the communion bread and wine upon consecration. Locke's example is therefore no incidental remark, but one that attacks one of the principal Catholic doctrines.

Expanding on Locke's mathematical example, we might wonder whether the irrationality of the similar principle that  $1+1+1=1$  would not also tell against the Christian doctrine that there are three persons in the single substance of God. This is a doctrine that was accepted by most Protestant sects as well as by the Catholics, though there were anti-Trinitarian "Socinian" and Deistical movements at the fringes of 18<sup>th</sup> century Christianity that denied it. While Locke was accused of Socinianism, his position on personal identity, with its attendant distinction between persons and substances, provided him with a ready means of demonstrating the rationality of the doctrine of the Trinity.  $1+1+1=3$  as long as it is understood that it is persons we are counting on both sides of the equation, and *Essay* II.xxvii explains why counting persons is not the same thing as counting substances.

However, Locke's position on the bounds of faith in revelation was contrary to certain tenets of Protestant Christianity. In the fourth and fifth editions of the *Essay*, Locke added a new chapter on "enthusiasm" that explained why.

In the chapter on enthusiasm, Locke considered the position of those who would maintain that we have no right to inquire whether a revelation has in fact come from God or been correctly interpreted. According to these people, after God has graciously condescended to give us a message to illuminate our way in the darkness of our inadequate knowing powers, it would be an insult to God and an unpardonable presumption on our part were we to question this gift and its author and ask God and his message to measure up to our weak critical scrutiny. Revealed truths, according to these people, are matters of faith and so above reason. Locke referred to this view as enthusiasm, which can be narrowly defined as faith in a revelation that has not been authenticated by reason as having come from God.

As so defined, enthusiasm is a special case of a more general phenomenon of human nature: the tendency to put more faith in a proposition than the evidence warrants (this can be considered a broader sense of "enthusiasm" applicable to other forms of faith than just faith in matters of revealed religion). This broader enthusiasm is a phenomenon that Locke took to be characteristic



of those who have no love for the truth. Those people who put more faith in a proposition than the evidence warrants love that proposition more than the truth, since they are more willing to assent to it than to the truth.

That Locke should have blamed enthusiasts for failing to adequately love the truth may seem puzzling in light of the ethics of belief he had earlier articulated in *Essay* IV.xvi.1-4. According to that ethic, no one can be expected to survey all the evidence before reaching a decision on a matter of probability. But there is really no contradiction here. Enthusiasm can be broadly defined as placing more trust in a proposition than *your particular* study of the evidence warrants. And simply accepting that a particular revelation has come from God without doing anything to consider the evidence certainly counts as doing that. The bare fact that a message has been received is as compatible with its having been received from the Devil or one's own imagination as it is with its having been received from God. Unless *some* evidence is available for picking God as the source of the revelation, and unless one's conviction in the divine provenance of the message is reasonably proportioned to the quality of that available evidence, the charge of enthusiasm is justified. In a case where no clear evidence is available for supposing that the revelation came from God, one should have no faith in the authenticity of the revelation; otherwise one could justly be said to have no love of the truth.

It is a good thing that Locke's ethic of belief does not countenance enthusiasm because, as he went on to note, enthusiasm is inimical to the values of toleration and freedom of opinion enjoined by that ethic. Toleration is only legitimate where matters of belief are concerned. Where truths can be known and demonstrated, universal consent is rightly expected. But enthusiasm muddles the distinction between knowledge and belief by according more assent to propositions than the evidence warrants and, as a consequence, treating matters of belief and opinion as knowledge. Since they consider their beliefs to be certain, and not merely probable, enthusiasts naturally think themselves entitled to impose them on others. After all, Locke noted, they have imposed them on themselves in the face of a lack of adequate evidence, so why should they not practice a similar violence on others?

When propositions really are known and demonstrated, imposing those propositions on others is generally not difficult because everyone is compelled by their own intuitions and the evidence of a demonstration to agree. But where the propositions are not intuited or demonstrable, and hence not really known, there is bound to be discord. Enthusiasts will naturally be indignant that others could deny what they themselves take to be evident, and only violence can result.

Locke rightly took enthusiasm, particularly religious enthusiasm, to be at the root of most of the civil commotions of his day. It still is today. The bulk of *Essay* IV.xix is devoted to a critique of a particular attempt to justify this socially disruptive factor: the pretense to be in possession of a special kind of revelation, immediate revelation.

Immediate revelation needs to be distinguished from two other forms of revelation that Locke discussed: traditional revelation and original revelation. A traditional revelation is a message, originally delivered by God to some prophet, and then transmitted from the prophet to the disciples and from the disciples to others by means of a chain of testimony that can stretch far back into history. An original revelation is a revelation given directly by God to some individual. For that individual the revelation is original (though for anyone the individual reports it to, it is only traditional). An immediate revelation is like an original revelation in being directly received from God, but in the case of immediate revelation what is immediately received is not a message (though a message may be incidentally present) but rather a sense of conviction. In immediate revelation



God is supposed to graciously compel belief in the truth of some message by making the recipient “see” the truth of the message as if it were immediately evident. The message may be one that is delivered at the same time, along with the immediate conviction, or it may be a traditional revelation that has not been authenticated. The person receiving the immediate revelation claims that they do not need to prove that the message came from God because God has graciously shown them — even compelled them to believe — that it is true by giving them a sort of clear inner vision of this fact (one, perhaps, not given to others, but reserved just for those whom God has elected for salvation.) In effect, therefore, the claim to have received an immediate revelation serves as a justification for religious enthusiasm, that is, for putting faith in a revelation without considering whether there is any evidence, adequate to satisfy reason, that the revelation actually came from God.

Locke noted that pretending to have such revelations is tempting, because it absolves us from the hard work of demonstrating our claims, and flatters our vanity by letting us think of ourselves as having been chosen by God for a special favour. But observing that the pretense to immediate revelation satisfies people’s laziness and vanity is by itself no argument for supposing that immediate revelations do not occur. If Locke was to undermine the pretense to immediate revelation, and thereby attack the most popular form of religious enthusiasm of his day, a more substantive refutation was in order.

Locke launched this more substantive refutation by criticizing the notion of an immediate vision of the truth. This “vision” is the defining feature of an immediate revelation, but exactly what is it, Locke asked, that people are claiming to have when they assert that they have had such a vision? If “vision” refers to an immediate knowledge, not obtained by inference or deduction from anything that has been previously established, then there are only two kinds of vision: intuition and sensation. Intuition is the immediate vision of the agreement or disagreement of ideas, received through simply comparing those ideas with one another. If that is the sort of vision that the religious enthusiast is claiming to have then the supposedly revealed truth ought to be evident to anyone who contemplates the ideas involved, and then it did not need to be revealed, because it is patently evident to everyone without revelation. Revelation concerns matters that cannot be intuited by us.

This leaves the alternative that the immediate vision is a kind of sensation. But sensation can tell us nothing about the real essences of the substances that are causing the ideas we receive from our senses. By sensation I can tell that someone or something is appearing to me, or that I am experiencing a feeling of a particularly special sort, and that this entity or this voice or this feeling is expressing or authenticating a certain message, but I do not sense the real essence of this object or feeling — whether it is really an angel or rather a devil or perhaps a figment of my own imagination.

What has to be the case, Locke claimed, is that the so-called “vision” received in traditional revelation is not a vision of the truth of the revealed message at all, but at best a sensing of some being, perhaps God, but perhaps also the Devil or a figment of one’s own imagination — who is testifying to the truth of a certain message. The enthusiast is accepting that testimony not because they intuit or sense its truth, or even because they intuit or sense that it is coming from God, but just because they are sensing that there is some messenger there delivering or endorsing that message. In other words, immediate revelation is really just the acceptance of testimony on no grounds whatsoever, and claims to immediate revelation are merely a pretense to having grounds.



Locke closed by observing that the prophets in the Bible did not rely on such immediate revelations. When God appeared and spoke to them, they were always careful to ask that the revelation be accompanied by a “sign” adequate to prove that it was really God, and not some devil or trickster, who was speaking. And while it is quite possible that God might enter into the hearts of unbelievers and compel them to accept a message, even in the absence of giving them a sign that it is he who is doing so, in these cases the message can only repeat what has already been said in previous messages that were evidenced by adequate signs of his presence and so give the unbeliever a special help on the way to accepting an established tradition. Following this example, no modern-day pretender to revelation should claim to have received any message that goes beyond the established tradition unless that person can give a proof, adequate to satisfy reason, that the revelation really did come from God.

#### ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Enthusiasm was much discussed by writers on philosophy and religion in the early modern period, when it was employed as a technical term with specific, and generally pejorative connotations that are no longer present in modern usage. However different writers, e.g., Locke, Shaftesbury, Hume, understood enthusiasm in importantly different ways. Undertake a comparative study of how these and other writers in the period understood “enthusiasm.”



*Early Modern Philosophy* by [Lorne Falkenstein](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).