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**LOCKE'S ETHICS IN  
AN ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING**

Locke did not deal with ethical issues in a systematic way. However, in his *Essay* he observed that ethics could be structured in such a way that it would be as precise as mathematics because “(...) morality is capable of demonstration as well as mathematics”.<sup>1</sup>

According to Locke it was supposed to happen by means of a meticulous analysis leading to the formulation of rational and demonstrative ethics. Let us, then, consider what Locke says about moral issues.

In the Book III of the *Essay* we find an explanation of what the philosopher understands by ideas and moral judgments, which makes him believe that ethics may be practised the same way as mathematics. In Locke's terminology, moral notions are complex ideas referred to as ‘mixed modes’. All our knowledge is based on simple ideas which are derived from empirical experience. They are passive reflections in our mind of what we experience. Thus, they come from two possible sources – a sensual experience and an observation. Our mind is not able to produce such ideas on its own nor can it have any ideas which do not consist of simple ideas. “But as the mind” – says Locke – “is wholly passive in the reception of all its simple ideas, so it exerts several acts of its own, whereby out of its simple ideas, as the materials and foundations of the rest, the others are framed.”<sup>2</sup>

Complex ideas, which Locke calls modes, consist of substances and relations.<sup>3</sup>

Ideas or moral notions may be defined exhaustively and precisely. It is their virtue and advantage over the ideas of substances, which, at the same

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<sup>1</sup> J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, The Pennsylvania State University 1999, IV.12.8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II.12.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, II.12.3. See also: Zbigniew Ogonowski, *Locke*, Warszawa 1972, p. 244.

time, enables a precise ethical discourse leading to verifiable conclusions. Since moral words (identified by names) are the collections of partial ideas introduced into the range of notions by our mind, we can easily – says Locke – understand precisely the words used in such a discourse; and if they are unintelligible, it is enough to make more precise what we mean by pronouncing certain statements, i.e.: what the words (ethical terms) we use mean. And the fact that the discussions about moral issues are often “obscure and vague” is just the result of “negligence”. That leads Locke to the following conclusion:

“Upon this ground it is that I am bold to think that morality is capable of demonstration, as well as mathematics: since the precise real essence of the things moral words stand for may be perfectly known, and so the congruity and 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 diverse natures are not so much inquired into as supposed”.<sup>4</sup>

Locke lists three kinds of rules which are annexed to actions (precisely – the complex ideas of actions) in terms of conformity or disagreement. He mentions the divine law, the civil law and the law of opinion or reputation. The consequence of referring one’s actions to the divine law is sinfulness or the conformity with duty, in terms of the civil law – criminality (illegality) or legality and according to the reputation – virtuousness or vice. The touchstones to which human actions are referred and on the basis of which they obtain their moral qualifications have the status of laws because their structure covers not only the standards, but also the power which enforces actions through orders (or prohibitions), i.e. punishment and prize.<sup>5</sup>

Some of Locke’s expressions seem to suggest that the law he considers the most important is the divine law, which constitutes the final moral instance.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this law is listed as the first one among the three and it is accompanied by the following categorical remark:

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<sup>4</sup> J. Locke, *Essay*, III.11.16.

<sup>5</sup> See: Z. Ogonowski, *Locke*, quoted edition, p. 257.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Copleston claims that Locke does not believe the civil law to be the final criterion of what is good and what is evil. Hence, the final criterion in relation to which all the actions are judged as moral good or moral bad is the divine law, see: F. Copleston, *Historia filozofii*, volume V, Polish translation by J. Pasek, Warsaw 1997, p. 142. However, it is not so unquestionable since Locke does not treat the revealed law as the component of true knowledge, which we will see later.

"That God has given a rule whereby men should govern themselves, I think there is nobody so brutish as to deny. He has a right to do it; we are his creatures: he has goodness and wisdom to direct our actions to that which is best: and he has power to enforce it by rewards and punishments of infinite weight and duration in another life; for nobody can take us out of his hands. This is the only true touchstone of moral rectitude; and, by comparing them to this law, it is that men judge of the most considerable moral good or evil of their actions; that is, whether, as duties or sins, they are like to procure them happiness or misery from the hands of the *Almighty*".<sup>7</sup>

But God promulgated this law to men "(...) by the light of nature, or the voice of revelation".<sup>8</sup> What does that mean?

In view of what Locke says in Book IV about the relations between knowledge and faith, the revelation may be the proper source of truthful propositions but only when we are sure that what pretends to be a revelation is one indeed. And that we can hardly ever be sure of. Thus, if the voice of revelation cannot inform us about the moral law in an exhaustive and decisive manner, we have to rely on the light of nature, i.e. our reason. However, in Book II of the *Essay*, Locke repeatedly refers to the divine moral law. Yet, he does not say straightforwardly what its contents are, what the divine orders are, which does not imply at all that he assumes that these orders are so well-known in the religious tradition that there is no need to mention them at all. The only thing which follows from what he says is that the divine law informs us only that virtue is morally right and vice – morally wrong and sinful. However, the philosopher suggests that also this truth must in fact be arrived at by reason alone on the basis of the analysis of the divine being. While writing about the third law, i.e. the law of opinion, Locke states that "virtue" and "vice" are the names denoting, as it is commonly believed, right and wrong actions; "(...) and as far as they really are so applied, they so far are coincident with the divine law above mentioned".<sup>9</sup>

In other words, when Locke refers to the divine moral law, he means that the man may only know it by means of natural learning; secondly, that divine rules can in fact be reduced to one conclusion: the moral righteousness of virtue, which implies a prize and the moral wrongfulness of vice, which implies punishment. All other, detailed moral qualifications such as, for instance, that murder, theft or lies are sinful are concluded by human

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<sup>7</sup> J. Locke, *Essay*, II.28.8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, II.28.8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II.28.10.

reason assuming that God disapproves of such actions. Locke does not at any moment describe precisely the divine law, he only refers to it in a general manner.<sup>10</sup>

It means that the only tangible and somehow available instances, which can serve for moral qualification of our actions are the civil law and the law of opinion, which, by source but not by contents, has the same status as the divine law (the law of opinion is created by human reason, the divine law is the assumption made by human reason as to what God expects from us). Therefore, the divine law is, generally speaking, the law of opinion with an assumed divine status. Stating that in almost all societies, virtue is the object of esteem and vice – the object of censure, Locke finds that it conforms to the divine rule of right and wrong. It is in this interpretation that I mean that this rule is the only element of the divine law, which Locke refers to openly. “For, since nothing can be more natural than to encourage with esteem and reputation that wherein every one finds his advantage, and to blame and discountenance the contrary; it is no wonder that esteem and discredit, virtue and vice, should, in a great measure, everywhere correspond with the unchangeable rule of right and wrong, which the law of God hath established”.<sup>11</sup>

This divine rule is universally accepted and has a useful nature as there is “(...) nothing that so directly and visibly secures and advances the general good of mankind in this world, as obedience to the laws he has set them, and nothing that breeds such mischiefs and confusion, as the neglect of them. And therefore men, without renouncing all sense and reason, and their own interest, which they are so constantly true to, could not generally mistake, in placing their commendation and blame on that side that really deserved it not”.<sup>12</sup>

Locke makes it even clearer that the divine law is a task which consists of the human reason grasping God’s moral expectations and not a type of a readily available code, in the following context. While writing about the essence of morality, i.e. that the moral judgments about actions are made in a relation, by comparing actions to the positive, customary or divine law, he

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<sup>10</sup> With a different assumption, i.e. that Locke accepts revelation as the way of God announcing the moral law, this interpretation would have to be totally different; then, the divine law would not only be formal, but would also have the character of a religious natural law, which has been referred to by numerous authors in the Christian tradition (with the Decalogue having a special place in such references). However, such an assumption disagrees with Book IV of the *Essay* and it is therefore discarded here.

<sup>11</sup> J. Locke, *Essay*, II.28.11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, II.28.11.

announces one of these possibilities: "If I have the will of a supreme invisible Lawgiver for my rule, then, **as I supposed the action commanded or forbidden by God**, I call it good or evil, sin or duty".<sup>13</sup>

After such a declaration of the philosopher, there should be no more doubts – it is the human reason that fills the divine law with material content. Hence, it is the interpreter of the divine law and, to a great extent – its creator rather than a recipient. The only thing that we can use as a moral indication of the divine law is the worthiness of virtue (equal to moral good) and the unworthiness of vice (equal to the moral evil) although also this indication may be understood as the object of human conclusion and not something which is given to us from outside, from outside the scope of earthly experience.

According to Locke the limits of the "natural law" are permanently marked by "the rule of virtue and vice" even when manners are corrupted because even then we condemn in others the mistakes we make ourselves, but we do not lose the proper ethical perspective.<sup>14</sup> This rule, however, is a product of human reason. It sounds more justified when we realize that according to Locke all our knowledge is genetically empirical; it refers to our moral knowledge the same way as to any other,<sup>15</sup> which rules out the ethical knowledge coming from any sources of cognition other than the sense or reflection.

The law of opinion or reputation, being the collection of proper moral notions, includes two norms: virtue and vice, which cover specific names of right and wrong actions. Although in different societies and cultures different actions are described as virtue and vice, the structure is the same everywhere: what we consider praiseworthy is referred to as virtue, to which

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., II.28.14 (bold font added by me – S.R.).

<sup>14</sup> Saying that people unmistakably praise virtue and reprehend vice, Locke adds: "Nay, even those men whose practice was otherwise, failed not to give their approbation right, few being depraved to that degree as not to condemn, at least in others, the faults they themselves were guilty of; whereby, even in the corruption of manners, the true boundaries of the law of nature, which ought to be the rule of virtue and vice, were pretty well preferred"; *Essay*, II.28.11. The natural law mentioned by the philosopher may be understood as the divine law in this sense, of course, that is presented in this interpretation. Sometimes, however, Locke writes about the divine moral law in another, traditional meaning, as if it was a collection of values and norms given by the Creator; see: II.28.12. I interpret this kind of statement as Locke's inconsequence.

<sup>15</sup> Locke says that: "That it is evident, that all relation terminates in, and is ultimately founded on, those simple ideas we have got from sensation or reflection: so that all we have in our thoughts ourselves, (if we think of anything, or have any meaning), or would signify to others, when we use words standing for relations, is nothing but some simple ideas, or collections of simple ideas, compared one with another"; Ibid., II.28.18. Since all our knowledge is reduced finally to simple ideas, also the moral notions must have the same genesis and structure: earthly, temporal and completely empirical.

we are encouraged with prizes, whereas what is considered as vice is re-  
prehended and discouraged by punishment. Locke, as he himself admits,<sup>16</sup>  
does not analyze the truthfulness of different customary laws, he only tries  
to show the nature of ideas and norms which people act upon. It appears  
that everywhere actions are judged in relation to what is considered as  
virtue or vice, and everywhere virtue is connected to prize and vice – to  
punishment: “Thus the measure of what is everywhere called and esteemed  
virtue and vice is this approbation or dislike, praise or blame, which, by  
a secret and tacit consent, establishes itself in the several societies, tribes,  
and clubs of men in the world: whereby several actions come to find credit  
or disgrace amongst them, according to the judgment, maxims, or fashion  
of that place”.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, this silent consent is equipped with power which is not  
smaller than the one possessed by the legislators although it is not based on  
any formal authority of imposing legal regulations since the customary law  
is made by “private persons”. It seems that recognition or condemnation,  
being the sanctions of the law of opinion, are powerful enough to make  
people behave accordingly to what is covered by the scope of virtue and  
vice in a given community; the power of approval and disapproval may be  
bigger than the fear of divine or legal punishment, “the greatest part whereof  
we shall find to govern themselves chiefly, if not solely, by this law of fashion;  
and so they do that which keeps them in reputation with their company,  
little regard the laws of God, or the magistrate”.<sup>18</sup>

Nobody is able, unless he is full of contradictions – says the philosopher,  
to put up with the antipathy or condemnation expressed by their environ-  
ment when they break customary rules or generally accepted moral rules.  
Locke talks here then about the inevitability of punishment. In fact, only the  
punishment related to customary law is inevitable and immediate, which is  
why these are the rules which people obey most often. Punishment inflicted  
by God or by the state tend to appear as such that can be avoided either  
by the hope that the wrongful act will never be discovered or by repentance  
and then reconciliation. Hence the conclusion that the law of reputation is  
the most powerful and it seems to be the most proper exemplification of  
Locke’s basic sense of the notion of natural law.

To end the discussion of Locke’s ethics one more issue must be consi-  
dered: what is the real structure of the norm to which we compare our acts

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<sup>16</sup> See the footnote to II.28.11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, II.28.10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, II.28.12.

within what the English philosopher calls 'the moral relation' and which results in the notion of moral good and evil?

Locke claims that the moral rule is a collection of simple ideas. Therefore the conformity with the moral rule consists of directing our actions in such a way that the simple ideas they consist of would conform to those which are required by the law.<sup>19</sup>

The state law is seldom questioned as a moral instance. Therefore Locke does not devote too much attention to this type of law.

What is the structure of the divine law and the law of opinion? On one hand, they include notions denoting morally good acts together with a prize received for doing them, on the other hand – notions denoting morally wrongful acts together with punishment received for committing them. Can such a structure be considered as a law in the full sense of this word as it is claimed by Locke? Or is it just a collection of notions, whose range of significance encompasses the element of prize and punishment, i.e. a collection of such notions which have moral connotations (positive or pejorative)? It seems that the divine law is not a law in the strict sense of this word. Firstly, it is not announced, i.e. it is not proclaimed as a law. I assume here that the revealed moral law is not authoritative for Locke since, according to his doctrine, the revelation itself does not reach the level of certainty. Secondly, this law is in fact a conjecture or rather – a collection of conjectures of moral subjects. Thirdly, the sanctions of this law do not affect those who are not covered by this law even though they appear as a certain reality in a distant future perspective. However, these are not inevitable sanctions. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to talk here about a law in the strict sense.

Things are different with the law of opinion. It seems that its structure meets the criteria which are given to the law as such. It includes prohibitions and commands expressed in the form of certain notions, there are also sanctions related to respecting or violating the norms and a mechanism of enforcement in the form of, at least theoretically, the inevitability of prize (i.e. respect) or punishment (i.e. infamy or social disgrace). This law is also announced in the sense of being widely known and accepted by the majority of people.

However, also in the framework of this law, the moral subject has the decisive vote because it is the moral subject who creates the ideas of his own actions and then compares such interpretations of his own actions to the notions included in the norms of customary law.

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<sup>19</sup> See: *ibid.*, II.28.14.

Locke says: “So that whensoever we take the rule of moral actions; or by what standard soever we frame in our minds the ideas of virtues or vices, they consist only, and are made up of collections of simple ideas, which we originally received from sense or reflection: and their rectitude or obliquity consists in the agreement or disagreement with those patterns prescribed by some law.”<sup>20</sup>

It means that we get moral ideas from the law of opinion (it refers analogically to the divine law) by the fact that knowing which patterns of moral good (“the ideas of virtues”) and moral evil (“the ideas of crimes”) are generally respected, we fill them with content, i.e. simple ideas coming from empirical cognition and reflection. In other words, the law of opinion is a general guideline telling us which actions are accepted by most and which are not; but we have to interpret this guideline by ourselves basing on our experience and knowledge, i.e. we have to give them some meaning and then compare them to the ideas of our own actions. According to Locke himself, not all moral notions of the law of opinion (which also refers to the divine law) are well-constructed; “very frequently the positive idea of the action, and its moral relation, are comprehended together under one name, and the same word made use of to express both the mode or action, and its moral rectitude or obliquity”,<sup>21</sup> disregarding its relation to the moral rule.

All it means is that the “patterns” of virtues or crimes are subject to verification or at least, that they should, because the ideas denoted by moral terms are defectively or vaguely constructed or else the moral names (terms) are understood differently.<sup>22</sup> It often results in misjudgements of actions. Thus, the law of opinion is not a final and unquestionable moral instance, a collection of ready-made and precise patterns to which the ideas of moral action could easily be compared to. From the *Essay’s* author’s words we can conclude that the defectiveness of moral notions is due to the fact that they are created by individual humans basing on their natural reason, which is naturally prone to making mistakes. Therefore, what we see as the finished moral pattern (after all, the customary law is an established thing) is not such in reality. The divine law should be treated analogically. It is a collection of positive and negative moral notions, a collection understood in the context of our human conjectures as to what God wishes for and what he most probably disapproves of.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, II.28.14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, II.28.16.

<sup>22</sup> See: *ibid.*, II.28.19.

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Therefore, we can say that these are not moral laws that constitute the final instance but rather the moral subject, who, using the natural light of reason, interprets the law of opinion and the divine law according to the criteria of his own reason and social or divine expectations. As a matter of fact, the moral subject appears to be the creator of the three laws listed by Locke and also the creator of the moral interpretations of these rules, which is most clearly evident in the case of the statute law, but also refers to the law of opinion or the divine law.

In such case, what are the grounds for Locke's belief that morality is as capable of demonstration as mathematics? What Locke says is neither precise nor in the least convincing.<sup>23</sup> His examples of moral judgments are misleading and, what is more, imply that he may have in mind the creation of a certain system of interrelated and ordered judgments. On the other hand, the clear notion of a moral relation, which Locke seems to consider as the key to the properly structured ethics, is not enough to talk about mathematically demonstrated ethics. Anyway, it has to appear as inadequate because we would need to be sure of the elements which are compared within the relation whereas the law and moral notions are in fact only tasks that ethics has to deal with rather than ready-made "facts", which we can simply relate to.

#### S U M M A R Y

John Locke did not deal with ethical issues in a systematic way. However, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* we can find several interesting remarks, which suggest that this English philosopher was deeply convinced that the formulation of a widely recognized ethical system is an easy task. It is enough to base it on a mathematical formula and a philosophical procedure of empiricism. Did Locke manage to convince the reader to his optimistic vision at least a little? Rather not. The ethical evidence he quotes are not as precise as mathematical ones while the examples of moral judgments are simply misleading.

#### B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Copleston F., *Historia filozofii*, Vol. V, polish translation by J. Pasek, Warsaw 1997.

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<sup>23</sup> See: J. Gibson, *Locke's Theory of Mathematical Knowledge and of a Possible Science of Ethics*, "Mind", Vol. 5, No. 17 (Jan., 1896), p. 50.

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