

The Christian Finality of John Locke's Theory of Empiricism

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Abstract: In this paper I will present the way in which John Locke connected the Hobbesian theory of the natural state to a vision that also takes into account Christian precepts.

First of all, I will show that, for Hobbes, the story of mankind was in fact a history of submission to a terrestrial power, bearing the metaphorical name of Leviathan, a true political monster. Hobbes's conclusion was that God's intervention in history is reserved only to those actions that do not concern coercion and punishment, but only evangelization, in view of the Savior's second coming.

Secondly, I will show that this sharp separation Hobbes makes between divine law, which only regards Salvation, and the natural one, which underlies the political relations between people, is a matter of which Locke, a spirit far more pious than the author of the Leviathan, cannot accept it. Locke actually looked for a way to conclude an agreement between Filmer's theory on royalty, which exaggerated the role of the divine law on politics, and the Hobbesian theory of the natural state, which is devoid of God's intervention.

In conclusion, I consider that the result of Locke's philosophical compromise will be a new type of empiricism, which we can call Christian, different from that of his predecessors, Bacon and Hobbes, which had had more an epistemological character.

Keywords: *divine law, natural law, Christian empiricism, John Locke*

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1. Introduction

Locke was already in his second year at Westminster School, when, in 1649, King Charles I was beheaded nearby. The school principal, Dr. Richard Busby, who sympathized with the royalists, asked all the students to pray for the soul of Charles I (Marshall, 1994, p. 4), although they were not allowed to participate in the monstrous scenes in which a king was killed by his subjects. But the students of the school have surely heard the cries of the crowd gathered to witness the execution of their king. Of course, this event marked the students of Westminster School, especially as they were educated in a royalist environment, all of whom were born during the reign of this sovereign (1625-1649). Probably one of them, named John Locke, who was then seventeen, was most impressed. At that time, it was considered that a King was the heir to a divine right to rule and, as such, the execution of Charles I had the significance of removing an entire epoch.

Affected by this event from a young age, Locke will avoid Hobbes's atheist excesses which, seeing how the people, represented by the Parliament, can make the decision to behead a king of divine law, will annihilate any idea of God's intervention in history. For Hobbes, history was guided only by the absolute power of the passions and the ferocity of those human beings, capable of inspiring, through fear and punishment, the state of unconditional submission to other people.

Locke detaches himself from the radical views initiated by Hobbes and Filmer

For Hobbes, the story of mankind was in fact a story of submission to a terrestrial power, bearing the metaphorical name of *Leviathan*, a true political monster, whose blind will has nothing to do with the will of a good God, who watches over of the beings created by Him. Hobbes solves the problem of the relationship between God and the world by the fact that God cannot rule by coercion and punishment, noting in this regard: "The kingdom of Christ is not of this world, and consequently its servants cannot (unless they are kings) ask for submission on his behalf" (Hobbes, 2014, p. 376).

Hobbes's conclusion is that God's intervention in history is reserved only to those actions that do not concern coercion and punishment, but only evangelization, in view of the Savior's second coming according to Saint John's model, who did the same for the first coming of Christ. But faith is neither connected to nor dependent on constraint or command, which are,

in Hobbes' opinion, the fundamental elements of a civil society. The earthly power is totally autonomous in relation to the divine authority as it obeys different laws (Hobbes, 2014, p. 376). This sharp separation that Hobbes makes between the divine and the natural law, which is the foundation of the political relations between people, is a question which John Locke, a spirit much more pious than the author of the *Leviathan*, cannot accept. John Dunn argues that, 'starting from his lectures in 1664 on the natural law of Christ Church, Locke had identified some of the most important difficulties of the Christian considerations on natural law and deepened his understanding of these difficulties in the elaboration of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, as it can be seen from the notes of 1671' (Dunn, 2009, p. 41).

On the other hand, neither did the excesses of a vision in which royalty originated in Adam's right to convey power over the earth, in a hereditary manner, as a gift from God, as this was justified by Filmer in his book *Patriarcha, or The Natural Power of Kings*, could not agree with Locke's view on the legitimacy of authority. Robert Filmer (1588-1653), a landlord from Kent, had offered Charles I, as early as 1641, the manuscript of the *Patriarcha* for publication. Prudently, given that the conflict with the Cromwell-led Parliament had already gone too far, the king did not want to further inflame things by agreeing to publish such a work, which justified an absolute monarchy, guaranteed by the Divine will and inherited directly from Adam, the first King and Patriarch. Less cautious and much more conceited, King Charles II, motivated also by the success of the Restoration, considered it appropriate to allow the publication of the *Patriarcha* in 1680, forty years after its conception. The work revolted John Locke, who had already drafted the text for what would become *The Second Treatise of Government*. Thus, *The First Treatise* will actually follow, in chronological order, the elaboration of *The Second Treatise*, thus becoming a work in which John Locke criticized this excessively mystical vision, which had totally annihilated the idea of natural law from the sphere of political theories.

Without challenging the divine law, Locke actually sought a way to reach an agreement between the divine and the natural law. In other words, John Locke will have an almost 'alchemical mission to mix fire with water', namely Filmer's theory of the divine law, which guarantees the descent of Adam's royalty, with Hobbes' theory of the natural law of politics, which stated that politics is autonomous in relation to the divine will and intervention. The result of this great alchemical work was objectified in the

The Second Treatise of Government, which introduced several extremely revolutionary ideas in the discourse on the origin of the political society which he understands as a work of God, like the Great Work of nature.

2. The natural law and the Christian law are not in opposition

If God created man with certain instincts aimed at survival and, even more, his prosperity, this is because God wants human beings to fulfill these inclinations. Thus, for John Locke, the natural law which commands no one to harm his neighbor reflects the will of God transmitted to man by his very nature, by his instincts and inclinations. This idea, in the *The Second Treatise of Government*, is very close to what Spinoza had imagined through the concept of *conatus* in his *Ethics*.

In both cases, since self-preservation is an instinct planted by the 'will and interest' of a supreme sovereign Creator, it turns out that people can live as long as it pleases the Creator of the world and not others, because they belong to Him, being His Creation (Locke, 2014, p. 718). Moreover, as it is a desire of God for the human being to survive and prosper, we have the duty and the righteousness to follow this path. Thus, self-preservation and the prosperity that guarantee it become a true principle of action for John Locke's political philosophy, founded on a deeply theological vision, because man does not act morally at random, but only under the divine command aimed at his self-preservation.

For Locke, God gives man the power to act in the sense of self-preservation and prosperity through a specific command that calls for work exhortation. This is specifically stated when he writes in *The Second Treatise of Government*: 'God commanded, and His wants forced him to labour. This was his property, which could not be taken from him, wherever he had fixed it. And hence subduing or cultivating the earth and having dominion, we see, are joined together' (Locke, 2014, p. 734).

All of these findings demonstrate the profoundly religious character of John Locke, who could not easily reconcile with the idea of natural law as it was presented in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, who saw the natural state in a way completely different from what the Christian precepts could tolerate. For Locke, the natural state is built on a natural law, which is not in an irreconcilable conflict with the Christian law. Even more, Locke is convinced that, if a strict natural law were to be followed, a society would ultimately be built, in which the individual *conatus* could express what God had sown in their original nature, eventually reaching a Christian society.

For John Locke, the departing from the natural law, belonging to God, in favor of natural law, belonging to man, which allows him even murder, is the main cause of the degradation of society, which can lead to one society characterized by hardship and violence, thus losing the aspect that it had initially, namely that of a society characterized by reason and peace.

In conclusion, although fascinated by the idea of a natural state and law, Locke cannot agree with Hobbes' atheistic and warlike vision, being, by his structure, a man with pacifist inclinations and a deeply religious soul, in the Christian sense of the word. Thus, Locke is oriented towards the theological and especially political views from the Netherlands, drawing on Spinoza's work, which had an influence on how the English philosopher understood the relationship between God's will and our inclinations for self-preservation and prosperity, expressed by the idea of *conatus*. The natural state imagined by Locke is no longer that of an atheist because he thinks of it in the way a good Christian can imagine it, namely as a state in which the will of God, as the supreme Creator of man, is present in actions of any human being. Moreover, unlike Hobbes, for whom the natural state was a mere working hypothesis, Locke is convinced that this is a real one, taking the life of the American Indians as a model.

3. Resolving the conflict between natural right and natural law through the idea of constitutionality

First, the natural law, as Locke sees it, is valid in a world characterized by certain rationality opposed to a vision such as the Hobbesian one, in which the natural state would be the product only of an irrationality of passions. The original conflict between natural law and natural right can be resolved, for Locke, through a Constitution, which must be approved by the people through its representative, which is the Parliament. The constitutionalism, as Locke conceived it, does not annihilate the importance of royalty, but, on the contrary, it remains an essential element of the political life, even if it must be transformed from an absolute monarchy into a constitutional one. But, perhaps the most important element brought by the new constitutional vision proposed by Locke, is the birth of *the idea of nation*. Once a Parliament is able to provide a body of laws that becomes a Constitution, there are sufficient and necessary premises for the emergence or, rather, the birth of a nation.

Not by accident, in the British area of political influence, after the Glorious Revolution, whose chief ideologue was John Locke, did the first conflict also appear, marking the birth of another great nation with George Washington's rebellion, in 1776. Thus, starting from here, those ideological frameworks that allowed, based on this model, all those future modern nations to be able to appear, was offered. Beginning with the founding of the French nation, following the Revolution of 1789, and continuing with Napoleon's Code of Laws, and then with the Revolution of 1848, the ideas of the new constitutional model radiated from Europe and America to the entire planet, determining Hegel to speak of a true end of history, as it had been until then.

4. The concepts of *identity* and *person* - foundations for a civilized society

The idea of nation, however, is correlated in Locke's political philosophy with that of a *person* and especially of recognizing the *identity* of the person who may be responsible for his actions.

The problem is proving to be extremely complicated for John Locke. In his *Essay, Book II*, in *Chapter XXVII*, §2, Locke would note that: 'We have the ideas of but three sorts of substances: 1). God; 2). Finite intelligences 3). Bodies. First, God is without beginning, eternal, unalterable and everywhere; and therefore, concerning his identity, there can be no doubt' (Locke, 2014, p. 310). As we find from this fragment, which strikingly resembles those of Spinoza's *Ethics*, only God has a clear status of identity; for the finite spirits and bodies, the problem becomes much more complicated, their identity being one relative to the precise moment of their appearance, as is the case with the identity of physical bodies, plants and animals.

Locke deals separately with *the identity of man* in the same chapter of the *Essay*, but in §6-29, where the dominant becomes the question of the distinction between *man*, *thinking substance*, and *person*. As an empiricist, Locke considers that 'nothing else but of an animal of such a certain form' (Locke, 2014, pp. 313-329) and the first thing that confers man's identity is his form or composition. Here we find the anatomist and physician John Locke, who regards the human being under the spectrum of his external, physiological determinations, as a being that possesses a specific composition. The inspired story in *Essay* of the intelligent and talkative parrot met in Brazil by Prince Maurice (Locke, 2014, pp. 314-315) confirms that, no matter how many verbal qualities the bird had, it still remained a parrot, without anyone

even questioning that that being, probably possessing a degree of intelligence, could also acquire the quality of human being.

But when it comes to *personal identity*, a problem much more complicated than mere intelligence, which the parrot can have, because it already involves self-awareness or one's own self, which is no small thing, the data of the problem change radically. Locke will have to identify the *personal identity* in the self-consciousness: 'For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that, that makes every one to be, what he calls self; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being' (Locke, 2014, pp. 316-317).

Self-awareness is what underlies the concept of *person*. The *self*, which is based on self-awareness, thus becomes the object of reward or punishment in the case of a judgment on the acts done by the man who assumes it. There are also exceptions, such as the case of people who do actions without being conscious, without assuming their own *Self*, or who assume another 'Self', alien to them, as is the case with fools or possessors. The actions of these people, whether they are drunk, sleepwalking or crazy, are hard to punish because their lack of clear assumption as perpetrators is lacking. Locke argues that they should be punished by a civil court even in these cases because the facts they committed in the moments of unconsciousness they did as humans. The true judgment as to the guilt of these souls can only be made by a supreme Divine court (Locke, 2014, pp. 325 – 326). The British philosopher is of the opinion that beyond these aspects, totally and utterly exceptional, of the unconscious actions, whether it is the possession, madness or transfer of personality from a deceased to a living or other form of identity confusion, consciousness alone ultimately defines the Ego and thereby the identity of the perpetrator of good or bad action (Locke, 2014, p. 325).

In fact, the truly religious issue is, for Locke, related to the possibility of surviving one's personal identity after the physical death of man. In this regard, the philosopher notes in *Essay*: 'But whatsoever to some Men makes a Man, and consequently the same individual Man, wherein perhaps few are agreed, personal Identity can by us be placed in nothing but Consciousness, (which is that alone which makes what we call Self) without involving us in great absurdities' (Locke, 2014, pp. 324-325). We see how Locke's entire thinking is centered on the idea of *self-consciousness*, which ultimately stands as the basis for that of the *person*. The *person* is also a term with many legal

implications, having direct reference to rewards and punishments. A man who is unable to say he is the *same person* cannot be punished or rewarded. Thus, the concept of a person correlated with that of the Ego, possessing its own conscience, becomes the most appropriate to the way religion describes the Second Judgment. Locke notes in this regard the following: 'And therefore conformable to this, the apostle tells us, that at the great day, when every one shall receive according to his doings, the secrets of all hearts shall be laid open. The sentence shall be justified by the consciousness all persons shall have, that themselves, in what bodies soever they appear, or what substances soever that consciousness adheres to, are the same that committed those actions, and deserve that punishment for them' (Locke, 2014, p. 328). Thus we see Locke's vision of the initial perspective that made a distinction between *man, thinking substance* and *person*. When referring to the human being as having a special anatomical shape with well-defined features, Locke is consistent with his medical training. When dealing with the problem of consciousness and the Ego, we find that Locke who, reading Descartes, discovered the metaphysical perspective on the presence of man in the world as a being that is characterized by self-consciousness. Finally, his theological-legal openings will lead him to the idea of *person*, a concept that proves to be the most suitable for the idea of reward and punishment.

Finally, consistent with his empiricism, John Locke considers, however, that the most important perspective on identity is that offered by medicine and anthropology, in which man acquires his *identity* from the moment of his birth or appearance in the world, when he acquires the status of an existence independent of other things. The continuation of this existence that has a well defined beginning in time is the basis of *identity*. 'For whatever be the Composition, whereof the complex Idea is made, whenever Existence makes it one particular thing under any Denomination, the same Existence continued, preserves it the same Individual under the same Denomination' (Locke, 2014, p. 329). In other words, when a man appears in the world, he acquires the status of existence and, with that, a name by which his identity is sealed, regardless of his future transformations and evolutions.

Through the inner nature of every human being, patronized by self-consciousness, the man's responsibility is recalled and it should be manifested both towards his Creator and towards the civilized society to which the individual belongs as a *zoon politikon*, as a social animal.

In turn, physical identity, no less important, is actually the essential condition of a right of material property, which implies a responsibility of the individual towards the world, the sensitive cosmos, in which he lives as a thinking being, having self-awareness.

This view, which can be framed into a philosophical Christianity that fit John Locke's liberal conception, led to the *de facto* exclusion of almost all religious orientations, excepting liberal Protestantism (a confession to which the philosopher adhered), including Christian, Jewish, and Muslim fundamentalism, but also of all forms of atheism and non-theistic religions, which he considered to be intolerant (Gorham, 2011, p. 109).

In the idea of *person*, a key concept of Locke's philosophy, the English thinker is reuniting the two perspectives, mentioned above, on responsibility, which concerns the inner nature, defined by self-awareness and the presence of the thinking self, on one hand, and the external identity of man, manifested by his physical body placed in a concrete world, on the other hand.

The idea of the *person* that seeks the continuity of the human being from the moment of his appearance in the world until the moment of his physical death is extremely important for John Locke. Through the concept of *person*, the British philosopher opposes, in fact, the visions that lead to the possibility of justifying metempsychosis or the reincarnation of the soul.

In a philosophical - Christian interpretation of the concept of *person*, even if through its death the physical body is lost, its spiritual nature, the self-conscious Ego, does not lose its identity initially acquired at the entrance to the world, at that precise moment of birth, when he acquired, with this event, a name that will accompany him all his life.

This vision was earlier confirmed by the Holy Fathers of the Christian Church, who also noticed that *a person*, even if they did not use this term, constitutes an intrinsic unity between logos and body (Cordoneanu 2006, p. 125). The initial presence of the *person*, even from the first moment of his entrance into the world at his birth, will be preserved forever by Locke as the original source of the subject's *identity*. The British thinker thus avoids the metempsychosis of the soul, a direct consequence of dualism, which have had a long tradition, from the Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries to the teachings of Pythagoras and Plato and, closer to John Locke, to Descartes' doctrine from the *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

5. Conclusions

Even if he develops an empiricist view of the *person*, the British philosopher still avoids the pantheistic 'trap' of Renaissance magicians, such as Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno. Locke is, however, closer to the spirit of his time, marked by the heliocentrism and physics of Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, and Newton, than to the Renaissance magicians, who used heliocentrism to impose a new, Sun-centered religion that would capture souls from eternity in the physical world through the cycles of an endless metempsychosis.

Nor could the Spinozist solution of the soul united with the body in a manifestation of a God identical with Nature, through a loss of the *person* in the great divine absolute, be a convenient one for John Locke, who placed in his center of thought the idea of human responsibility, both to Creator, to his fellows, but also to nature.

Locke shows us, therefore, through his works (*Two Treatises of Government*, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and *A Letter Concerning Toleration*), which open a Christian empiricism centered on the idea of *person*, the manner in which a good Christian should think, for whom philosophy is not necessarily incompatible with a life led by the precepts in which he believes.

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