Locke, Toleration, and God’s Providence

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Abstract

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This essay is an exploration of some of the theological dimensions of Locke’s theory of toleration. First, I argue that the skepticism that is often associated with Locke’s argument against religious coercion would have been unintelligible to Locke and his contemporaries. Second, I offer an alternative reading of Locke’s theory based upon his exchange with Jonas Proast. I argue that by examining the debate between Locke and Proast, one can see that Locke’s theory rested upon his conception of providentialism, specifically the distinction between God’s ordinary and extraordinary providence. In my view, it was Locke’s belief that God would not fail to provide the means for human salvation that allowed him to contend that beliefs incapable of rational assessment fall outside the jurisdiction of the magistrate. Finally, I conclude with some general thoughts on the implications of a providential reading of Locke for interpretations of the early enlightenment.
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Introduction: Locke, Toleration, and the Modes of Intellectual History

In 1691, while debating the toleration of Protestant dissent, John Locke and the Oxford Divine Jonas Proast digressed into a heated exchange over the nature and purpose of miracles. What follows is a discussion of their disagreement, and of how it ought to influence our thinking about the sources of Locke's theory of toleration. My central contentions are twofold. First, I assert that without sufficient theological backing, the pragmatic and skeptical strategies that are often attributed to the Letter Concerning Toleration would have been unintelligible to Locke and his contemporaries. Second, I argue that when one moves beyond the first Letter and into Locke’s debate with Proast, those missing theological supports become apparent. Locke did think that skepticism and political pragmatism were necessary elements of good government, but he did not think that on their own they provided adequate grounds for the toleration of religious dissent. In my view, Locke’s argument for toleration was underwritten by his particular understanding of God’s Providence, an understanding he inherited from Scholastic, Reformed and Dissenting theology. Further, the theological roots of Locke’s theory have much broader implications for how we ought to regard the development of late seventeenth century theories of tolerance, and indeed the origins of Enlightenment naturalism more generally.

Despite Locke’s importance in the history of philosophy and the canonical status of the Letter Concerning Toleration in liberal political theory, very little scholarly attention has been paid to Locke’s debate about toleration with Jonas Proast, the only
extended public debate in which Locke ever allowed himself to be engaged.\footnote{The most notable examples are Jeremy Waldron, “Locke, Toleration, and the Rationality of Persecution,” in Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives, ed. Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 61-86; Mark Goldie, “John Locke, Jonas Proast and Religious Toleration 1688-1692,” in The Church of England c.1689-c.1683: From Toleration to Tractarianism, eds. John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 143-71; Peter Nicholson, “John Locke’s Later Letters on Toleration” In A Letter Concerning Toleration in Focus, eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 12-56; Richard Vernon, The Career of Toleration: John Locke, Jonas Proast and After (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997); Adam Wolfson, “Toleration and Relativism: The Locke-Proast Exchange,” The Review of Politics 59.2 (Spring, 1997): 213-31.} What little work has been done has generally analyzed Locke’s debate with Proast from one of two different and largely opposed perspectives. Political theorists, on the one hand, have mined the debate for insights as to whether or not Locke’s arguments against religious coercion are actually effective and therefore adequate supports for current theories of toleration. Proast here is ‘the persecutor’ who serves as a proxy for the commentator’s own scrutiny of the limits of Locke’s thinking. Notoriously, Jeremy Waldron has concluded that when considered on the merits of the arguments alone, Proast won the contest decisively.\footnote{Waldron, 83-84.} On the other, historians of political thought such as Mark Goldie have used the debate as a means to more firmly embed Locke’s thought in the political circumstances of the 1690s. In Goldie’s view, Locke and Proast’s arguments are “intramural partisan pieces” in the struggle between the high and low church parties for the control of the Anglican Church.\footnote{Goldie, 161.}

Both of these approaches have their advantages, but there is danger on either side as well. The complaints against the political theorist’s approach to the history of ideas are
well known. Though not necessarily so, such discussions evince a marked tendency toward anachronism, as thinkers address ‘timeless’ political questions in a manner that may or may not have anything to do with their actual historical circumstances or authorial intentions. The worry with the alternate approach, expressed far less often (perhaps because its advocates constitute the reigning orthodoxy), is of falling into Namierite reductionism, where the intellectual substance of the ideas being expressed ineluctably dissolves into the narrow concerns of class and party. The resulting ‘history of discourse’ at times has the appearance of being about everything surrounding a given speech act, and not the content of the act itself.

My approach in this paper, one much influenced by the recent work of Ian Hunter, Knud Haakonsen, T.J. Hochstrasser, Richard Tuck and especially J.B. Schneewind, lies somewhere between these two positions. I focus principally on the arguments themselves, but with the firm understanding that their points of reference are those of the late seventeenth and not the early twenty-first century. We cannot assume that western intellectual life has been consumed from Socrates to the present day with a univocal set of issues that all thinkers have been trying to solve, with the accretion of proposed solutions gradually progressing toward a correct answer. The formulation and solution of

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philosophical problems are inescapably shaped and limited by the context in which they occur. This does not mean, however, that we can understand philosophical argumentation as historical activity simply by examining the immediate circumstances surrounding it. We must also attend to what might be called the *proximate* intellectual contexts of philosophical argument. Every age has its own baseline set of assumptions about what the most significant philosophical problems are and its own specialized languages for making sense of them. It is by reconstructing these local philosophical *mentalités* and situating specific arguments within them that we are able to understand intellectual activity as an historical phenomenon.

In the 1600s, Christian theology was still arguably the most important of these proximate intellectual contexts. The education of elites in the seventeenth century was steeped in theological training, and the philosophical interventions of the period invariably reflect that background. For all the derision heaped upon the ‘schoolmen’ during the 1600s, educated Europeans still spoke in their language, worked with their theoretical categories, and assumed the basic priority of their philosophical problems. It is

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7 Schneewind’s crucial observation here is that when we turn our attention from political thought to moral philosophy it becomes much less obvious that a given thinker was attempting to intervene on some specific element of his immediate circumstances. J.B. Schneewind, “Teaching the History of Moral Philosophy,” in *Teaching New Histories of Philosophy*, ed. J.B. Schneewind (Princeton: Princeton Center for Human Values, 2004), 191. My view is that this point could be extended considerably because moral philosophy was rarely, if ever, separated from political thought in the early modern period.

8 Nicholas Jolley, “The Relation between Theology and Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, eds. Daniel Garber, Michael Ayers, with the assistance of Roger Ariew and Alan Gabbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 363-92 and Richard Popkin, “The Religious Background of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy,” in Garber and Ayers, *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, 393-424. This assertion of theology’s centrality is in contrast to the pronounced tendency of historians of political thought to assume classical republicanism as the most important and dynamic conceptual idiom available. While there is much to be said for such a position, I think it has been overdrawn.
thus of principal importance in evaluating the philosophical thought of the seventeenth century to pay close attention to pervasive religious allusion and theological terminology. With regard to the debate between Locke and Proast, the primary advantage this approach affords is that it allows one to appreciate the seemingly more esoteric dimensions of the dispute, dimensions that may appear ‘dead’ to the political theorist or as empty rhetorical window-dressing to the historian of political thought. The discussion of God’s Providence and its relation to questions of religious coercion, though it occupies a significant amount of space in Locke and Proast’s extraordinarily verbose exchange, has never been discussed more than in passing in the scholarly literature. My aim in this paper is to rectify that neglect, and suggest moreover that the providential themes of the *Letters Concerning Toleration* play a key role in explaining Locke’s overall thinking about toleration and its relationship to Christian morality.
The Letters Concerning Toleration and Locke’s Skeptical Prudence

There was a time when historians of England treated the Stuart Restoration as a relatively benign period with regard to the toleration of religious minorities. Supposedly, the substance of toleration had been achieved in the midst of the interregnum, and although dissenters experienced some harsh treatment during the period 1660 to 1688, it was nothing compared to what had occurred earlier, or for that matter what was transpiring in Continental Europe. With the arrival of William and Mary, toleration was irrevocably secured as one of the foundations for the emerging liberal order. We know now, of course, that much of this is Whig fiction. As Mark Goldie says, during the Stuart restoration, “England was a persecuting society.” The Restoration had certainly begun on a benign note, with Charles II declaring at Breda a commitment to “liberty to tender consciences.” Shortly after the new King ascended the throne, however, things quickly spiraled out of control. The next twenty-eight years would be a constant see-saw of government attitudes and policy towards Catholics and Protestants who dissented from the Church of England. Indulgences were granted, then revoked. Periods of relative calm were followed quickly and without warning by periods of bitter and miserable

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11 Quoted in Coffey, 166.
persecution. From 1660 to 1688, thousands of Catholics and Protestant dissenters were fined, exiled, assaulted, imprisoned and a few even executed for their refusal to join the Church of England.\textsuperscript{12}

John Locke had been converted to the cause of toleration during the 1660s through his association with Anthony Ashley Cooper, the First Earl of Shaftesbury. In 1667, on Shaftesbury’s behalf, Locke composed \textit{An Essay on Toleration}, and in 1669 the two men helped draft the \textit{Fundamental Constitutions of the Carolinas}, which included provisions for the toleration of Protestant dissenters. Though both men initially had seen the Stuart restoration in a positive light, according to Richard Ashcraft, it was the frustrating experience of pleading toleration’s case in the face of endless reversals that gradually moved Locke and his patron toward the radical parliamentary opposition.\textsuperscript{13} In 1683, in the aftermath of the Exclusion Crisis and the alleged Rye house plot, in which Locke and Shaftesbury were implicated, the two men fled England for Holland as fugitives. Shaftesbury would die there, and Locke would not return to England until after the Glorious Revolution in 1688.

It was during his exile in Holland that Locke composed \textit{A Letter Concerning Toleration}. Scholars generally attribute the motivation for the Letter to three factors. First, in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, Locke was surrounded by other exiles and Dutch thinkers who promoted a plurality of deeply felt, but unorthodox theologies. For a time he lived at the home and \textit{salon} of a Quaker, Benjamin Furly. His best friend in the


Netherlands, Philip Van Limborch, was a Remonstrant Divine. Locke began an affair with Damaris Cudworth, the daughter of the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth and an impressive latitudinarian theologian in her own right. This is of course inconclusive, but it seems relatively safe to suggest that Locke was in a position to appreciate the value of religious pluralism. If nothing else, we know he was increasingly inspired to intervene in the continental debates on Protestant doctrinal theology. Second, even after Shaftesbury’s death, Locke continued to be involved in subversive politics. There is some evidence that he even helped to finance the botched Monmouth rebellion. Finally, Locke watched with trepidation the worsening situation of the French Huguenots. All these matters came to a head in 1685 with the ascendance of the openly Catholic James II, the failure of James Scott’s coup attempt and Louis XIV’s revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Sometime towards the end of that year, Locke composed the Letter Concerning

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16 Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics*, 375. James’ envoys in Holland at least thought Locke was up to something during this period, as the crown during 1684 began making concerted requests to the Dutch for Locke’s extradition. David Wooton, introduction to *Political Writings* by John Locke (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 90.

17 David Wooton suggests that James’ ascension, when placed alongside the thinly veiled anti-catholic polemic of the letter suggests that by 1685, Locke had given up all hope of reconciliation with the English government or of ever returning home. Wooton, 95. Mark Goldie has produced evidence corroborating this view, though he suggests that during this period Locke was increasingly isolated from his comrades in England. Mark Goldie, “John Locke's Circle and James II,” *The Historical Journal* 35.3 (September 1992): 557-586.
Toleration, originally in Latin, and gave it to Limborch.\textsuperscript{18} It would remain unpublished for four more years.

In the Letter, Locke forwards a variety of arguments against religious coercion. Holding them together, however, is a skeptical thread that G.A.J. Rogers has dubbed Locke’s ‘argument from ignorance.’\textsuperscript{19} According to Locke, the magistrate is a man like other men, fully capable of error. “Neither the right nor the art of ruling necessarily carry along with it the certain knowledge of other things.”\textsuperscript{20} This being the case, the Magistrate has fundamentally no better ability to determine which Church is the True one than does his subject. Therefore, he cannot in good conscience force what he believes to be Orthodoxy on his subjects, since he cannot remunerate them for his mistake if he accidentally earns them damnation. Consequently, the achievement of salvation for Locke is a purely individual matter that falls entirely outside the jurisdiction of the state.

\textsuperscript{18} Maurice Cranston, “John Locke and The Case for Toleration,” in A Letter Concerning Toleration in Focus, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus, 87-89.


Locke thus asserts that different visions of how to achieve salvation are equally epistemically problematic. Their respective truth-probabilities are unknown and cannot conclusively be established. The magistrate and his subjects may differ deeply on the finer points of worship, but since they lack an independent criterion for determining who is correct, only God holds the knowledge to judge between them. “The purity of their worship, and the truth of their doctrines, is on both sides equal...The decision of that question belongs to the supreme judge of men to whom also alone belongs the punishment of the erroneous.”

Both the magistrate and his subjects should exercise restraint due to the limitations on their ability to know the absolute truth of religious matters.

The obvious question about this formulation has to do with limits. Where should one draw the boundaries as to what the magistrate ought and ought not to tolerate? Locke foresees this problem and explicates it in the form of a possible objection to his argument from ignorance. If it is not in the magistrate’s power to forbid a religious sect from engaging in any specific practice in the course of the worship of God, then what can be done when a sect wishes to engage in something that is deeply and indisputably objectionable? That is, if the magistrate is so constrained, then what could he possibly do with respect to sectarians who would wish to sacrifice children as part of their religious ceremonies, or alternatively “lustfully pollute themselves in promiscuous

uncleanliness?" What makes the magistrate’s knowledge of the ultimate morality of these practices any greater than his knowledge of seemingly morally indifferent things?

Locke’s response to this problem is that the magistrate’s jurisdiction is limited to the “worldly welfare of the commonwealth.” Human sacrifice and licentiousness clearly fall within the magistrate’s jurisdiction, Locke argues, because “these things are not lawful in the ordinary course of life.” He then goes on to say that “whatsoever is permitted unto any of [the Magistrate’s] subjects for their ordinary use, neither ought to be forbidden by him to any sect of the people for their religious uses.” In Locke’s view, we ought to determine what can and cannot be tolerated by considering it removed from its religious context. If we permit Latin in the marketplace, then we ought to permit Latin liturgy. If we prohibit murder at a fair, then we ought also to proscribe in it a Church service.

Thus, it appears that Locke’s argument from ignorance is what Richard Popkin has labeled ‘mitigated’ or ‘constructive’ skepticism, an attempt to use skeptical arguments to demolish certain kinds of knowledge while insulating others, resulting in a

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22 Ibid., 33. Locke was familiar with this line of argument against skeptical cases for tolerance. It was in fact precisely the argument he had used against Edward Bagshaw in his anti-tolerationist Two Tracts on Government, written twenty years earlier while Locke was still the Censor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford’s Christ Church College. See Jacqueline Rose, “John Locke, ‘Matters Indifferent,’ and The Restoration Church of England” The Historical Journal 48.3 (2005): 601-621.

23 Ibid., “Letter Concerning Toleration,” 54.

24 Ibid., 33.

25 Ibid., 37.

26 Ibid., 51.
chastened but effective epistemology.\textsuperscript{27} In Locke’s view, the magistrate is limited to considering evidence from the ‘ordinary course of life’ when attempting to determine what religious practices may be tolerated. The legal status of religious rituals should stem from a purely prudential assessment of the danger they pose to the public order.\textsuperscript{28}

This is good so far as it goes. There are few claims to knowledge that can survive a thoroughly skeptical scrutiny, and political moderation does superficially seem to follow from humility about one’s knowledge of religious matters.\textsuperscript{29} Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that this skeptical-prudential argument would have been unintelligible to Locke as formulated here. First, there is a deep theoretical difficulty with interpreting Locke skeptically. Simply put, skepticism is hard to control because its ability to dissolve the evidentiary foundations of an argument applies just as well to one’s own positions as it does to those of one’s opponent. Indeed, the logical conclusion of arguments in which skepticism is invoked is a situation in which no arguments are justified, in which arguments are nothing more than contests between baseless opinions.

\textsuperscript{27} Popkin, \textit{The History of Skepticism}, 112-28, as well as his preface to Hendrik G. van Leeuwen, \textit{The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630-1690} (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963). As Popkin points out, this argumentative strategy became quite popular in the middle of the seventeenth century, and not only in England. In Popkin’s view, the philosophies of Pierre Gassendi and Marin Mersenne (with whom Locke was also familiar) can also be characterized as forms of mitigated or constructive skepticism. Popkin, \textit{History of Skepticism}, 112.

\textsuperscript{28} It should be noted that it was precisely this formulation that allowed Locke to deny toleration to Catholics and atheists. Catholics cannot be tolerated because they will always possess a loyalty to a foreign prince. Atheists will always pose a threat to civil society because without a concept of God, they have no concept of promises, and thus no concept of law. Locke, “Letter Concerning Toleration,” 46-48.

\textsuperscript{29} It is this supposed ‘metaphysical neutrality’ that forms the backbone of the classic accounts of political liberalism. See Isaiah Berlin, \textit{Four Essays on Liberty} (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) and John Rawls, \textit{Political Liberalism} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
More to the point, for Locke’s contemporaries, there was nothing that suggested that toleration followed necessarily from an admission of the frailty of human knowledge about the precise will of God. As Richard Tuck has skillfully pointed out, skepticism in the seventeenth century was a politically neutral philosophy. It aimed principally at disciplining the self into a state of ataraxia through suspension of belief about matters of contention, so that one might be able to live happily and healthfully in periods of tumult and controversy.\(^\text{30}\) As a consequence, it was an argumentative device as likely to be used by establishment thinkers against the heterodox as the other way around. Grotius, Lipsius, and Hobbes, for instance, all began from skeptical premises and ended up arguing that the magistrate had every right to enforce religious uniformity for the sake of the public good.

Similar problems arise when we consider Locke’s political pragmatism. Peter Miller and J.A.W. Gunn have both documented this type of ‘public interest’ argument for religious toleration amongst seventeenth-century economic and political writers.\(^\text{31}\) Further, Gary De Krey, John Scott, and John Marshall have suggested that in the early years of the restoration several prominent Dissenters, such as Slingsby Bethel and John


Humfrey forwarded similar arguments. Nonetheless, the idea that Locke easily balanced his skepticism with a prudential calculus remains problematic. While prudential cases for toleration were made, they were continually hamstrung in their reception by their association with an amoral ‘reason of state’ and Hobbesianism. It may initially seem odd to hang an argument for religious toleration on the same family tree as, say, having one’s political opponents strangled in the middle of dinner or giving the sovereign the power to determine the answer to 2+2. In order to understand arguments for toleration in this manner, it is necessary that we follow the advice of Alex Tuckness and Maurice Cranston and temporarily depart from our modern outlook that touts pluralism as a virtue for a community and toleration as a basic principle of politics. Instead, we must come to terms with an older but in some ways more consistent view, namely that the existence of pluralism is deeply objectionable, and toleration therefore an unacceptable


33 Indeed, as Jose Fernandez-Santa Maria has pointed out in a different context, one of the most referenced examples of political duplicity in anti-reason of state polemic was Henry IV. What better example could there be of the amoral political actor who became an apostate to win the crown and then used his power to extend toleration to his former co-religionists? Jose Fernandez-Santa Maria, “Reason of State and Statecraft in Spain, 1595-1640” *Journal of The History of Ideas* 41.3 (Jul-Sept, 1980): 361. While Locke obviously did not share the association of toleration with immorality, there is ample evidence to suggest that he also did not view positively the notion of a magistrate governing only by the public interest. He mocks the notion that governments can both be legitimate and contrary to God’s authority in his notes on William Sherlock in 1690. John Locke, “On William Sherlock,” in *Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 315-17.

accommodation to moral error.\textsuperscript{35} Religious and secular concerns were not easily separated in the seventeenth century. As Robert L’Estrange put it, “Uniformity is the Ciment of both Christian, and Civil Societies. Take away that, and the parts drop from the body; one piece falls from another.”\textsuperscript{36} This was the consensus viewpoint, and to argue that it could be pragmatically put to one side was to open oneself to charges of irreligion.

There were local dimensions to this problem as well. Over the course of the restoration, arguments for the indulgence of dissenters based on considerations of the public interest had become inextricably linked with the King’s dispensing power. To assert that a magistrate had the power to overrule the existing laws against dissenters on a case by case basis thus carried an implied endorsement of expanded executive powers, perhaps even absolutism. This, for obvious reasons, was something Locke would have been largely unprepared to do.\textsuperscript{37}

For all these reasons, it seems problematic to suggest that Locke’s skeptical prudence can be taken at face value. In the late seventeenth century, few people believed that skepticism favored toleration over uniformity, and political pragmatism was widely regarded as a veil for radical metaphysics. Despite this, the fact remains that by 1685 Locke saw limited skepticism, political prudence and freedom of religious worship as

\textsuperscript{35} It should be noted that this certainly did not mean that both functional and principled arrangements and theories of toleration did not occur prior to early-modern arguments for them. As Cary Nederman and John Christian Laursen have repeatedly pointed out, the medieval period saw a variety of tolerant practices in Christian and Muslim societies. See Difference and Dissent: Theories of Toleration in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ed. Cary J. Nederman and John Christian Laursen (London and New York: and Littlefield INC., 1996) and Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration before the Enlightenment, ed. Cary J. Nederman and John Christian Laursen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

\textsuperscript{36} Quoted in Coffey, 38.

\textsuperscript{37} Vernon, The Career of Toleration, 10-12.
logically connected concepts. The real question then is how precisely he saw them as being related to one another. The beginnings of an answer, however, lie outside the scope of arguments covered in the first *Letter*. Rather, it is in the cut and thrust of his extended debate with Proast that we can begin to see the real character of Locke’s skeptical prudence, and why he was so confident that it entailed exactly the kind of religious tolerance he advocated.
Jonas Proast and God’s Extraordinary Providence

By 1689 Locke’s circumstances had changed radically. He had returned from Holland shortly after the revolution and had immediately taken up various kinds of service in William III’s new government. Initially offered the ambassadorship in Brandenburg, he declined in favor of becoming the Commissioner of Appeals. Unfortunately, the London air did not agree with Locke (He was an asthmatic), and soon he began spending much of his time at Damaris Cudworth’s (now Lady Masham) estate at Oates. Locke also began publishing, though largely anonymously. 1689 saw the publication of the Letter in French, English, and Dutch alongside the Two Treatises on Government and the Essay concerning Human Understanding.38

In the meantime, the situation for English dissenters had changed for the better as well. In September of 1689, after a long and bitter struggle with the High Churchmen, Parliament passed the Toleration Act. The new legislation allowed Presbyterians, Independents, and Quakers not only to abstain from communion in the Anglican Church, but also to license meetinghouses and worship publicly. The result was that by 1715, England was home to nearly two thousand dissenting congregations.39

There were, of course, very real limits to the Act. While many scholars have been tempted to focus on the continued exclusion of Catholics and the categorical denial of


toleration to anti-trinitarians, it is important to keep in mind that neither of these was really on the table in 1689. At a more realistic level, however, there was still much room for improvement. Originally, the Act’s proponents had aimed at comprehension within the Established Church, but implacable resistance from Tories had resulted in a move toward indulgence. As a consequence, The Act was marked by failure and compromise. The laws against religious dissent would not be repealed. Instead, their penalties would merely be suspended for those nonconformists who swore allegiance to the new regime. Additionally, the Corporation and Test Acts would remain in effect until 1828. Nonetheless, it can still be reasonably argued that the Glorious Revolution had, on the whole, proved a positive for Protestant nonconformists. For twenty years they had endured the proscription of their public worship. That was over, and it would not be back.  

For Jonas Proast, the Toleration Act was the culminating event in a series of humiliations stretching back a decade. The Chaplain at All Souls College during the 1680s, Proast had taken part in the Tory resistance to James in 1687-88, being among those Churchmen who refused to read the King’s declaration of indulgence from the pulpit. It was a decision that cost him his Chaplaincy. As James attempted to stack the Oxford hierarchy with Catholic sympathizers, Proast found himself under the authority of the new warden Leopold Finch, who promptly dismissed him. Though not initially

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40 Hugh Trevor-Roper, “Toleration and Religion after 1688” in Grell, Israel and Tyacke, From Persecution to Toleration, 394-401.
a supporter of the revolution in 1688, Proast took the oath of allegiance and expected to be reinstated to his former position as reward for his resistance to James’ cronies. He was not. Instead the non-juroring schism of Henry Dodwell and William’s installation of Latitudinarian bishops left Proast and his Tory fellows profoundly alienated. His attacks on Locke, written in 1690, 1691, and 1704 were thus attacks on the new Low Church order in general, and the Toleration act of 1689 in particular as much they were philosophical assaults on Locke’s doctrines per se.41

The key point of contention between Locke and Proast was Locke’s notion that the jurisdiction of the state be limited to matters of morality and civil interest. Proast continually sought to demonstrate that the state, in addition to its concern for worldly matters, also had care of men’s souls. It was in defense of the minimalistic vision of political obligation contained in the Letter that the providential bases of Locke’s theory emerge. Proast published his first attack on Locke under the pseudonym Philochristus (friend of Christ) in April 1690. The Argument of the Letter Concerning Toleration, Briefly Consider’d and Answer’d was a standard case for Augustinian correctio, which as Mark Goldie has demonstrated, formed the mainstream of the High Anglican case for intolerance from the 1680s onward.42 Locke had argued in the First Letter that coercion can only change behavior, that it cannot alter the involuntary contents of belief.43 Since only correct belief was sufficient to achieve salvation, coercion was thus not only unjust but also inefficacious. Proast countered by asserting that the penalties proposed for


religious dissenters would not be aimed at directly changing minds, but at creating inconveniences, laying out “Thorns and Briars” for those who chose to dissent from the True Church. In Proast’s view, when the inconveniences associated with dissent accumulated, nonconformists would increasingly feel compelled to reconsider their beliefs. In this way, compulsion could “indirectly and at a distance” lead the heterodox out of error.

Locke answered Proast later that same year in A Second Letter Concerning Toleration, also published anonymously. Here Locke treats Proast’s Augustinian case with derision. Proast, Locke claims, has simply not answered the arguments put forward in the Letter. The question is not how to lead the heterodox out of error, but rather who will determine which opinions are in fact erroneous. Furthermore, Locke argues, the fact that persecution may appear useful to us tells us nothing of God’s opinion on the matter. God does not do many things that would seem to us useful in propagating the true religion. Indeed, it might seem to the human mind that miracles would be useful in bringing the wayward to the true faith, as they certainly were in the apostolic period. Despite this, God chooses not to perform them, unless we believe in the purported miracles of Rome. Proast has not supplied an adequate criterion for determining the limits of the magistrate’s jurisdiction and thus has done nothing to change the parameters of the debate.


45 Proast, 5.

Locke’s remark about miracles does not, on the face of it, appear central to the case of the *Second Letter*. Nonetheless, Proast seized upon it, and much of the subsequent debate revolved around miracles and their meaning. In his response to the *Second Letter*, Proast contended that Locke, in arguing that the jurisdiction of the state extended only to civil interests, had misinterpreted how the Magistrate fit in with God’s providential plan for the world.47 In the first ages of Christianity, God had used miracles to plant and expand the true religion, to prevent it from being extirpated at the hands of pagans. At the conversion of Constantine, however, God had withdrawn his ‘extraordinary’ providence and thereby transferred the care of Christianity to the civil government. Toleration meant removing all the advantages of the true religion in the world, assuring its speedy destruction, “for to the corrupt Nature of Man, false Religions are ever more agreeable than the true.”48

Locke dedicated over one hundred pages of his mammoth *Third Letter* to taking up the issue of miracles and God’s providential plan for Christianity. And interestingly, the argument he makes is the same skeptical prudential argument, though this time set in a theological context. Against Proast, Locke argues that there is no reason to assume that withdrawal of God’s extraordinary providence at the end of the apostolic age entailed a transfer of the care of the true religion to the Magistrate. Historically, that is simply false. Further, it would suggest that in every country where the magistrate is not of the true

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47 Jonas Proast, *A Third Letter Concerning Toleration in Defense of The Argument of the Letter Concerning Toleration, Briefly Consider’d and Answer’d* (Oxford: Printed by L. Lichfield for George West and Henry Clements, 1691). Here things get slightly confusing. In Proast’s *Third Letter*, he writes as though the authors of Locke’s first and second letters were different people. Thus, although there are actually four texts in play, Proast writes as though there are only three, all seeking to comment on Locke’s original.

religion, miracles should be occurring continually.\textsuperscript{49} What the withdrawal of God’s extraordinary providence \textit{does} mean is that he has made salvation a matter of individual concern, and he has “appointed preaching, teaching, persuasion, instruction, as a means to continue and propagate his true religion in the world.”\textsuperscript{50} The province of the Magistrate is limited to civil matters because God has not provided him the means to determine infallibly the correct way to salvation.

Now, I think, the issue becomes somewhat clearer. Rather than a dispute between the skeptic and the anti-skeptic, the pragmatic and the ideologue, what we have in the Locke-Proast debate are two competing visions of the function and character of God’s Providence in the world. What is necessary now is to locate those opposing discourses in the larger context of late seventeenth century English intellectual life. Then we will be in a better position to assess the full consequences of a Providential reading of Locke’s theory of toleration.


\textsuperscript{50} Locke, \textit{Third Letter}, 475.
God’s Two Powers and the Two Forms of Providence

There is no small amount of debate amongst scholars of early modern England as to the status of Providential discourse on the eve of the Enlightenment. In 1977, J.P. Kenyon argued that by the 1690s providence was by and large an empty rhetorical trope. Providence could be used to justify any position and it was usually deployed only in the company of a host of other, more culturally resonant arguments.  

Mark Goldie too has insisted that providence was at best a problematic concept in late Stuart political discourse. Focusing on the propaganda of the allegiance controversy in 1691, Goldie pointed out that only one commentator, William Sherlock, attempted to cast 1688 in providential terms, and his argument was treated largely as an object of ridicule.  

Finally, Roy Porter has suggested that the beginning of modern probability theory in the late seventeenth century put Providence decisively out of business.

More recently, however, a group of revisionist scholars have attempted to recover the religious idioms of late seventeenth century political life. J.C.D. Clark, in his characteristically contrarian fashion, has argued that it is simply false to say that

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Providence went into decline during the seventeenth or even the eighteenth century.\(^{54}\) Rather, according to Clark, political commentators continued to use it and English audiences continued to take it seriously. Concurring with Clark, Tony Claydon has insisted that providence played the predominant theme in Williamite propaganda after the revolution.\(^{55}\) Finally, Jane Shaw has suggested that the whole question of Providence’s status changes radically when it is taken out of its elite context and directed instead at the everyday lives of ordinary English men and women. Here, she argues quite compellingly, a flourishing ‘culture of wonders’ extended well into the eighteenth century.\(^{56}\)

Though my own sympathies lie with the revisionist camp, I think it could nevertheless be argued that all these positions share a general tendency toward imprecision. Providence was never a monolithic concept in Christian thought, and thus it is difficult to speak of its fortunes in absolute terms. In its most general sense, Providence denotes God’s government over the natural world, the course of history, and the individual lives of human beings. From there, however, it has historically been put to a wide variety of ideological and explanatory purposes. The variant at issue between Locke and Proast was God’s ‘extraordinary’ providence, his ability to work miracles above the established order of creation. This was in contrast to God’s ‘ordinary’ providence,


whereby he governs the world through what Hume would later refer to as the ‘constant conjunction’ of secondary cause and effect.\textsuperscript{57}

As a formal philosophical concept, the ordinary/extraordinary dyad originated as a sub-division of the distinction between God’s ordained and absolute powers.\textsuperscript{58} This latter distinction emerged gradually during the high and later Middle Ages as University theologians attempted to grapple with the logical difficulties stemming from God’s omnipotence. According to Lawrence Moonan, by 1200 the basic contours of this set of problems were already widely appreciated thanks to the dialectical writings of the early Masters such as Anselm, Abelard, and Peter Lombard.\textsuperscript{59} If God possesses unlimited power, then why does the world contain so much wickedness and suffering? Does speaking of God’s unlimited and arbitrary power when juxtaposed with such a world cast him as a capricious tyrant? On the other hand, If God does not have the ability to arbitrarily alter the world’s natural, moral, and salvific order, does that not limit his


\textsuperscript{59} Moonan, 50-57.
power and thereby make him something less than God? Additionally, can we reconcile these difficulties without somehow placing morality above God or nature outside his power, thereby rendering him superfluous?

The distinction between God’s absolute and ordained powers developed during the first half of the thirteenth century as a covenantal, compromise solution for this vexing set of questions.\textsuperscript{60} God’s absolute power designated his capacity to do anything that did not involve a logical contradiction (create a married bachelor or a round square, for instance). His ordained power, conversely, described those things that he had actually chosen to do. God might have been a tyrant, but in his infinite goodness, he had bound himself to an intelligible and consistent order. The two forms of God’s providence were sub-categories within this willed order, the two means by which He governed within the set boundaries he had established for himself. Interestingly enough, it appears that this meant that many late medieval theologians broke with the colloquial notion of a miracle as a contravention of nature. Since both His ordinary and his extraordinary providence were part of his ordained power, miracles appeared to the human mind to overturn the established order of creation but did not actually do so.\textsuperscript{61}

This finely wrought piece of Scholastic thinking, however, did not remain in its original form for long. Subsequent generations of theologians in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries increasingly corrupted the distinction between God’s

\textsuperscript{60} “The Absolute and Ordained Power of God in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” 442-449.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 446.
two powers, moving it away from its covenantal moorings. Instead, these thinkers would speak of God’s ability to intervene in the world as being ‘presently active.’ The result was the adoption of a view of reality as radically contingent, in which God sustained the state of things from moment to moment through his ordained powers, but could opt to overturn them at any time through the use of his absolute. Moreover, this new interpretation practically rendered the distinction between the potentia absoluta and the providentia extraordinaria moot. God’s extraordinary providence was an instance of where he exercised his absolute power, and the two terms were sometimes used interchangeably. At the same time, this ‘operationalized’ variant moved quickly into the realm of political theory and rhetoric. Canon Lawyers and secular political thinkers pressed it into service as a means to justify by analogy the wide reserve of emergency powers possessed by popes and kings.

The crucial transformation, however, occurred during the Protestant Reformation. Catholic theologians repeatedly challenged reformers to produce miracles to prove the truth of their understanding of Christian doctrine. The classic response, typified in Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, was twofold. First, reformers argued that they were not introducing new doctrine, but rather that they had simply hit upon the

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62 Oakley contends that the covenantal understanding of God’s power (though not with explicit reference to the distinction) endured alongside the operationalized variant, and played a major role in subsequent debates between voluntarists and intellectualists. He has, twice, used Locke as a case study. Francis Oakley and Elliot W. Urdang, "Locke, Natural Law, and God," Natural Law Forum, 11 (1966) and Oakley, “Locke, Natural Law and God – Again,” History of Political Thought, 18.4 (Winter 1997): 624-51.

63 Oakley “The Absolute and Ordained Power of God in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” 447-449.

64 Oakley, “Jacobean Political Theology: the Absolute and Ordinary Powers of The King,” 323.
proper interpretation of existing revelation. They were not advocating reform in the modern sense, but rather in the sense of returning to the traditions of the early Church, making new miracles gratuitous. Second, Calvin in particular argued that miracles had been the province only of Christ and the original apostles. The purpose of miracles had been only to establish the initial truth of Christianity, not sustain it through time. The need for miracles had passed, and apparent contemporary departures from the ordinary course of nature should be regarded as “delusions of Satan.”

The Protestant doctrine of the cessation of miracles, which was widely adopted by reformed Churches, thus had two important consequences for conceptions of God’s ordinary and extraordinary providence. First, as Lorraine Daston has pointed out, it increased the prominence of another category of events that floated between the mundane and the miraculous, the preternatural. Preternatural events were those that were too rare to be easily considered part of God’s ordinary providence, but whose divine origin was nevertheless unclear. These included comets, deformed children, strange wildlife, images in the sky, very unusual weather, and a variety of other portents and prodigies. God could generate a preternatural event, but so could Satan, or various kinds of angels and demons, or even the standard unaided machinations of nature. As a consequence, wondrous

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events could not be taken at face value. Rather, they required a careful and expert
evaluation to determine their exact origin.

Second, the cessation of miracles paradoxically rationalized the miraculous. As
Peter Harrison has pointed out, by denying that the age of miracles extended beyond the
initial years of the Christian religion, reformers inadvertently increased the centrality of
miracles to the foundations of Christianity.\footnote{Peter Harrison, “Miracles, Early Modern Science, and Rational Religion,” 502-503; Ibid.,
19-45.} Calvin had argued that Christianity was
established on the basis of the miraculous abilities of Christ. That is, the reason that it
was worth our while to believe in the divinity of Christ’s person and mission was that his
life had been constantly attended by acts of extraordinary providence. Miracles became
the ‘proofs’ upon which the faithful were to base their rational religious belief.\footnote{Harrison, “Miracles, Early Modern Science, and Rational Religion,” 503.}

The concept of miracles as proofs thus added a new ‘communicative’ dimension
to the notion of extraordinary providence. Previously, the classic Biblical illustration of
God’s direct action in the world had been the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace.\footnote{Oakley has masterfully discussed the various invocations of the fiery furnace story in
Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order, 67-92.} From the Book of Daniel, the story relates an incident in which the King of Babylon
orders three Jewish youths to bow down before a graven image. When they refuse, he
orders that they be tossed inside a blazing furnace and burned alive. God intervenes,
however, and prevents the flames from doing the boys any harm.\footnote{Daniel 3: 1-30.} One can see
immediately the difference between the reformed notion of a miracle and the intervention
that foiled Nebuchadnezzar. In the latter case, extraordinary providence constitutes an actual guiding of events in a manner that reflects God’s will, while in the former miracles are principally a “medium of communication” whereby God instructs the faithful on what they ought to believe.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{72} Ashcraft, Revolutionary Politics, 62.
The Ordinary/Extraordinary Distinction and Locke’s Intellectual Milieu

The ordinary/extraordinary distinction in its Protestant iteration thus became an important feature of the seventeenth century conceptual apparatus. With the rise of new methods of inductive science, the distinction was increasingly pressed into service by natural philosophers seeking to lay siege to the deductive systems of the scholastics and explain the natural world in a manner consonant with Christian doctrine. Consequently, both reductive and apologetic applications of the distinction can be found in the writings of many of the members of the Royal Society including Walter Charleton, Joseph Glanvill, John Wilkins, William Whiston, Thomas Burnett, and perhaps most significantly, Locke’s personal friend and colleague Robert Boyle.73

Boyle dwelt at length on the categories of God’s providence on numerous occasions.74 He employed the distinction repeatedly, for instance, in his attack on Aristotelian conceptions of nature, A FREE ENQUIRY Into the Vulgarly Receiv'd NOTION OF NATURE. For Boyle, God’s

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73 Walter Charleton, The Darkness of Atheism Dispeled by the Light of Nature (London 1652); John Wilkins, A discourse Concerning a New World & Another Planet in 2 Bookes (London, 1640); Joseph Glanvill, Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion (London, 1675); William Whiston, A New Theory of the Earth (London, 1694) and Thomas Burnet, The theory of the earth containing an account of the original of the earth, and of all the general changes which it hath already undergone, or is to undergo, till the consummation of all things (London: Printed by R. Norton for Walter Kettily, 1684). Interestingly, one of the most common uses of the distinction was to give a naturalistic explanation of the Noadic flood. Whiston, 206 and Burnet, 63-74. Locke himself attempted this in Some Thoughts Concerning Education. His idea was that God had repeatedly moved the center of the earth’s gravity, causing the oceans to overflow. Locke, “Some Thoughts Concerning Education” in Works of John Locke Vol 9, 184-185.

74 On Locke’s relationship with Boyle G.A.J Rogers, Locke’s Enlightenment: Aspects of the Origin, Nature and Impact of his Philosophy (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1998), 60-62. According to Rogers, Boyle was a major influence on Locke. The two worked together at Oxford in Boyle’s experiments on respiration, and Locke’s library contained over sixty volumes of Boyle’s work. Ibid.
ordinary Providence comprised the best framework for understanding nature’s invariant, law-like behavior.

“‘Tis intelligible to me, that God should at the Beginning impress determinate Motions upon the Parts of Matter, and guide them, as he thought requisite, for the Primordial Constitution of Things: and that ever since he should, by his ordinary and general Concourse, maintain those Powers, which he gave the Parts of Matter, to transmit their Motion thus and thus to one another.”75

Nature is in no way independent of God, a notion Boyle identified with polytheism.76 Rather, what we colloquially refer to as nature is in fact a Dante-esque ‘art of God,’ a carefully wrought artifice sustained moment to moment by his divine activity.77

Further, for Boyle, the careful study of God’s ordinary providence would help us to determine in specific cases if, when, and how God had actually wrought a miracle.

“I think it becomes a Christian Philosopher, to admit, in general, that God doth sometimes in a peculiar, though hidden way, interpose in the ordinary Phaenomena and events of Crises’s; but yet, that this is done so seldom, at least in a way that we can certainly discern, that we are not hastily to have recourse to an extraordinary Providence...if it may be probably accounted for by Mechanical Laws, and the ordinary Course of Things.”78

75 Robert Boyle, A FREE ENQUIRY Into the Vulgarly Receiv’d NOTION OF NATURE; Made in an ESSAY, Address’d to a FRIEND (London, 1685): 42. Boyle actually believed the very notion of ‘laws of nature’ as distinct from God’s constant and unfailing interposition in the workings of the world to be incoherent. “Nothing but an Intellectual Being can be properly capable of receiving and acting by a Law...Inanimate Bodies, how strictly soever call’d Natural, do properly act by Laws, cannot be evinc’d by their sometimes acting Regularly, and, as Men think, in order to determinate Ends.” Ibid., 42-43.

76 Ibid., 84.

77 It is important to stress that this conceptualization of divine activity is not identical to the later deistic notion of a divine actor who simply creates and then recedes into the darkness for all time. Rather, in both his ordinary and his extraordinary providence, God here is the continual underlying primary cause for nature’s behavior.

78 Ibid., 224.
In other words, if we properly acquaint ourselves with the processes of secondary causation appointed by God, then we are less likely to find ourselves bamboozled by false portents.

If Boyle may be taken to be representative, what can be seen here is a growing unwillingness amongst natural philosophers to countenance miraculous explanations for events that can be described and explained through the concatenation of natural causes. Such explanations are unnecessary, because by employing the ordinary/extraordinary distinction, we can come to understand that the ordinary workings of the world are themselves the product of God’s active presence. God’s purposes are not entirely shrouded in mystery. Rather, by close and careful attention to how things appear to us in the mundane events of everyday life, we can learn some significant portion of God’s plan for the world. God has endowed the world with sets of natural properties, and he has outfitted his creatures with the faculties to navigate and understand those properties. In other words, whatever God intends for human beings to know about a given matter of fact, can be discovered by reason.

If its reductive and apologetic uses in natural philosophy provided one context in which Locke may have become familiar with the ordinary/extraordinary distinction, another was the 1670s controversy surrounding Samuel Parker’s ferocious attack on religious dissent, *A Discourse of Ecclesiastical Politie*. Parker was a staunch Erastian (so much so that he was accused by more than one commentator of being a Hobbist), and his *Discourse* was aimed at demonstrating that the Magistrate ought to have direct control over all the outward features of religious practice. In an argument virtually indistinguishable from the one Proast would advance against Locke twenty years later, Parker argued that in the first ages of Christianity, whatever God intends for human beings to know about a given matter of fact, can be discovered by reason.

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79 Ashcraft has an excellent discussion of the larger context for the Parker controversy in his chapter on the “ideological dimensions of dissent.” Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics*, 39-74.

“when [the Church] wanted the assistance of the Civil Magistrate,” the Apostles had used the miraculous powers bestowed upon them by Christ to defeat the enemies of the true religion. “And thus was the Primitive Discipline maintain'd by Miracles of severity, as long as it wanted the Sword of the Civil Power.”

Miracles, according to Parker, had ceased upon the conversion of Constantine. From then on, salvation lay in the hands of the established Church, as governed by the Magistrate. That the Church of England was the heir to this tradition, in Parker’s view, was evident to all “sober and rational” individuals. By separating from the established Church, dissenters unbound themselves from God’s moral law and the order of salvation. They were no better than the Donatists whom Constantine had crushed. They were a “wild and fanatique rabble,” “enthusiasts” whose mere existence threatened both the civil and spiritual order of society.

The Discourse provoked a wave of responses over the course of the 1670s, not least because in addition to his theoretical arguments, Parker also appeared to advocate civil and popular violence against dissenters. The most prominent responses came from Robert Ferguson,

81 Samuel Parker, A Discourse of Ecclesiastical Politie Wherein the Authority of the Civil Magistrate over the Consciences of Subjects in Matters of External Religion is Asserted: the Mischiefs and Incoveniences of Toleration are Represented, and all Pretenses pleaded in behalf of Liberty of Conscience are fully Answered. 48.

82 Ibid., 50. “As soon as the Emperours thought themselves concern'd to look to its Government, and Protection, and were willing to abet the Spiritual Power of the Clergy with their Secular Authority; then began the Divine Providence to withdraw the miraculous Power of the Church (in the same manner as he did by degrees all the other extraordinary Gifts of the Apostolical Age, as their necessity ceased) as being now as well supplied by the natural & ordinary Power of the Prince.” Ibid.

83 Ibid., xxviii.

84 Ibid., 16.
Richard Baxter, and John Owen. All three aimed at rebutting Parker’s charge of irrationality. In doing so, they applied the Protestant ‘communicative’ iteration of the distinction against Parker’s more traditional ‘preservative’ interpretation. The withdrawal of God’s extraordinary Providence did not annex the care of Christianity to the magistrate, according to the non-conformists, but rather altered the means by which the faithful were to verify propositions about God’s will. Ferguson in particular asserted that from that point on it was man’s rationality that allowed him to conform to the divine will. God ceased to communicate by miracles, and instead stamped his law into scripture and nature, so that human beings might save themselves through the exercise of their rationality alone. In the dissenting view, Parker and his ilk were the enthusiasts, impugning God’s gift of rationality and instead insisting on unthinking obedience.

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85 Robert Ferguson, *A sober enquiry into the nature, measure and principle of moral virtue, its distinction from gospel-holiness with reflections upon what occurs disserviceable to truth and religion in this matter: in three late books, viz. Ecclesiastical policy, Defence and continuation, and Reproof to The rehearsal transpos’d by R.F* (London: Printed for D. Newman, 1673); John Owen, *The reason of faith, or, An answer unto that enquiry, wherefore we believe the scripture to be the word of God with the causes and nature of that faith wherewith we do so : wherein the grounds whereon the Holy Scripture is believed to be the word of God with faith divine and supernatural, are declared and vindicated* (London: Printed for Nathaniel Ponder, 1677); Richard Baxter, *The judgment of non-conformists of the interest of reason in matters of religion in which it is proved against make-bates, that both conformists, and non-conformists, and all parties of true Protestants are herein really agreed, though unskilful speakers differ in words* (London, 1676).

86 Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics*, 53.

87 Hence Ferguson: “God creating Man a rational Creature, endowed him with Faculties and Powers capable of knowing what was congruous to the Nature of God and his dependence on him, and what was not.” Ferguson, 57.
Miracles, Reason and Politics: Locke’s Skeptical Prudence Revisited

Seventeenth century Protestant theology and natural philosophy thus offered Locke a robust theory in which he could ground his theory of toleration. We need not stop at circumstantial evidence, however, as there is abundant confirmation of Locke’s own subscription to the communicative theory of providence in his moral epistemology. Locke’s theory of knowledge is deeply complicated and a full explication would carry us beyond the scope of the current discussion. For our purposes, a brief outline of relevant points will suffice. Locke, unlike Boyle, did not think that human beings were fitted for knowledge of the natural world. In fact, as Richard Ashcraft points out, Locke repeatedly and pointedly expressed opinions about “the meagerness of human knowledge” as to the true nature of reality. Rather, like Ferguson, in Locke’s view human cognitive faculties were equipped principally for knowledge of ‘morality and divinity.’ We can, through the application of reason alone come to certain knowledge of God’s existence. Indeed, in Locke’s view, simply being in the world provides such copious evidence for Divine

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89 John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, collated and annotated with prolegomena, biographical, critical and historical by Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover Publications, 1959): 16. Hereafter (except where otherwise noted), the Essay will be referred to ECHU, and section numbers noted according to the convention of book/chapter/subheading.
creation that “there never was any rational creature that set himself to examine [the proposition that God exists] that could fail to assent to [it].”

Additionally, all the fundamental principles of morality attested to in scripture can be attained with certainty by rational reflection as well. “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 and incongruity of the things themselves be certainly discovered; in which consists perfect knowledge.” For Locke, morality is deductive. When we compare the definition of our understanding of murder, for instance, with our definition of ‘wrongness,’ we can just ‘see’ that the latter can be predicated of the former. Like ‘Socrates is mortal,’ the statement ‘murder is wrong’ is true by definition.

There are finer points of God’s will, however, such as that we ought not to work on the Sabbath or that the dead will be resurrected come judgment day, that are not available to reason. Rather, these things exist above reason. But we do not take the truth of these metaphysical opacities on faith alone. Rather, we believe them because their revelation was invariably accompanied by the miraculous. In Locke’s terminology, the

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90 ECHU, I/iii/17.
91 ECHU, III/xi/16.
92 Locke long promised, but never actually provided, a comprehensive deductive system of morality.
93 Locke occasionally expresses contempt for prophecies in the old Testament that do not conform to his vision of revelation attended by extraordinary providence. For instance: “That things brought about in the ordinary course of providence and humane meanes are yet thus ascribed to the Spirit of god is very evident in the old Testament or else we must suppose that the spirit of god descend to meane offices of teaching the arts of weaving & embroidery.” Locke, “Of Immediate Inspiration” in Writings on Religion, ed. Victor Nuovo (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.
Sabbath and the Resurrection of the Dead are ‘credentialed’ by God’s extraordinary providence. “He who comes with a Message from God to be deliver’d to the world, cannot be refus’d belief if he vouches his Mission by a Miracle, because his credentials have a right to it. For every rational thinking Man must conclude as Nicodemus did, We know that thou art a teacher come from God, for no Man can do these signs which thou dost, except God be with him.”

Nor do we take the fact that these breaks in the ordinary course of nature were indeed miracles for granted. We can be fairly sure that Christ and Moses were in fact messengers from God for purely legalistic reasons. Both performed miracles on numerous occasions, in the presence of multiple witnesses.

This is what is sometimes referred to as the ‘two track’ system of Locke’s moral epistemology, wherein reason and revelation act in a complementary fashion to cover the fundamental requirements of morality. “Reason is natural revelation, whereby the eternal father of light, and fountain of all knowledge, communicates to mankind that portion of truth which he has laid within the reach of their natural faculties: revelation is natural reason enlarged by a new set of discoveries communicated by God immediately, which reason vouches the truth of, by the testimony and proofs it gives, that they come


95 Interestingly, Joseph Glanvill made a similar argument for belief in witches. According to Glanvill, the wealth of records attesting to the existence of witches rendered arguments for their physical, logical, and theological impossibility specious. “We have the Attestation of thousands of Eye and Ear-witnesses, and those not of the easily deceivable Vulgar only, but of wise and grave Discerners; and that, when no Interest could oblige them to agree together in a common Lye: I say, we have the light of all these Circumstances to confirm us in the belief of things done by Persons of despicable Power and Knowledge, beyond the reach of Art, and ordinary Nature.” Glanvill, Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion, (London, 1676): Essay VI, 2.

from God.”

One should note, however, that encompassing both tracks is the fact that God always acts *publicly*. If there is some article that requires our belief or some act that needs to be done or avoided, then God will not fail to promulgate that fact in a manner that is accessible to all. The truths of divinity, morality, and revelation (when attended by miracles) can be rationally apprehended by any normal, reasoning adult.

The publicity of God’s providence is the cornerstone of Locke’s conception of moral epistemology. Without publicity, propositions about God’s will are merely speculation. This was the problem Locke identified when he repeatedly inveighed against enthusiasm (a term he associated principally with Puritanism and Catholic claims to infallibility, but which he occasionally applied to Quakers as well) that claimed direct access to God’s will. In Locke’s view, such a claim cannot be considered valid because it is private. There are no means by which outside observer could verify or deny the claim to immediate inspiration. “If they know it to be a truth…[then] any other man may naturally know that it is so without the help of revelation.”

Additionally, the enthusiasts themselves cannot be entirely sure that their ‘direct inspiration’ is genuinely from God and not a preternatural occurrence. “There may be spirits, which, without being divinely commissioned, may excite in those ideas in me, and lay them in such order, that I may

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97 *ECHU* IV/xix/4.


99 *ECHU* IV/xix/11.
perceive their connexion.” Ultimately Locke concludes that such claims must be assumed to be false, because in cases of genuine revelation, God would not permit such a degree of ambiguity. “If he would have us assent to the truth of any proposition, he either evidences that truth by the usual methods of natural reason, or else makes it known to be a truth which he would have us assent to, by his authority; and convinces us that it is from him, by some marks which reason cannot be mistaken in.”

The basic point is that, for Locke, the spheres of what is within our understanding and what lies beyond it are respectively coextensive with what God regards as essential and inessential. Therefore, determining the extent of human knowledge is the same as determining the extent of moral obligation. Further, it is clear that in demarcating what is essential and what is inessential in terms of the means by which God communicates his will to mankind, Locke is implicitly relying on the ordinary/extraordinary distinction. “I am far from denying that God can, or doth sometimes enlighten men’s minds in the apprehending of certain truths, or excite them to good actions by the immediate influence

100 ECHU IV/xix/10. “I ask how shall any one distinguish between the delusions of Satan, and the inspirations of the Holy Ghost? He can transform himself into an angel of light. And they who are led by this son of the morning, are as fully satisfied of the illumination, i.e. are as strongly persuaded, that they are enlightened by the spirit of God, as any one who is so: they acquiesce and rejoice in it, are acted by it: and nobody can be more sure, nor more in the right (if their own strong belief may be judge) than they.” Ibid.

101 ECHU IV/xix/14. “We see the holy men of old, who had revelations from God, had something else besides that internal light of assurance in their own minds, to testify to them that it was from God. They were not left to their own persuasions alone, that those persuasions were from God; but had outward signs to convince them of the author of those revelations. And when they were to convince others, they had a power given them to justify the truth of their commission from heaven, and by visible signs to assert the divine authority of a message they were sent with. Moses saw the bush burn without being consumed, and heard a voice out of it. This was something besides finding an impulse upon his mind to go to Pharaoh, that he might bring his brethren out of Egypt: and yet he thought not this enough to authorize him to go with that message, till God, by another miracle of his rod turned into a serpent, had assured him of a power to testify his mission, by the same miracle repeated before them, whom he was sent to.” Ibid.

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and assistance of the holy spirit, without any extraordinary signs accompanying it. But in such cases too we have reason and scripture, unerring rules to know whether it be from God or no."\(^{102}\)

In light of all this, we can see that Locke’s ‘skeptical prudence’ in a new light. When Locke deploys the argument from ignorance, he is not simply saying that the magistrate should be reticent in legislating intolerance because he cannot be certain that what he is doing is right. Rather, he is arguing much more forcefully that the mere presence of ambiguity, the impenetrability of a proposition to reason, is sufficient to conclude that God does not consider the contents of the proposition essential. Indeed, in doing so he is participating in a defense of religious non-conformity that stretched back at least fifteen years.

Moreover, when Locke limits the sphere of magisterial control to ‘worldly welfare’ and the ‘ordinary course of life’ he is not prudentially separating the spheres of Church and State. On the contrary, he is recasting the role of the Godly Magistrate. Locke’s magistrate weighs only those dimensions of a practice that are amenable to rational examination when deciding whether or not it ought to be prohibited. The magistrate should consider what actions the performance of a practice will normally entail, and what effects will normally follow, and whether or not those are inherently objectionable. Conceived in this way, one can determine the essential moral status of a religious practice. This is because God will have arrayed the various moral properties of a religious practice in such a way that their morality is either self-evident, or demonstrable based upon rational proofs or empirical evidence. If we can, by employing our rational

\(^{102}\) *ECHU* IV/xix/16.
faculties, ‘see’ that a religious practice is immoral, then the magistrate ought to prohibit it. If not, then God has left the matter opaque for a reason, namely that it does not trouble him overly much.

Finally, we are also in a better position to see the actual issues at play between Locke and Proast. In essence, theirs was a disagreement between Protestants over how Christian Polities ought to conduct themselves in the absence of immediate instruction from God. That is, what it means for Christians to be left well and truly on their own. Proast’s High Anglican theory was that care of Christianity had fallen to corrupt human beings, and that without constant maintenance of the community of the faithful, the true religion would eventually wither and die. Locke’s theory of providence, by contrast, was essentially that of a dissenter (though Locke by the 1690s identified himself as a member of the Church of England). God, in Locke’s view, had never abandoned the triumph of the true religion solely to the care of human beings. Rather he had fitted their cognitive apparatus in such a way that in a free market of religious ideas, the true religion would eventually triumph as the most rational option available. When “men have done their duties…[God] bids us not to fear, until the end of the World.”

By advocating this providential reading of Locke’s arguments for toleration I do not wish to suggest that by 1690 Locke had developed an entirely consistent theological rationale for toleration. There are many ways in which Locke’s system falls short of coherence. The most obvious to the modern reader is the immense danger of putting all of

103 Most scholars agree that by this time Locke was probably a Socinian. See, for instance, John Marshall, “John Locke and Latitudinarianism,” in Kroll, Ashcraft and Zagorin, Philosophy, Science and Religion in England 1610-1700, 253-274.

one’s theological eggs into one natural basket. The measurement of God’s will in terms of empirically available costs and benefits rather than Scriptural prescriptions and miraculous interventions lends itself quite easily to a world picture in which God is no longer necessary. If everything human beings need to be good, happy, and wise is available without God’s presence, then why should we, as Lavoisier famously (though perhaps apocryphally) pointed out a century later, retain such a bizarre and irrational hypothesis? Thus it is difficult not to cringe a little (or smirk perhaps, depending upon one’s metaphysical predilections) as Locke confidently declaims on the immediate and incontrovertible availability of God’s existence to human reason. After all, it was not ‘religion’ per se whose philosophical supports collapsed in the post-Darwin era but rather, as Margaret Jacob has pointed out, the very specific natural theology formulated by Locke and his contemporaries.105

There is good reason to think that Locke very quickly began to appreciate this danger, as by the mid 1690s he had already begun to pull away from the notion that everything human beings needed was available through reason working with the senses. In 1695, Locke came into possession of some early draft papers of John Toland’s Christianity Not Mysterious, in which Toland the Deist seemingly took certain articles of Locke’s reasoning to their logical conclusion by arguing that there was nothing worthwhile in Christian revelation that could not be readily apprehended by reason acting alone.106 Locke’s response was The Reasonableness of Christianity, in which his central


thesis was that in spite of reason’s immense power, there were still some things necessary to salvation that could only be achieved through acceptance of revealed truth.\textsuperscript{107}

Further, lest we be lured into thinking Locke’s theology more modern than it actually is, it is important to note that Locke did think, even in 1685, that it was perfectly acceptable for the magistrate to engage in the moral coercion of his subjects.\textsuperscript{108} This was a tendency in his thinking that only became more pronounced over the course of the 1690s. By the third letter, he openly advocates laws against drunkenness, lasciviousness and debauchery.\textsuperscript{109} Indeed, during this time, Locke became associated with John Tillotson’s campaign for moral regeneration as well as the Societies For the Reformation of Manners.\textsuperscript{110}

Nonetheless, this providential reading suggests that accounts of Locke’s political thinking that emphasize skepticism and prudence require some substantial revision. Though the frailty of human knowledge and prudential governance are parts of Locke’s theory of toleration, they do not lie at its center. On the contrary, the key component for Locke’s conception of toleration and its limits is a God not altogether unlike the one who

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 384-413.

\textsuperscript{108} One of the many criticisms Locke makes of the English policy towards dissenters in 1685 was in spite of efforts at persecution, brothels and ale houses were left alone. “Why then does this burning zeal for God, for the church, and for the salvation of souls: burning, I say literally, with fire and faggot: pass by those moral vices and wickednesses, without any chastisement, which are acknowledged by all men to be diametrically opposite to the profession of Christianity?” Locke, “Letter,” 7. This was a widespread criticism, and helped inspire the massive bawdyhouse riots in 1668. Tim Harris, “The Bawdy House Riots of 1668” The Historical Journal, 29.3 (Sep., 1986): 537-556.

\textsuperscript{109} Locke, “Third Letter,” 469.

saved Descartes from his evil demon fifty years earlier. Locke’s God assures us that if we apply ourselves diligently to the works of his creation, we can as *individuals* using our own rational judgment discover all that is necessary for virtue and salvation. The result is a divinely ordained separation of the religious and political spheres, wherein the magistrate is only responsible for those aspects of human life where moral agreement is possible. The limited nature of human knowledge is in fact an unrecognized blessing, as it illuminates the limits of human political and moral obligation. Skepticism of this sort, in Locke’s view, generated true religion, true morality, and Godly politics.
Conclusion: A Crisis of the European Mind?

Thanks to Jonathan Israel’s imposing two-volume interpretation of the European Enlightenment, it has become fashionable once again to speak forcefully of a ‘crisis of the European mind.’ According to Israel, by 1650, the passions that inflamed the wars of religion had petered out, and European authorities had settled into a new age of orthodoxy. Simultaneously, as a result of the scientific revolution and the emergence of the new philosophy, Europe underwent an intellectual crisis in the years after 1650. The contest between confessions was replaced by a new intellectual dialectic between reason and faith. Out of this dialectic emerged not one enlightenment, but two. One—the “moderate, mainstream enlightenment”—sought to reconcile Christian belief and the socio-political status quo with the new modes of thinking. A more radical enlightenment, inspired by Spinoza and Bayle, by contrast:

rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing structures entirely, rejecting the creation as traditionally understood in Judeo Christian civilization, and the intervention of a providential God in human affairs, denying the possibility of miracles, scorning all forms of ecclesiastical authority, and refusing to accept that there is any God-ordained social hierarchy, concentration of privilege or land ownership in noble hands, or religious sanction for monarchy.


112 Ibid., Radical Enlightenment, 11.

113 Ibid., 11-12.
This radical enlightenment, much more than the moderate is, in Israel’s view, responsible for developing the “philosophical package” of modern progressive values.\textsuperscript{114}

Locke’s usage of the distinction between God’s Ordinary and Extraordinary Providence does not, on the face of it, imperil this formulation to any great extent. By Israel’s measure, Locke was firmly placed in the ‘moderate mainstream enlightenment’ that sought to reconcile the new philosophy and Christian belief.\textsuperscript{115} That such a thinker would employ religious language is therefore unsurprising. Locke, however, was not an isolated case. There were others, both outside of England and of a purportedly more radical outlook, who saw the distinction as useful. The most obvious case is the Neapolitan Giambattista Vico, whose \textit{Scienza Nuova} was organized around a nebulous providentialism inherent in nature and history.\textsuperscript{116} But there are other examples as well. Pierre Bayle used the distinction as part of his assault on portentous interpretations of the comet that appeared in 1680.\textsuperscript{117} It was Leibniz’s invocation of the distinction that first pushed Samuel Clarke to insinuate that he was an Epicurean.\textsuperscript{118} Even the supposed arch-infidels Hobbes and Spinoza employed the distinction. It shaped the discussion of miracles in \textit{Leviathan}, and in the \textit{Opera} Spinoza insisted that we must understand God’s

\begin{enumerate}
\item Israel, \textit{Enlightenment Contested}, 864.
\end{enumerate}
power as being broken into ordained, absolute, ordinary and extraordinary components.\textsuperscript{119}

I do not wish to suggest that the Enlightenment was a religious phenomenon through and through. Though they may have exhibited some religious trappings, the ideologies that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century and helped to bloodily sweep away France’s old regime represented themselves as being profoundly anti-Christian. I do not see any need to do other than take them at their word. I do wish to suggest, however, that we ought not to automatically assume threads of continuity from the enlightenment’s beginnings to its end. On the contrary, if I am correct and there is in fact a widespread usage of meaning-laden theological language in the second half of the seventeenth century, then there is a case to be made for a substantial blurring of the boundaries between Europe’s confessional period and the early enlightenment.

Moreover, I think this also poses difficulties for Israel’s partitioning of the early enlightenment into radical and moderate branches based upon their relative embrace or rejection of a “philosophical package” of modernity. Again, if I am correct, then the early enlightenment was animated less by an anachronistic battle between orthodox conservatives and atheistic democrats than by the shared project of trying to develop a theology appropriate to a world transformed by the religious and political struggles of the preceding two centuries. Some of these solutions can, I am certain, be described as more ‘radical’ than others. The question is radical in which respect—radically irreligious or religiously radical? In my view, it may be the case that at the end of the seventeenth

century, many commentators across the political and philosophical spectrum began to believe that a God who was to some degree immanent could resolve more philosophical, political and moral quandaries than one wholly transcendent. In a Europe shaped for over a millennium by Judeo-Christian traditions and the insistence on God’s separateness from his creation, that widespread shift in preference in itself would be radical enough. In other words, I think Israel is correct to suggest that the period after 1650 saw watershed changes in the structure of European intellectual life. I think he is wrong, however, to suggest that what made these changes significant, both historically and philosophically, was their supposed break with Europe’s Christian past. My sense is that the closer we look at the crucial period of 1650 to 1750, the more we are going to find that the “philosophical package” of modernity, including liberal notions of tolerance, has its roots in the surreptitious insertion of the Christian God into nature.
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