

LOCKE'S ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDER-
STANDING AS A PARTIAL SOURCE OF
POPE'S ESSAY ON MAN

BY GRANT McCOLLEY

THE importance of Locke to English poets of the first half of the eighteenth century is attested by their many references to him. In the particular case of Pope, Wakefield long ago pointed out an obvious parallel between the passage in *An Essay on Man* which opens with, "Why has not Man a microscopic eye?" and Locke's specific discussion of this point in Book II, Chapter XXIII, Section 12.

There are other parallel concepts. Although general in nature, and such as might well have been developed by Pope himself, or drawn from innumerable sources, they are principles which Locke made important and prominent. The first of these ideas occurs in the section from which Pope drew the parallel noted by Wakefield. In this section, Locke states that "we are furnished with faculties to discover enough in the creatures to lead us to the knowledge of the Creator, and the knowledge of our duty." Pope introduces the second half of the fourth section of Epistle III with the admonition, "Go, from the Creatures thy instructions take," and continues with an amplification of this theme. Although it is traditionally considered that this section, "finely improved," was taken from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, it is important that Pope was indebted to this particular portion of Locke's *Essay* for the parallel established by Wakefield.

A more vital similarity, however, occurs in the purpose of the two essays. Both seek to turn the thoughts of man from the infinite realm of the universal to the finite world of man. These two phases of the generative purpose of the essays are noticeable in both works.

Pope opens Epistle II of his *Essay* with the injunction:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man.

As expanded in the "argument" of Epistles I and II, and in the epistles proper, the scanning of God is the product of a quest for more knowledge. This quest is the result of pride, and occasions

in man error and misery. Although God be known in many worlds, it is the duty of man to trace Him only in his own. This assertion means, in turn, that it is the business of man to study himself, his nature, his powers and frailties, and the extent of his capacity.

According to Pope, to scan God is to philosophize, and particularly to study science. In the first section of Epistle II, the general theme of which is that man should not pry into God, Pope is severe in his comment on science:

Go, wond'rous creature! mount where Science guides;
 Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;
 Instruct the planets in what orbs to run;

 Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule—
 Then drop into thyself, and be a fool!

Not only is the study of science an occupation for the fool, but it offers, according to Pope, little of value to mankind:

Trace Science then, with Modesty thy guide;
 First strip off all her equipage of Pride;
 Deduct what is but Vanity, or Dress,
 Or Learning's Luxury, or Idleness;

 Then see how little the remaining sum,
 Which serv'd the past, and must the times to come!

It was Pope's desire that man study himself rather than seek universal knowledge, that he place no faith in science which occasions thought concerning Deity, and that man know and respect his capacity.

Similar attitudes are generally expressed by Locke. In the Introduction of his *Essay*, he attacks the search after universal knowledge, and urges man to understand his capacity so that he may be "more cautious in meddling with things exceeding (his) comprehension." He next states that "we should not then, perhaps, be so forward, out of an affectation of an universal knowledge, to raise questions, and perplex ourselves and others with disputes, about things to which our understandings are not suited." Such disputes, he continues, only cause men to increase their doubts, and "confirm them at last in perfect scepticism." He concludes that "our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct."

In comparison with that of Pope, Locke's attitude toward sci-

ence is one vaguely expressed. Pope specifically labels the scientist as a fool and his work as almost worthless folly, but such unequivocal statements are not made by Locke. His most direct assertion occurs in the "Epistle to the Reader," wherein he discourses on worthless forms of speech which have "so long passed for mysteries of science," and perhaps by implication indicts science. This indictment, however, has little or no connection with Pope's objection to a science which scanned God.

Various references in the Epistle to the Reader and the Introduction suggest, however, that the origin of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was connected with the scientific movement which then called the attributes of Deity into question. The epistle implies that Locke regarded himself as "an under-labourer in clearing the ground" for "the incomparable Mr. Newton, with some other of that strain." Since Newton, especially in the scholium of the *Principia*, held that God is as unknowable to man as colors are to the blind, it is not impossible that Locke considered a portion of his "ground clearing" a demonstration that a deistic interpretation of God was faulty because of the limits of man's capacity.

It is probable that Locke did have in mind various philosophic and scientific ideas of his period, particularly those concerning Deity. He speaks of disputes as something leading to scepticism, condemns an affectation of universal knowledge, and urges man that he be satisfied with what God has seen fit to give him. One of Locke's best statements of this last point is given in Book II, Chapter XXIII, Section 12, as follows:

The infinite wise Contriver of us and all things about us hath fitted our senses, faculties, and organs to the conveniences of life, and the business we have to do here. We are able by our senses to know and distinguish things, and to examine them so far as to apply them to our uses, and several ways to accommodate the exigencies of this life. We have insight enough into their admirable contrivances and wonderful effects to admire and magnify the wisdom, power, and goodness of their Author. Such a knowledge as this, which is suited to our present condition, we want not faculties to attain. But it appears not that God intended we should have a perfect, clear, and adequate knowledge of them, that perhaps is not in the comprehension of any finite being. We are furnished with faculties (dull and weak as they are) to discover enough in the creatures to lead us to the knowledge of

the Creator, and the knowledge of our duty ; and we are fitted well enough with abilities to provide for the conveniences of living ; these are our business in this world.

The *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *An Essay on Man* state that it is improper for man to seek universal knowledge, and that the proper study of mankind is man and his problems on earth. Both essays advise or suggest that man study the creatures, and agree that man is as perfect as he should be. They further agree in praising the wisdom, power, and goodness of the Creator, and in establishing a virtuous life as the principal consideration of man.

Although it is true that most of these concepts or principles are stated in that section of Locke's *Essay* which provided Pope with comments on the adequacy of the senses of man, it would be hazardous to assert that Pope drew them from this source. He may or may not have done so. In either case, however, Locke made a notable contribution to Pope's *Essay*, for more than any other man he gave to these concepts and ideas the prestige and validity essential to make them attractive to an accepted poet.

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