DAWES HICKS LECTURE

LOCKE AND THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

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I PROPOSE to look critically at Locke's answer to three closely related questions:

1. Are there any circumstances whatsoever in which we can properly be described as 'choosing', or 'deciding', whether or not to believe *p*?
2. If there are such circumstances, does our decision to believe *p* rather than to disbelieve it ever make us liable to moral censure?
3. If there are no such circumstances, are there any other circumstances in which we can properly be praised or blamed for believing *p*?

If I have chosen to subject Locke, in particular, to such a triune inquisition this is for three reasons. First, because his discussion of these questions is lengthy, detailed, and honest; secondly, because it has been very little explored by Locke scholars; thirdly, because on the face of it Locke falls into puzzling inconsistencies, which need some sort of explanation.

To begin from the last point. A passage in Locke's *A Letter on Toleration* lays it down quite explicitly that 'to believe this or that to be true is not within the scope of our will'.[1] And, as we shall see, this is by no means the only occasion on which he so definitely denies that men can ever choose what they shall believe. Yet no less explicitly, this time in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, he distinguishes a class of cases in which 'Assent, Suspense, or Dissent, are often voluntary Actions' (XX. 15)[2]. ('Belief', one should note, he identifies with assent.) Throughout his account of belief, furthermore, Locke relies upon that doctrine which he sums up in one of his running

[1] *Letter on Toleration*, ed. R. Klibansky (Oxford, 1968), Eng. trans. J. W. Gough, p. 121. The original latin reads: 'Ut hoc vel illud verum esse credamus, in nostra voluntate situm non est.'

[2] All quotations from the *Essay* are as in John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975). Nidditch's copy text is the fourth edition. Since most references are to Bk. IV, I cite only, in such cases, the chapter and section.

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heads: 'Our Assent ought to be regulated by the grounds of Probability' (XVI. 1). Assuming only that 'ought' implies 'can', that 'ought' means something stronger than 'it would be nice if', the Utopian sense of 'ought' in which we might tell someone that he ought to be President of the United States, this appears to entail that we are free thus to regulate, or not to regulate, our assent. Indeed, Locke's main contribution to philosophy, so Gilbert Ryle has somewhat narrowly but not absurdly argued, consists in his having shown us that 'the tenacity with which people hold their opinions is not always, but ought always, to be proportioned to the quantity and quality of the reasons which can be adduced for them'.[1] And 'ought always to be proportioned' seems to commit Locke to something like W. K. Clifford's main thesis in 'The Ethics of Belief': 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'.[2] (Although Ryle, we note with interest, ascribes to Locke not 'an ethics of belief' but an 'ethics of thinking'.)

I said that Locke's views, had been neglected. Although it presents us with such striking problems in interpretation, the penultimate segment of the *Essay* (XIX–XX) in which Locke presents his theory, or his theories, on belief, has never been, so far as I know, closely studied. Aaron takes the view that Locke was tiring of his task when he came near to its end, and offers in evidence the fact that he did not revise these chapters as closely as he did their predecessors.[3] Admittedly, they contain an exceptional degree of repetition, a common sign of fatigue. Yet they are quite fundamental for Locke. There were two projects particularly dear to his heart: the first, to advocate, if only within limits, religious toleration; the second, to undermine one particular sort of religion, 'enthusiasm', fanaticism, yet without weakening religious faith. The epistemological foundations of his argument are, in both cases, expounded in these chapters. He did not revise them, one might plausibly suggest, not because he was tired but because the ideas they contain were so fundamental to his thinking, not revisable; the repetitions arise from his determination to hammer home the crucial points.

[1] Gilbert Ryle, 'John Locke', first delivered as a lecture in 1965, reprinted in *Collected Papers* (London, 1971), vol. i; the passage quoted is on p. 156.

[2] First published in *Contemporary Review*, Jan. 1877, reprinted in Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock, *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (London, 1947). The passage quoted is on p. 77.

[3] Richard Aaron, *John Locke*, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1971), p. 248.

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(He added to the fourth edition, indeed, a new chapter 'Of Enthusiasm', still further to insist upon them.)

To turn now to the detail and the honesty of Locke's argument, let us look first at the definition of belief which he offers us: 'the admitting or receiving any Proposition for true, upon Arguments or Proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain Knowledge that it is so' (XV. 3). Believing, it will be plain, is on this view an imperfect surrogate for knowing, made necessary, Locke tells us, by the fact that true knowledge is 'very short and scanty' (XIV. 1). When immediate intuition does not suffice, demonstration can give us knowledge; we *see* that the conclusion of the demonstration must be true. But where such demonstrations are lacking, as they mostly are, we have no option but to fall back upon probable reasoning. Notice that on Locke's definition there is no such thing as an entirely groundless belief; we are persuaded by 'Arguments or Proofs' to accept as true those propositions we believe to be true. This is so, even although the 'proofs' do not amount to demonstrations. Locke defines belief, then, as a purely intellectual operation, in a way which emphasizes at once its likeness, and its inferiority, to knowledge.

It is not at all surprising, in the light of this definition, that Locke generally prefers to speak in terms of 'assent' rather than of 'belief', even although, as we said, he takes them to be synonymous. The mere having of an idea as the result of experience does not for Locke, as it does for Hume, count as believing.[1] We 'believe' only when a proposition is before us for our consideration and there are 'inducements' for us to accept it as true—grounds, that is, which make it seem probable, likely to be true. These 'inducements' may be of either of two sorts, the conformity of the proposition with 'our own Knowledge, Observation and Experience' or 'the Testimony of others, vouching their Observation and Experience'.

The two grounds of probability will, in favourable circumstances, reinforce one another. '[A]s the conformity of our Knowledge, as the certainty of Observations, as the frequency and constancy of Experience, and the number and credibility of Testimonies, do more or less agree, or disagree with it, so is any Proposition in it self, more or less probable' (XV. 6). Many people, Locke confesses, give assent to propositions on much weaker grounds than this; they assent to propositions, indeed,

[1] Compare J. A. Passmore, 'Hume and the Ethics of Belief' in G. P. Morice (ed.), *David Hume: Bicentenary Papers* (Edinburgh, 1977), pp. 77–92.

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merely because someone tells them that they are true. But this is a 'wrong ground of Assent'; those who have recourse to it are not proceeding rationally.

The Mind if it will proceed rationally, ought to examine all the grounds of Probability, and see how they make more or less, *for or against* any probable Proposition, before it assents to or dissents from it, and upon a due balancing the whole, reject, or receive it, with a more or less firm assent, proportionably to the preponderancy of the greater grounds of Probability on the one side or the other [XV. 5].

On the assumption that for Locke belief is involuntary, his choice of language in this analysis of belief and probability may somewhat surprise us. When we believe, he has said, we 'admit' propositions as true, we 'receive' them as such. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* explicitly points out, the primary use of the word 'admit' is voluntary. We can admit, or we can refuse to admit, a person to our house; we can admit, or we can refuse to admit, to a fault, to a responsibility, or that something is the case. The word 'receive' is more often involuntary in its connotations. But when, as here, it is linked with 'admit', it is natural to read it as having that sense in which a person 'receives callers' or 'receives guests' or 'receives stolen goods'—in each case a voluntary act. A 'received opinion', we might add in favour of this interpretation, is surely an opinion which is generally *accepted.* And 'accepting' is, in most contexts, something we choose to do.

Coupling Locke's analysis of the way in which the beliefs of a rational man are founded on the probabilities with his use of such words as 'admitting' and 'receiving' to describe our coming to believe, we should very naturally interpret his analysis of rational belief in something like the following manner: a proposition is put before us, or we put it before ourselves, for our consideration; we estimate its probability in the light of the arguments for and against its being true; we give our assent to it with a degree of assurance proportionate to its relative probability. But this analysis is precisely parallel to the analysis we should offer if we were asked to give an account of what we mean by a rational *decision.* A proposed course of action, we might then say, is put before us, or we put it before ourselves, for our consideration; we estimate its desirability in the light of the considerations for and against it; we agree to it if the considerations *pro* are stronger than the considerations *contra.* So on this interpretation belief would simply be one form of decision-making, that form in which the considerations *pro* and

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contra are considerations of probability. And if such decision-making is not voluntary, then what *is* voluntary? The only question which could remain is whether irrational belief is also voluntary. Yet Locke, as we saw, asserts all belief to be involuntary, whether it be rational or irrational.

Faced with so absolute a contradiction between what seems to be entailed—viz. that belief is one form of voluntary decision—by the interpretation we have so far favoured and the doctrine to which Locke so firmly commits himself, that belief is *not* a voluntary decision, we have no option but to look again at our interpretation. Then we notice that even although Locke certainly tells us that a man must *if he will proceed rationally* assent to a proposition with a degree of assurance proportional to its probability, where the phrase 'if he will proceed rationally' would suggest that irrational people do not thus regulate their assent, he also tells us that no one, rational or irrational, can help giving his assent to the more probable proposition. The probability, for Locke as not for Hume, is one thing, the degree of assurance another, but the first necessarily engenders the second. '[T]hat a Man should afford his Assent to that side, on which the less Probability appears to him, seems to me utterly impracticable, and as impossible, as it is to believe the same thing probable and improbable at the same time' (XX. 15). If we take this to be Locke's considered opinion, two conclusions seem to follow. The first, that where we went wrong in our previous analysis of Locke's argument was in supposing that after considering the *pro* and *contra* probabilities a person, on Locke's view, *decides* to believe or not to believe. No such decision, it would now appear, enters into the situation. Finding the probabilities *pro* a proposition to be more powerful than the consideration *contra* that proposition, a person cannot but believe the proposition with a degree of assurance proportional to the degree to which it seems to him to be more probable. There is no choice in the matter. The second conclusion is that when Locke tells us that 'our Assent ought to be regulated by the grounds of Probability', i.e. the actual or real grounds of probability, he must after all be using 'ought' in its Utopian sense, must be saying that the world would be a better place if people so regulated their assent, rather than that they are under a moral obligation to do so. And Ryle, too, must be using 'ought' in this Utopian sense when he sums up Locke's conclusion in the maxim that 'the tenacity with which people hold their opinions is not always, but ought always, to be proportioned

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to the quantity and quality of the reasons which can be adduced for them'. No doubt, in an ideal world assent would be governed by *the* grounds of probability, by the reasons which *can* be adduced. But in any actual world human beings will believe not in accordance with the grounds which *can* be adduced but in accordance with the grounds they actually have before them, however feeble they may be; they will automatically give their assent to what seems to them, at that moment, the most probable view. To tell them that they ought to believe in accordance with the *real* probabilities, the grounds that *can* be adduced, as distinct from the immediately obvious probabilities, is to tell them they ought to do what they cannot possibly do. 'Admit' and 'receive' have, on this showing, their passive sense, that passive sense in which wax admits, or receives, impressions. Does not Locke tell us that the mind is like a piece of wax? A 'received opinion' is not, it would seem, an opinion we have accepted—for the concept of 'acceptance' is irremediably voluntary—but rather an opinion which has impressed itself upon us.

But setting out to avoid an interpretation of Locke which led inevitably to the conclusion that belief was a voluntary decision we have now substituted an analysis which Locke would find quite as unpalatable, with its consequence that no one can ever be blamed for believing as he does, since we believe as we must. As a defender of toleration, to be sure, Locke might find this conclusion palatable but not as a critic of enthusiasm. He wants to be able to blame the enthusiast, as indeed the atheist, for believing as he does.

Perhaps there is a way out. We distinguished two senses of the phrase 'grounds of Assent'—the sense in which it means the *real* grounds as they would be known to an ideal human observer, the Utopian grounds, and the sense in which it means the grounds as an agent immediately perceives them. But when Locke talks about 'the grounds of Assent' or 'the real grounds' or, in Ryle's phrase, 'the reasons which can be adduced', he usually means something which falls between these two extremes. He means the grounds, the reasons, which would be available to us if we chose to inquire, the reasons which somebody—not an ideal observer, but someone who has investigated further than we have done—would be in a position to put before us, or which we ourselves could discover, if we inquired further. It is *these* grounds, we might now suggest, which ought, on Locke's view, to regulate our assent. We can be blamed for

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not regulating the degree of our assent by reference to them, just because we can be blamed for not carrying our inquiries as far as we should have done.

Such an interpretation, one might continue by arguing, would square with Locke's attempt, towards the very end of his *Essay* (XX. 16), to draw a parallel, in respect to the character and limits of their involuntariness, between belief, perception, and knowledge. To see the point of this parallel, we shall have to revert to an earlier chapter (XIII) in which Locke attempts to establish the involuntariness of perception and knowledge while yet leaving open a very restricted sense in which they are voluntary. It in no way depends on a perceiver's will, Locke there says, whether he sees something as black or yellow, whether he feels it as cold or as scalding hot. 'The Earth will not appear painted with Flowers, nor the Fields covered with Verdure, whenever he has a Mind to it: in the cold Winter, he cannot help seeing it white and hoary, if he will look abroad' (XIII. 2). We are free, in respect to perception, only this far; we are free to decide whether to inspect such a landscape more closely 'and with an intent application, endeavour to observe accurately all that is visible in it' or, on the contrary, simply to take it in at a glance and pass on to other matters.

Similarly with knowledge. In respect to its voluntariness as in so many other respects, 'knowledge', Locke argues, 'has a great Conformity with our Sight'. Like perception, it is *neither wholly necessary nor wholly voluntary.* Just as, if only we open our eyes, we cannot help seeing the winter landscape as white, so too, if we choose to compare our ideas, we cannot but see that they are related in particular ways, and thus arrive at knowledge. Given only that we have the concepts of one, two, three, and six we see at once, if we take the trouble to compare them, that, taken together, one, two, and three make six. Given, too, that we compare the concepts of frail dependent man and omnipotent God we cannot but see that 'Man is to honour, fear, and obey GOD'. But if we do not choose to compare our ideas, this knowledge, mathematical or moral, will never come our way.

> [A]ll that is *voluntary* in our Knowledge [so Locke sums up], is the *employing*, or with-holding any of *our Faculties* from this or that sort of Objects, and a more, or less accurate survey of them: But they being employed, *our Will hath no Power to determine the Knowledge of the Mind* one way or other; that is done only by the Objects themselves, as far as they are clearly discovered [XIII. 2].

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What we have before our minds, that is, determines what we know. Our knowledge is voluntary only in so far as we can decide what we *do* have before our minds.

Now for the comparison with belief.

> As Knowledge, is no more arbitrary than Perception [Locke writes], so, I think, Assent is no more in our Power than Knowledge. When the Agreement of any two *Ideas* appears to our Minds, whether immediately, or by the Assistance of Reason, I can no more refuse to perceive, no more avoid knowing it, than I can avoid seeing those Objects, which I turn my Eyes to, and look on in day-light: And what upon full Examination I find the most probable, I cannot deny my Assent to. . . . Yet *we can hinder both Knowledge and Assent, by stopping our Enquiry,* and not imploying our Faculties in the search of any Truth. If it were not so, Ignorance, Error, or Infidelity could not in any Case be a Fault. Thus in some Cases, we can prevent or suspend our Assent: But can a Man, versed in modern or ancient History, doubt whether there be such a Place as *Rome*, or whether there was such a Man as *Julius Caesar*? [XX. 16].

Notice the progress of Locke's argument, which is consistent with our initial assumptions about his intentions. He is far from denying that ignorance, error, and infidelity can in some circumstances be a fault. ('Infidelity', of course, in that sense which links it with 'being an infidel', with disbelieving.) The enthusiast and the atheist can be condemned on moral grounds, for believing what they should not believe. The only problem, as he sees it, is to reconcile this undoubted truth with his other, no less firm, conviction that belief is never, in the full sense, voluntary.

He tries to reconcile his two basic convictions by applying to the case of belief what he had previously said about perception and knowledge. In the same sense in which we cannot help perceiving that the landscape before our eyes is white, or knowing that two and two make four, we cannot help believing that there is such a city as Rome and that there was such a person as Julius Caesar. But just as it lies within our power to decide whether merely to glance at the snow or to look at it closely, to study or not to study arithmetic, so too, he argues, it lies in our power to decide whether to scrutinize a proposition carefully before we assent to it. Only so far is belief voluntary.

It would seem, then, that Locke gives a clear and definite answer to each of our original three questions. There are *no* circumstances in which we decide to believe p; the question whether we can be blamed for thus deciding does not, therefore,

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ever arise. Nevertheless, there are circumstances in which we can be blamed for believing *p*. This is when we believe *p* without having sufficiently explored the possibility that it is false and if we had done so would have disbelieved it.

Not, Locke now hastens to add, that it is always our duty to inquire before we believe. We are not called upon to submit *all* our beliefs to critical investigation. Precepts so rigorous as this would place an intolerable burden on us. In a great many cases it is a matter of no consequence, whether to ourselves or to other people, what we believe—'whether our King *Richard* the Third was crook-back'd, or no; or whether *Roger Bacon* was a Mathematician, or a Magician'. In such instances ''tis not strange, that the Mind should give it self up to the common Opinion, or render it self to the first Comer'—not strange, and perfectly forgiveable. We do not decide to believe such propositions; we simply acquiesce in them without inquiry. He suggests, even, that in respect to such opinions we are free; 'the Mind lets them float at liberty'. This is not merely a loose metaphor. For he continues thus: 'where the Mind judges that the Proposition has concernment in it . . . and the Mind sets it self seriously to enquire, and examine the Probability: there, I think, it is not in our Choice, to take which side we please, if manifest odds appear on either. The greater Probability, I think, in that Case, will determine the Assent' (XX. 16). So Locke is drawing a contrast. He is arguing that it is only when we inquire closely that we are not free to choose—'*there*, it is not in our Choice, to take which side we please'; 'the greater probability will *in that Case* determine the Assent'. He is leaving open the possibility, which he had previously rejected, of our 'taking what side we please'—if only in respect to unimportant beliefs into the grounds of which we have not deeply inquired.

We can, however, save Locke's central doctrine that belief is involuntary, even if at the cost of this contrast, by withdrawing his concession that in the case of the floating opinion we are free to choose what to believe. Such an opinion, he might have said, simply enters our mind and lodges there. He himself compares it, indeed, with a mote entering our eye. But in that case he will have to modify his earlier definition of belief. For these will then be *groundless* beliefs. Perhaps we should rather suggest, as being Locke's central view, that such beliefs are accepted by us on the ground that they are commonly asserted. What Locke is really telling us, on this view, is that only if we inquire will our beliefs be regulated by real probabilities,

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as distinct from such 'wrong grounds of Assent' as popular opinion.

One now begins to understand why Ryle ascribed to Locke an 'ethics of thinking' rather than an 'ethics of belief'. For where we go wrong, on this interpretation, is in failing to investigate rather than in believing or failing to believe. Our investigations, Locke freely admits, may in some cases lead us astray. As a result of investigating, we may arrive at a false belief which, had we not investigated, would never have occurred to us. But that does not mean that we were then wrong to investigate. 'He that examines, and upon a fair examination embraces an error for a truth', he writes in a *Commonplace Book* entry, 'has done his duty', the 'duty to search after truth'.[1]

If we accept this interpretation, then we could put Locke's argument thus: 'Just as what we know depends on what ideas we have before us, so what we believe depends on what *evidence* we have before us. But it is often the case that we would have had different evidence before us had we investigated further. When the question at issue is one of great importance we ought therefore to investigate it further. So to say that our beliefs *ought* to be regulated by the grounds of probability—that these grounds are not only "the Foundations on which our *Assent* is built" but also "the measure whereby its several degrees are, or ought to be, *regulated*" (XVI. 1)—means that although the evidence we at any time have before us will *in fact* determine the degree of our assent, yet our degree of assent *ought* to be regulated by the evidence we *would* have had before us had we chosen to inquire.'

Clearly, however, something has now gone seriously wrong, at least on the assumption that 'ought' implies 'can'. If our degree of assurance is inevitably determined by the evidence we have before us, if belief is simply something we passively have in the presence of such evidence, just as the perception of a snowy landscape is something we passively have, on Locke's view, in the presence of such a landscape, what is the point of telling us that we ought not to believe until we inquire further? It would certainly be quite ridiculous to say that we ought not to perceive the landscape until we have examined it more closely. Remember Locke's definition of rational procedure: '*the Mind . . . ought to examine all the grounds of Probability*, and see how they make more or less, *for or against* any probable Proposition, before it assents to or dissents from it' (XVI. 5).

[1] 'Error' in Lord King, *The Life of John Locke* (2nd edn. London, 1830), ii, 75 f.

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This *simply isn't possible*, if we automatically respond with the appropriate degree of assurance to any proposition as soon as we have it before us.

Once more, our attempt to interpret Locke seems to have reached an impasse. Perhaps we had better look again at the alleged parallelism between belief and knowledge in case that is what has been misleading us. In the course of drawing this parallel, Locke tells us that we can 'suspend or prevent' our belief. And this is exactly what he must be urging us to do, when he lays it down that our beliefs ought to be regulated by the evidence we *could* have had before us had we investigated rather than by the evidence we have before us prior to investigation. For this implies that we can stop ourselves from believing until we have conducted these investigations. What corresponds to such suspension or prevention in the case of knowledge? Locke's answer is clear enough: '*we can hinder both Knowledge and Assent by stopping our Enquiry.*' We can prevent ourselves from knowing any geometry by not studying it, we can suspend our knowledge of geometry by ceasing to study it. Similarly, then, we can prevent ourselves from believing that Caesar was assassinated by not studying ancient history and suspend any further beliefs about his assassination by ceasing to read as soon as we discover that he was assassinated. But that is not at all what Locke has in mind when he grants that we can sometimes suspend our belief. Neither is it what we ordinarily have in mind when we use that phrase. (Incidentally, we never speak of ourselves as 'suspending our knowledge'.)

Suppose, for example, I go to see a play about the assassination of Julius Caesar. I may wonder whether it gives an accurate account of the assassination. I describe myself as 'suspending' my belief that it does, or does not, until I can inquire further, perhaps by reading a history textbook when I return home. (This is not at all the same thing, I should perhaps add, as the Coleridgian 'willing suspension of disbelief'.) 'Suspending my belief' is by no means equivalent, then, to ceasing to inquire. Rather, I suspend my belief until I *can* inquire, perhaps because I previously knew nothing about Julius Caesar but know that plays are not always historically accurate, perhaps because the playwright depicts an incident which conflicts with what I had previously believed about the assassination of Julius Caesar. My suspension of belief has grounds, then, but that does not stop it from being voluntary. My decisions normally have grounds. 'Voluntary' is not a synonym for 'arbitrary'.

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We can blame someone for not knowing something or for not having perceived something: 'You ought to know that', 'you ought to have seen that'. This is certainly equivalent to 'If you had looked carefully, or if you had reflected for a moment, you would have known that'. In a parallel way, one might be blamed for believing as a result of inadequate inquiry —'You wouldn't have believed that, if you had looked into the matter more closely.' One can be blamed, too, for claiming to know when one does not know, claiming to have perceived when one has not looked, claiming to have good grounds for a belief when one has no such grounds. But one cannot be blamed for knowing *prior* to comparing or for perceiving without looking; this is impossible. One can in contrast be blamed for believing before investigating—and it is then for *believing*, not merely for not investigating, that one is blamed.

So the attempt to assimilate the voluntariness of belief to the voluntariness of knowledge breaks down. It is not just that we can decide not to inquire; we can decide, it would seem, not to believe until we have inquired. Locke's dictum 'What upon full Examination I find the most probable, I cannot deny my Assent to' now assumes a fresh significance. What is the phrase 'upon full examination' doing in this dictum? If the analogy with perception and knowledge were a perfect one, then Locke should simply have written: 'What I find the most probable, I cannot deny my Assent to'. Instead, he adds the phrase 'after full examination' with the suggestion that I *can* deny my assent to what looks to be probable after a *less than full* examination. The parallel at this point is not, indeed, between Locke's theory of belief and his theory of knowledge but between his theory of belief and his theory of desire.

Our will, he suggested in the first edition of the *Essay*, is determined by what we immediately perceive to be the greater good; that is parallel to saying that our belief is determined by what we immediately perceive to be the greater probability. If we sometimes choose wrongly, Locke went on to add, this is because we do not always fully investigate the remote consequences of our actions. That is parallel to saying that if we sometimes believe wrongly this is because we do not always fully explore the probability of what we believe. As Locke's theory of the will stands in the first edition, however, 'choose wrongly' cannot mean 'choose in a manner in which the agent morally should not have chosen'. An outside observer may be in a position to remark: 'had he considered remoter conse-

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quences he would have chosen differently'. From the outsider's point of view the choice is then a wrong one. But the agent himself, and of necessity, has chosen what seemed to him the greater good; he cannot be blamed for doing so. It would have been *better* had he chosen otherwise. So in the Utopian sense of 'ought', he ought to have chosen differently. But in the moral sense of 'ought', no such judgement can be passed upon him. For how can the mind wait to explore before choosing, if it is always automatically determined by the greater good as it perceives it?

In the second edition of the *Essay*, Locke therefore introduced a fundamental change into his discussion of voluntary action. The mind, he now says, has a power to suspend its desires. '[D]uring this *suspension* of any desire', he writes, 'before the *will* be determined to action, and the action (which follows that determination) done, we have opportunity to examine, view, and judge of the good or evil of what we are going to do; and when, upon due *Examination*, we have judg'd we have done our duty . . . ; and 'tis not a fault, but a perfection of our nature to desire, will, and act according to the last result of a fair *Examination*' (II. XXI. 47).

We are no longer allowed to excuse ourselves, then, by explaining that we responded to what we perceived to be the greater good, that the remoter consequences we did not perceive. For we could have inhibited our impulse to act until we had explored further; the mere perception of a course of action as being to our greater good does not immediately and irresistably compel us to choose it.

The parallel between Locke on desire and Locke on belief should by now be obvious. From the point of view of an outside observer an agent believes wrongly if he believes as he would not have believed had he explored further. But the agent might reply: 'I believed as I had to believe on the evidence before me. If I had had your information, my belief would have been different. But it was not in fact before me. My belief may be *incorrect*, wrong in that sense, but none the less it was not wrong of me to hold it.' Locke's counter-argument, or so I am suggesting, would run something like this:

'During the suspension of any belief, we have an opportunity to examine, view and judge the probability of what we are being asked to believe; and when, upon due examination, we have judged, we have done our duty . . . ; it is not a fault but a perfection of our nature, to believe according to the last result of a fair examination.'

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Our duty, then, is to hold ourselves back from choosing, or from believing, until we have considered the situation fully; people who do not do this can properly be blamed. But after such an examination, we cannot but choose what then seems to us the greater good, cannot but believe what seems to us most probable. And this is not as a result of some defect, some limitation on our freedom. On the contrary, it is 'a perfection of our nature' thus to believe. At this level, the truth of freedom is necessity.

One might argue, of course, that Locke was mistaken in supposing that we can voluntarily suspend our beliefs. Perhaps the true situation, as Professor Curley has suggested, is this: the arguments *pro* and *contra* are sometimes so balanced that our belief is suspended, as a balance is suspended by equal weights on either side.[1] So suspension of belief is no more voluntary than is believing or disbelieving, it is equally determined by the perceived probabilities.

But Locke cannot take this way out. We ought, on his view, to suspend our beliefs whenever we discover that they rest on unexamined grounds. This does not at all imply that the case against them is as strong as the case for them. That we do not yet know. The analogy is with suspending a policeman from his duties, pending inquiries. We have some ground for suspicion: that is all. Unless it is possible for human beings to suspend their belief in this sense, it is quite pointless to tell them that they ought not to accept beliefs on inadequate evidence. They will automatically believe whatever at that moment seems to them probable, with no choice in the matter. To those who reply that it is indeed pointless thus to rebuke them, that we *cannot* suspend our beliefs, Locke would have replied, I think, as he does to those who doubt whether we can suspend our desires: experience shows us that we can (II. XXI. 47).

Such an appeal to introspection might dissatisfy us; we may suspect Locke, both in relation to belief and desire, of employing, in the concept of suspension, an *ad hoc* device for reconciling his moral conviction that we ought to hold certain beliefs, make certain choices, with his theoretical conviction that our belief is always determined by our perception of probabilities, our choice by our perception of the greater good. But, to describe him as proceeding in an *ad hoc* manner would be unfair;

[1] E. M. Curley in an essay on 'Descartes, Spinoza and the Ethics of Belief' in E. Freeman and M. Mandelbaum (eds.), *Spinoza: Essays in Interpretation* (La Salle, Illinois, 1975), p. 175.

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that we can suspend our belief is certainly a common presumption. It might turn out to be mistaken, but it is certainly not the merely factitious product of a theoretician's dilemma. So, for example, in his *The Scientific Imagination*, Gerald Holton has argued that the scientist must learn both to suspend his belief and to suspend his disbelief, neither believing as soon as a plausible hypothesis presents itself nor disbelieving as soon as some accepted view is apparently overthrown by new evidence.[1] He does not take this view as a way out of problems in the theory of belief, but rather as a result of reflection on what actually happens within the institutions of science.

Locke would not be satisfied with the suggestion, made explicit by Bernard Williams, that we wrongly suppose ourselves to have some degree of control over our believing only because belief naturally passes over into public assertion and we do have a degree of control over what we publicly assert. As Locke emphasizes, there are many societies in which people cannot, without making a martyr of themselves, publicly assert their beliefs; they learn to be careful about what they say. If we live in such a society, it is still our duty, as Locke sees the situation, not to *believe* without examination. And in so far as to ascribe such a duty is to assume that belief can be voluntarily suspended, Locke is committed to the conclusion that belief lies under our control.

But our story is still not complete. Locke is more than a little perturbed by the fact that people's beliefs are so often not in accordance with the real probabilities, even if we take this to mean the probabilities as they would be estimated by someone who had scrupulously examined the available information, as distinct from the probabilities as an ideal human observer would estimate them. '[I]f', he writes, 'Assent be grounded on Likelihood, if the proper Object and Motive of our Assent be Probability [notice the transition from "grounded on" to "*proper* Object"] . . . it will be demanded, how Men come to give their Assents contrary to Probability' (XX. 1). Locke is convinced that he can satisfactorily reply to this objection. He attempts to do so, indeed, *before* he formulates his final view that belief is voluntary only in the sense in which knowledge is voluntary.

There are two distinct sets of cases to be considered, the first in which men do not have the relevant information before them, the second in which they have the relevant information before them but use, Locke says, 'wrong measures of probability'.

1 Gerald Holton, *The Scientific Imagination* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 71.

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In the first set of cases, Locke sees no theoretical difficulty. If people are so exhausted by hard labour or so politically restricted or so lacking in intelligence or so lazy that they are unable or unwilling to inquire, then it is only to be expected that the opinions they hold will be at variance with the real probabilities. For theological reasons, Locke has to maintain that these obstacles are never so formidable as to render a person incapable of discovering the fundamental truths of religion. But he can freely grant that such intellectually handicapped persons may, in respect to a wide range of their beliefs, hold beliefs which further inquiry would show them to be highly improbable—and, except where they are lazy, cannot be blamed for so believing.

The second class of cases Locke finds much more troublesome. There are men, he has to confess, who, 'even where the real Probabilities appear, and are plainly laid before them, do not admit of the conviction, nor yield unto manifest Reasons, but do either *epechein*, suspend their Assent, or give it to the less probable Opinion' (XX. 7). How can this be so if belief is an automatic response to the greater probability? Where such men go wrong, Locke tries to persuade us, is in *their estimates of probability*. They do not 'yield unto manifest reasons' because they assign probabilities wrongly. Note once again the close connection with Locke's theory of the will. He himself brings out the parallel. '[T]he Foundation of Errour', he writes, 'will lie in wrong Measures of Probability; as the Foundation of Vice in wrong Measures of Good' (XX. 16).

But how, in turn, does *this* mistake arise, this false belief that *p* has a greater probability than it really has? First, according to Locke, human beings tend to give too great a weight to general principles, principles which were instilled into them when they were children and which they therefore wrongly take to be innate and unquestionable. Indeed, they 'will disbelieve their own Eyes, renounce the Evidence of their Senses, and give their own Experience the lye, rather than admit of anything disagreeing with these sacred Tenets' (XX. 10). Locke roundly condemns those who act thus; at this point his theory of belief links with his rejection of innate principles. But this is not because they have *deliberately decided* to give a higher probability to these principles than they ought to give them; the principles were not deliberately adopted but were 'riveted there by long Custom and Education' (XX. 9). When Locke condemns such dogmatists—although with a measure of toler-

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ance—it is in his usual fashion for *not inquiring*, not testing, not examining, their fundamental beliefs. This, he thinks, they could have done, had they so chosen.

Now, it is relatively easy to understand how a person educated all his life to hold a certain belief should ascribe to it so high a probability that nothing can outweigh it. But Locke includes the 'enthusiast' in this same category. 'Let an Enthusiast be principled, that he or his Teacher is inspired, and acted upon by an immediate Communication of the Divine Spirit, and you in vain bring the evidence of clear Reasons against his Doctrines' (XX. 10). In this instance, a person has *come to* assign a high probability to a quite preposterous proposition, a proposition which, furthermore, may be quite at variance with those principles to which, from childhood, he had been accustomed to assign a high probability. We cannot explain how *he* comes to make his mistakes by assimilating him to the person who was brought up to hold a particular belief.

Perhaps Locke has his classifications wrong. Perhaps he should have brought the enthusiast within the ambit of a third case he has described, when the objective grounds of probability do not accord with men's passions and appetites. 'Tell a Man, passionately in Love, that he is jilted; bring a score of Witnesses of the Falsehood of his Mistress, 'tis ten to one but three kind Words of hers shall invalidate all the Testimonies. *Quod volumus, facilè credimus; what suits our Wishes, is forwardly believed*' (XX. 12).

This, however, is more than a little startling. For we had been encouraged to assimilate belief to knowledge and to perception where, on Locke's view, passion has no such power. In the present instance, men do not deny the probabilities; at the same time they refuse to accept the conclusions which follow from them. Is this not a clear case of choosing to believe the less probable? The lover's friends would certainly describe the situation in these terms: 'he chose to believe his mistress rather than us'.

Locke tries to offer an alternative analysis of the situation, consistent with the general course of his argument as we have so far presented it: 'Not but that it is the Nature of the Understanding constantly to close with the more probable side, but yet a Man hath a Power to suspend and restrain its Enquiries, and not permit a full and satisfactory Examination, as far as the matter in Question is capable, and will bear it to be made.' But in the present instance this now-familiar tactic will not

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work. The evidence is *already* before the lover; he needs no more evidence. Neither does he suspend his belief: he believes his mistress and does not believe the witnesses, witnesses in whom, on other matters, he would have implicit faith.

So Locke tries a different tack, still working with his intellectualist conception of belief. In such cases, Locke argues, the person who faces the evidence squarely and yet says 'Although I cannot answer, I shall not yield', is still relying on grounds which seem to him probable. Fresh evidence, he will tell himself and his critics, may emerge, a hidden fallacy may be revealed, a witness may turn out to be unreliable, a conspiracy to be afoot. Locke is not suggesting that this is *always* a possible rejoinder. '[S]ome Proofs in Matter of Reason, being suppositions upon universal Experience, are so cogent and clear; and some Testimonies in Matter of Fact so universal, that [a man] cannot refuse his Assent' (XX. 15). But few philosophers, at least in their cooler moments, have ever supposed that it is *always* possible to choose what to believe. The only question is whether this is *ever* possible. And now Locke makes the concession we began by quoting: 'in Propositions, where though the Proofs in view are of most Moment, yet there are sufficient grounds, to suspect that there is either Fallacy in Words, or certain Proofs, as considerable, to be produced on the contrary side, there Assent, Suspense, or Dissent are often voluntary Actions'. The arguments we have before us in such instances we admit to be extremely powerful, and yet, as we say, we 'refuse to believe' the conclusion which would follow from them, we 'do not choose to believe' that it is true.

The fact that in such situations we so unselfconsciously use such expressions as 'refuse to believe', 'choose to believe' does not, of course, finally settle the matter. These expressions might rest on intellectual confusions, myths about our own capacities; or they might be idiomatic ways of talking, misleading only if we (wrongly) take them literally. Perhaps Locke need not have made his concession. Very strong evidence has been produced, let us say, that a political leader we have been accustomed to admire has betrayed us. We say that we 'do not choose to believe' or 'prefer not to believe' that he is guilty. But all this may mean is that out of loyalty we are not prepared to *admit* that he is guilty.

Such an interpretation would link very neatly with the set of observations with which Locke ends this section of his *Essay*. After all his explanations, he is still worried about the fact that men have so many false beliefs, beliefs contrary to probabilities

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of which they are well aware, even although, in his view, their beliefs are naturally determined by the evidence before them. What men call their 'beliefs', he therefore suggests, are very often not beliefs at all but expressions of party loyalty. 'They are resolved to stick to a Party, that Education or Interest has engaged them in; and there, like the common Soldiers of an Army, shew their Courage and Warmth, as their Leaders direct, without ever examining, or so much as knowing the Cause they contend for' (XX. 18).

It is not just that such 'common soldiers' have acquiesced without reflection in some current opinion, like the man who acquiesces in the view that Richard III was a hunch-back. For he at least understands what he is acquiescing in; he gives the proposition enough attention to be confident that it is not utterly ridiculous, even if he does not closely examine its truth. In contrast, Locke is suggesting, the majority of the members of a party or a Church do not even *understand* the views to which their membership commits them. Their so-called 'beliefs' are, on their lips, mere catch-cries, expressing their resolution to stick by their party. So their apparent capacity to believe what cuts clean across the evidence is improperly so described. It is a capacity, only, to utter certain phrases when their party or Church calls upon them to do so. And if 'I believe *p*', can sometimes thus be equated with 'I stand by the party which asserts *p*', then equally 'I refuse to believe that *p*', 'I like to believe that *p*', 'you ought to believe that *p*', can be expressions of, or exhortations to, loyalty, whether to a person or a party.

Locke puts forward a very similar argument in his *Commonplace Book*.[1] He then asks us to consider the case of a man who adheres, without critical reflection, to what Locke calls 'a collection of certain professions'—let us say the Thirty-nine Articles or the Westminster Confession. Such an adherence, Locke tells us, 'is not in truth believing but a profession to believe'.

Yet, one naturally objects, if we ask the loyal adherent: 'Do you believe *p*?', he will certainly, and sincerely, reply 'Yes'. Furthermore, if the belief is of the kind that carries actions as a consequence, he will engage in those actions; he will not merely tell us that God is present in the consecrated wafer, to take Locke's own example of transubstantiation, he will approach communion reverently. If we ask him to explain to us in detail

[1] Lord King, *Life*, ii, pp. 76–7.

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in what the doctrine of the Real Presence consists, he will no doubt rapidly become confused, should we not be satisfied with the stock-catechism answers. But does this imply that he does not actually believe in the Real Presence? One is reluctant either on the one side to identify a merely habitual response—in which utterances 'are made, actions performed, but without any understanding whatsoever'—with a genuine belief or on the other side to permit oneself to speak of 'beliefs' only in those instances where the situation has been fully comprehended. Some degree of understanding, some capacity to answer relevant questions, seems to be required for a genuine belief. But *what* degree of understanding is quite another matter. Unless we put the criteria high, we shall not find it possible to avoid the conclusion, which Locke wants to avoid, that a great many people hold quite absurd beliefs. Yet if we do set them high, we make it impossible for anybody to believe, as distinct from merely parroting phrases, unless he has considerable intellectual gifts, a conclusion which seems quite monstrous.

So far, I have had nothing to say about the chapter on 'Enthusiasm' which Locke introduced into the fourth edition of the *Essay* immediately prior to that chapter on 'Wrong Assent, or Errour' to which our attention has latterly been directed. One is indeed tempted to pass it over as of merely historical interest. But in fact it entirely disrupts the argument he has so far developed and continues to develop in the chapter which now succeeds it. In discussing the enthusiasts we might expect him to experience his greatest difficulties in defending his intellectualist account of belief. And this is precisely what we do find. We find, too, confirmation of our suggestion that the enthusiast should be classified with the lover who believes against the evidence. Locke now begins to describe rational belief not in terms of a purely intellectual weighing-up but rather in terms of the operations of a certain form of passion—the love of truth.

No doubt, he links his new emphasis on passion with the course of his previous argument. There is, he says, one unerring mark of the lover of truth: 'The not entertaining any Proposition with greater assurance than the Proofs it is built upon will warrant' (XIX. 1). But whereas we had once been given to understand that human beings were so constituted as inevitably thus to adjust their degree of assurance to the evidence, we are now told that 'there are very few lovers of Truth for Truths sake, even amongst those, who perswade themselves that they

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are so'. What happens, then, when men believe a proposition with greater assurance than the evidence for it warrants? In such instances, Locke now informs us, ''tis plain all that surplusage of assurance is owing to some other Affection, and not to the Love of Truth'. Or again, 'Whatsoever Credit or Authority we give to any Proposition more than it receives from the Principles or Proofs it supports it self upon, is owing to our Inclinations that way, and is so far a Derogation from the Love of Truth as such.' That dictum which in earlier versions of the *Essay* was little more than a passing remark—'what suits our wishes is forwardly believed'—comes to occupy the centre of the stage. It is no longer surprising that believing, as Locke's argument proceeded, came to be parallel to desiring rather than to knowing. In rational men, men inspired by the love of truth, belief is no doubt founded on the evidence and nothing but the evidence. If belief is in their case ever voluntary, it is only so in those very special instances in which they continue to believe, with the probabilities against them, in the expectation that fresh information will turn up. But such lovers of truth, Locke now thinks, are rare. What he is now prepared explicitly to call 'groundless fancies' play a much greater part in human life than he had at first been prepared to admit. Indeed, whereas a belief had at first been *defined* as a proposition received as true *upon arguments and proofs*, this definition, it would now appear, applies only to rational, or relatively rational, beliefs; men can believe from inclination, or at the very least they can believe from inclination with much greater assurance than they should believe. (And in the case of the enthusiast, with his 'groundless fancies', the degree of assurance should be zero.)

Can they be blamed for believing? Locke seems to take it for granted that our inclinations lie in some measure under our control. 'He that would seriously set upon the search of Truth', he writes, 'ought in the first Place to prepare his Mind with a Love of it' (XIX. 1)—as if this 'preparation of the mind', with the subduing of inclinations which it entails, lies within our power. 'He that hath not a mastery over his inclinations', he tells us in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, '... for the sake of what reason tells him is fit to be done, wants the true principle of virtue and industry'.[1]

Finally, a word or two about 'faith', in the narrow sense of the word, the acceptance of a belief because it is taken to be

[1] *Some thoughts Concerning Education*, § 45, ed. F. W. Cornforth (London, 1964), p. 64.

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divinely revealed. Historically speaking, this has occupied the very centre of the debate about whether men can decide to believe. Many Christian theologians, from Clement of Alexandria to Newman, have thought it a central assumption of Christianity that assent lies in a man's power, that men can choose to believe what God teaches them, even when it is contrary to experience, perhaps even to reason. For they have wanted to blame 'men of little faith', the Doubting Thomases of this world.[1] And they were conscious of what Jesus is reported as saying in Mark: that men are to be saved for believing, damned for not believing (16: 15–16). How could this be, if men are not free to believe? Not all theologians, of course, have taken this view. Faith, many of them have argued, is a grace of God; men can believe only when God enables, or perhaps compels, them to do so. If Jesus condemned them for not believing, this is only to express God's mysterious judgement upon them. Or like Aquinas they have sought to compromise. Faith he describes as 'an act of the intellect assenting to Divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God',[2] an act of free choice, even although a choice men can make only when God permits them to do so. But when philosophers and theologians have asserted man's freedom to believe, this has most often been in order to leave room, as Locke also wants to do, for condemning infidelity. Or else, as in Clifford's case, for condemning credulity as the wrongful making of a decision.

Locke, however, and without calling on divine grace, does not make of faith an exception to his view that the rational man will believe only with a degree of assurance proportional to the evidence. Once again he begins from the case of knowledge. '[*N*]*o Proposition*', he says, '*can be received for Divine Revelation*, or obtain the Assent due to all such, *if it be contradictory to our clear intuitive Knowledge*' (XVIII. 5). It is only reason that can tell us a particular book is divinely inspired; and no evidence that it is so inspired can be as clear and certain as the principles of reason itself. '*Nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with the*

[1] That assent, or belief, is an act of the will has continued to be a very widely held doctrine amongst Roman Catholic philosophers. So Lonergan tells us that 'it is a free and responsible decision of the will to believe a given proposition as probably or certainly true or false', B. J. F. Lonergan: *Insight* (2nd edn. rev. London, 1958), p. 709. The extent of conflict on this point is brought out in Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 81–6.

[2] *Summa Theologica*: 'Of the Act of Faith', Second Part of the Second Part, Question 2, Article 9, Dominican translation.

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clear and self-evident Dictates of Reason, has a Right to be urged, or assented to, as a Matter of Faith' (XVIII. 10). We are to have faith in what revelation tells us, only if all we can set against it are '*probable Conjectures*' (XVIII. 8).

Here, very obviously, Locke is writing in moralistic terms. 'Nothing that is contrary to the Dictates of Reason has a *right* to be assented to.' It is not at all being suggested that we *cannot* believe what is contrary to reason. '*I believe, because it is impossible,* might', he says, 'pass for a Sally of Zeal', but it 'would prove a very ill Rule for Men to chuse their Opinions, or Religion by' (XVIII. 11). A 'very ill rule' no doubt, but on the view from which he originally set out, it would be not only 'ill' but *impossible* to adopt such a rule. In short, the existence of the enthusiast constantly undermines Locke's hopeful view of man, as a being who naturally, and inevitably, responds to the most probable hypothesis—much as the very existence of twentieth-century enthusiasts has undermined the similar confidence we partly inherited from Locke himself, but without paying adequate attention to his vacillations and reservations.

There can be no doubt, I think, that Locke would have liked consistently to maintain two theses, the first that rational human beings will regulate their degree of assurance in a proposition so that it accords with the evidence—the ideal of an objective science, the Enlightenment ideal. The second, that human beings are so constituted as naturally to do this, were created rational, that they go wrong only when some of the evidence is not before them. But he finds it impossible to reconcile this second thesis with his experience of the actual irrationality of human beings, brought home to him with peculiar sharpness by the Civil War and, more particularly, by the 'enthusiasm' of the Puritan sectaries. At first, he does what he can to reconcile his theories with his experience by suggesting that what, from the point of view of better-informed observers, are irrational beliefs have a rational foundation, that they rest upon errors of fact rather than errors of judgement—errors of fact arising either out of ignorance or the assignment of wrong measures of probability. If only men could bring themselves to inquire, he argues in this spirit, they would cease to hold irrational beliefs. But then he still has on his hands a residue of cases, in which men have all the evidence before them which they could possibly need, and yet still believe irrationally. Perhaps, he is at one point led to suggest, they do not under these circumstances *believe*, in the proper sense, at all; they merely mouth phrases.

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But it is very hard to take this view about an ardent enthusiast, convinced that he is personally inspired by God. And so in the end Locke is led to conclude that men can believe falsely, not as the result of having inadequate evidence, but as a result of being dominated by powerful inclinations. And so he is gradually driven into a new picture of belief, in which it is no longer a weaker form of knowledge, but rather, like desire in Locke's second-edition account of desire, an attempt to remove uneasiness, to satisfy our inclinations. The rational man is then the man who is dominated by a passion for truth, as distinct from party passions. Conscious of the fact that his beliefs are often based upon evidence which from the point of view of an ideal observer is inadequate, such a rational man will be tolerant, as the enthusiast, confusing his beliefs with knowledge, will not be tolerant. But at the same time the rational man will *blame* the enthusiast, whether on Locke's first view, for not properly inquiring or, on Locke's second view, for not properly controlling his inclination to believe beyond the evidence.

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