Locke and the Problematic Relation between Natural Science and Moral Philosophy

A recent exchange between Jeremy Waldron and Michael Zuckert highlighted an important, but often neglected, aspect of John Locke’s political philosophy having to do with his conception of the relation between natural science and moral philosophy. In his book *God, Locke, and Equality*, Waldron observed that in Locke’s political writings the doctrine of natural equality relies on human beings all being of the same species, yet in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke reduced the notion of species to arbitrary linguistic categories with no real connection to the essence of natural substances.\(^1\) Waldron’s conclusion: Locke’s argument for equality is irreducibly theological. In response, Zuckert argued that Waldron failed to realize that Locke grounds equality in two distinct kinds of arguments: a secular rationalist and a theological argument.\(^2\) The heart of what Zuckert calls “Locke’s wager” is the proposition that these two kinds of arguments with distinct sorts of evidence together provide a compelling case for equality to the broadest range of readers.

This paper examines Locke’s account of the relation between natural science and moral philosophy and finds that both Waldron and Zuckert are correct, albeit in different ways. Waldron is right to see the problematic effects of Locke’s natural philosophy as it relates to his moral philosophy, and Zuckert is correct to observe that Locke’s moral teaching
presupposes a conceptual flexibility embracing two forms of knowledge with distinct sorts of evidence. However, I argue that this signifies a divided mind built into Locke’s thought—that is an uneasy, even tenuous, association between demonstrative moral philosophy and experimental natural science with potentially serious implications for liberal society.

We must begin by examining the problem of species in Locke. As is well known, for Locke the only source of ideas is experience in the form of sensation produced by external sensible objects or reflection upon the internal operation of one’s own mind. The three kinds of ideas produced by sensation and reflection are simple ideas formed by “qualities that affect our senses,”3 complex ideas composed of multiple simple ideas, and mixed modes, which are solely products of the human mind’s capacity to discern relations and separate ideas by abstraction.

The primary distinction between what can and cannot be known through ideas emerges in Locke’s discussion of substance. Far from being the foundational principle of intelligibility as it is for Aristotle or Spinoza, Locke’s corpuscularianism demotes substance to a term signifying the unknown thing that holds corporeal bodies together. Mind has no idea what unites atoms into form and no sense of the infinite variety of potential relations and powers in any, even apparently the most simple, substances. The implications of the ineluctable essence of substance for Locke’s philosophy are enormous. In Locke’s radically particularistic ontology “All things that exist” are “particulars” (3.3.1.409), and as such the proper philosophic stance toward being is to
resist the temptation to deduce general sorts or species from presumed essential qualities. Any truly philosophic perspective must distinguish between the “nominal essence”—the name we give to a sort of thing displaying certain observable characteristics—and the “real essence” or its internal constitution, which is, given our limited cognitive capacities, irreducibly mysterious (3.6.3.440). Whereas mixed modes can in principle be known with certainty precisely because they are constructs of mind indistinguishable from their linguistic representation, we can never achieve more than hypothetical accounts of observable natural phenomena.

What does Locke’s epistemology mean for a moral philosophy ostensibly grounded on membership in a common species? First, Locke clearly rejects the Aristotelian conception of human beings as a certain kind of substance with a distinct ontological status part of an intelligible natural order composed of distinct species of things. For Locke, species has only semantic value inasmuch as while nature may admit of observable resemblances among things, resemblances do not establish boundaries, and thus we must avoid eliding phenomenally similar individuals into a structurally defined class.⁴ If anything, natural kinds would tend toward an astonishing proliferation of species as he argues “it is absurd to ask, whether a thing really existing, wanted anything else to it” (3.6.5.441). For Locke, each abstract idea with a name to it makes a distinct species.

The impact of this for moral philosophy is obvious. Throughout the Essay Locke examines a number of definitions of the human in order to answer the question: Who or
what is a human being to whom one has moral obligations? The thrust of Locke’s account of species is to show that the philosophical attempt to ground a logocentric notion of humankind is much more problematic than typically supposed. The many debates about the moral status of “naturals,” “changelings,” and fetal monstrosities are, in Locke’s view, reflections of the fact that each of these beings with its own “particular constitution” belies the categories based on real essences (3.6.16-7.448-9). From what we do know about the nature of substance, which of course Locke assumes is very little, we can at least say conclusively that rationality does not exhaust the definition of the human.

At this point in the paper it is necessary to examine in some detail Locke’s account of demonstrative morality. Locke raises the epistemological stakes in the relation of moral and natural philosophy dramatically when he announces that “Morality is capable of demonstration, as well as Mathematicks” (3.11.16.516; 4.3.18.549). Moral ideas are like math in the sense that both involve mixed modes that in theory avoid the problem of intermediation between the idea and the reality of things. Whereas “natural Philosophy is not capable of being made a Science,” Locke insists that “our proper imployment lies in those Enquiries, and in that sort of knowledge, which is most suited to our natural capacities, and carries in it our greatest interest,” namely, eternal salvation (4.12.10-11.645-6). This is frequently interpreted to mean that Locke contrasted the inevitable mediocrity of natural science with the certainty of moral philosophy. However, it may be wise to avoid jumping to this conclusion.
When we carefully reconsider Locke’s arguments about natural science and moral theory respectively, we observe that while Locke identifies the acquisition of moral knowledge as the Proper “Business of Mankind,” he hastens to add that he “would not therefore be thought to disesteem, or dissuade the study of nature” (4.12.12.647). Morality is the proper business of human beings partly because it is a study suited to an egalitarian distribution of rational capacities, whereas unlocking the “Secrets of Nature” is suited to the “private talent of particular Men” such as the “Master Builders” of modern science like Newton and Boyle (4.12.11.646; “Epistle,” pp. 9-10). The elitist tendencies in natural science do not, of course, diminish the very positive contributions made to human flourishing by scientific advances, and Locke recounts with great aplomb the civilizational significance of the discovery of iron and quinine (4.12.11-12.646-7). That there is no perfect science of bodies, neither precludes better and worse hypotheses about bodies based on empirical observation, nor does it set a predetermined limit to what conclusions experience can validate.

In addition to observing Locke’s recognition of the advances in natural science, we should also notice the important qualifications he places on the certainty of moral philosophy. It turns out that in practice morality is not capable of the degree of certainty possible with mathematical propositions. At one point in the *Essay*, Locke restates his famous claim about demonstrative moral knowledge with the major caveat, “if a right Method were taken, a great part of Morality might be made out with that clearness…of the Truth of Propositions in Mathematics” (4.12.8.643-44). Not only does certainty in morality depend on use of the “right method” for acquiring knowledge, Locke insists that
even then only a “great part,” but not all of the rules of morality, can be known with mathematical certainty because of the uncertainty inhering in language. The chief lesson Lockeans can draw from this is to beware overconfidence in the power of words to grasp truth not only about substance but also in moral matters.

Locke thus raises the possibility of demonstrating moral truth, while simultaneously showing the extreme difficulty in doing so. We see natural science that is both limited by our ignorance of the real essences, and yet capable of better and worse hypotheses drawn from the experimental method. For Locke then, the human being is both a rational being capable of moral knowledge and at the same time a kind of substance whose real essence is ineluctable.

We now need to take up the theological questions central for both Waldron and Zuckert. In Book I of the *Essay* Locke suggested “the only true ground” of morality is a God “who sees men in the dark, [and] has in His hands Rewards and Punishments” (1.3.6.19). Thus, the normativity of moral law ultimately seems to depend on proof of the existence of the divine “Law Maker” (2.28.5.351). Later in Book IV, Locke tries to demonstrate the existence of God (4.10.3-10.620-23). Apart from the many obvious inadequacies contained in it, what is probably most striking about Locke’s discussion is that it does not, as we might expect, set up a rational demonstration of the particulars of the moral law vouchsafed by God, but rather it introduces a lengthy treatment of the grounds of belief epistemologically falling short of knowledge. It turns out that securing salvation has more to do with judgment, probability and faith—mental activities that do not claim
certainty—than it does with rational demonstration.⁶ For Locke, reason is central to faith insofar as it involves the mind’s assent to the propositions of revelation, but for our purposes the salient point is Locke’s insistence that faith is conceptually distinct from knowledge.⁷ In this respect theology and natural science are more similar to each other, at least with respect to their epistemic basis and their reliance on probability, than either are to demonstrative moral knowledge.

Zuckert is thus correct to observe that in lieu of compelling evidence for the existence of God and immortality of soul, Locke’s moral philosophy runs the risk of collapsing for all practical purposes into the same epistemological zone as natural philosophy; that is the realm of probability and belief rather than knowledge.⁸ While it is possible to make the case, as Zuckert persuasively does, that Locke complemented his theological argument for morality with a secular argument rooted in his theory of self-conscious personal identity,⁹ this study seeks to explore a different aspect of Locke’s conceptual flexibility. We suggest that Locke’s primary aim in the Essay was not to develop his moral theory, but rather to limn the features of a new and more modest conception of philosophy. Narrowing the definition of what constitutes knowledge and broadening the subjective intellectual processes involved in belief formation does not advance a fully fledged moral philosophy, but rather establishes new parameters for philosophic activity framed within a cognitive range bounded by substance, on the one hand, and the supernatural, on the other; between the mysterious properties of the blade of grass and the incomprehensible operation of the “eternal infinite Mind” of Almighty God (4.10.19.630).
In the *Essay* we see perhaps the genesis of modern analytical philosophy in Locke’s reduction of the scope of philosophy to its proper “underlabourer” role helping the various sciences to clarify their terms, sort through theoretical confusions and make their practitioners aware of the limits in the way the mind represents the world in thought and language. The real problem in understanding the proper relation of natural and moral philosophy lies with the presumptuous metaphysician, rather than the humble experimentalist or pragmatic moralist. By making philosophy conceptually more compact, Locke seeks to free experimental natural philosophy from unscientific moral dogma, while also liberating moral philosophy from the metaphysical tendencies of scientific materialism.

We are now in a position to conclude by speculating about the political implications of Locke’s new direction for modern philosophy. The balance between natural and moral philosophy as separate spheres of study with their own forms of evidence is what I call the divided mind in liberalism. Perhaps Locke foresaw modernity animated by a moderate spirit with regards to both natural and moral philosophy. The habitual conservatism of experimental science and the pragmatism of Locke’s “reasonable” Christianity do appear to be ideal partners. Moreover, the stunning success of liberalism since the end of the Cold War appears to testify to the political viability of this balance. However, is there not, at least on a theoretical level, a deep structural instability in this arrangement as well? A natural science constitutionally incapable of endorsing the concept of natural species could, as Waldron fears, seep into thinking about the human
species and thus undermine liberal society’s confidence in the natural basis of moral and political equality.

Conversely, a moral philosophy made aware by Lockean epistemology of the arbitrary character of its own modal reasoning may have few intellectual scruples about simply dismissing or discrediting empirical evidence produced by natural science that challenges regnant moral principles. Perhaps it was even predictable that the divided mind of liberalism would reflexively take a “Red State/Blue State” political expression with factions moral and religious, on the one hand, and scientific and secular, on the other, doing battle over the very meaning of what constitutes evidence, knowledge and proof. The real source of the problem as I see it is something like this. By limiting the scope of knowledge and vastly expanding the range of belief, Locke accentuates the political relevance of any idea that is in principle capable of rational demonstration: knowledge is made more precious by its scarcity. While Locke seems to obviate the possibility for clashing claims to knowledge emerging from moral and natural philosophy by reconceptualizing them both primarily in terms of probability, they differ inasmuch as the conclusions reached on matters of faith, and by extension morality, do not, unlike natural philosophy, expect confirmation by observable empirical evidence. This is not to suggest that there is no empirical basis to evaluate the conclusions of moral reason, but rather that, again unlike with natural science, Locke did not explain how we can expect rational agreement about what this empirical basis would be.
A further complication is a kind of knowledge about “the particular existence of finite beings without us,” which Locke termed sensitive knowledge and argues relies heavily on experience (4.2.14.537-8). For this reason it is the weakest kind of knowledge, but Locke insists that sensitive knowledge has a claim to certainty and is thus epistemologically speaking above probability. My point is that while the stakes are certainly higher for morality and religion than for natural science, the epistemic grounds of the former modes of reasoning also appears to be weaker. It may be more important to understand our moral duties and our potential chances for salvation than it is to learn about the physiology of the koala bear; but the fact is that on Lockean terms we can probably know more about koalas than we ever can about salvation and possibly even of our moral duties. The tension or conflict between natural and moral philosophy thus arises from a condition in which the claim to know something about less important matters can logically lead to substantive claims about more important matters like the biological basis for human species membership—something with obvious moral implications. Natural philosophy as Locke conceives it has the epistemic means to slip the leash of probability with greater facility than is the case with either morality or faith. For its part, Locke’s idea of faith reduces reason to a largely instrumental role in the validation of the miraculous, and thus may not be as well equipped as Locke thinks it is to harness the supernatural in support of a rational system of ethics. As Locke well knew, faith can slip its leash too.

Let us suppose that Locke recognized this possibility. Is his conception of philosophy able to maintain the uneasy balance between natural and moral philosophy? In
philosophy’s traditional role as the master science, it was conceptually well equipped to be the mediator among conflicting claims to knowledge by resolving, harmonizing or simply bracketing off disputes involving theology, ethics and natural science. Admittedly it did so often at great cost to theoretical coherence, but at least prior to Locke there was a general presumption that this is precisely what philosophy is supposed to do. I have my suspicions about whether Locke’s more modest, and in some respects diminished, idea of philosophy has the means to make authoritative claims to knowledge about what contributes to human flourishing. Enlightenment optimism about the natural convergence of moral and scientific knowledge presupposed a more ambitious idea of philosophy than Locke was willing or able to articulate and defend. Contemporary philosophy is sometimes criticized for not being able to speak to the political and scientific communities in their own language. Often this is a fair criticism that was leveled against Locke himself. More problematic, however, may be Locke’s apparent inability to conceive of philosophy as a means through which the moral and the scientific aspirations of modernity can meaningfully speak to each other. 

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6 For thoughtful treatments about the epistemological basis of Locke’s account of belief, see Greg Forster, John Locke’s Politics of Moral Consensus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. chs. 2-4 and Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Locke and the Ethics of Belief (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 1.


10 In the Essay, Locke famously identified the problem of religion divorced from rationalism as “Enthusiasm” (see 4.19).

11 See for example, Locke’s exchanges with Jonas Proast and Edward Stillingfleit, the Bishop of Worcester, over the issues of toleration and rational theology respectively (John Locke, “Third Letter