

**The Role of the Public in Locke's Educational Writings**

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At the very beginning of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* John Locke signals his view of the importance of the subject: “I think I may say that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education. ‘Tis that which makes the great difference in mankind.”<sup>1</sup> Locke’s assessment of the formative role of education is hardly surprising given the deeply egalitarian premises of his natural rights philosophy in his seminal political writing *The Two Treatises of Government*. Here Locke grounded natural rights on the basic human equality derived from our status as being “promiscuously born to the same faculties” (Locke 1988: II, 4). In this context he affirmed that the ultimate goal of education is rational autonomy and the full independence of children upon reaching maturity: “Age and Reason as they grow up, loosen them [the Bonds of Subjection] till at length they quite drop off, and leave a Man at his own free Disposal” (Locke 1988: II, 55). Natural freedom and equality thus are the core philosophical ideas underlying Locke’s teaching on education.

Yet as several commentators have observed, there are two aspects of Locke’s argument in the *Thoughts* that seem to conflict, or be in tension, with the egalitarian premises of his natural rights philosophy. First, Locke directs his ideas in the *Thoughts* not at all children, but rather primarily for the sons of well-to-do gentlemen (Horwitz 1986: 141). Second, Locke’s recommendations seem to presuppose that a proper education can only take place in the private family under the instruction of a personal tutor (Tarcov 1984: 3-4). Together these propositions suggest that Locke had a narrowly class-based conception of education that in practice had little application to the public more generally.

This study reexamines the role of the public in Locke’s educational writings. Contrary to the notion that Locke’s educational theory focused on the requirements of a particular social class, this study will argue that Locke’s educational writings were permeated with an acute sensitivity to the importance of education as a public good. Indeed, Locke’s educational theory aimed at nothing less than formulating the intellectual basis of a conception of democratic citizenship for Lockean liberal society.

In order to illuminate the central role of the public in Locke’s thoughts on education, it is necessary to examine his understanding of the multiple dimensions of what is public. This multifarious idea of the public is only intelligible, however, if we look beyond the *Thoughts* and include in our analysis his other major educational writings, the later *Conduct of the Understanding* and his “Essay on the Poor Law.”<sup>2</sup> Taken in their totality, these writings present a comprehensive treatment of education designed to suit the requirements of various stages of individual development and maturity. Perhaps the most revolutionary, but rarely noticed, aspect of Locke’s educational writings, spanning early childhood education in the *Thoughts* to a call for reform of university curricula in the *Conduct*, is his foreshadowing of contemporary approaches to education that integrate pre-school, primary, secondary, higher education and continuing education. Each aspect of Locke’s educational proposals includes an important public dimension and element of liberal democratic citizenship. In a sense, this culminates in his plan to institute his key pedagogical insights in a system of publicly funded “work schools” for poor children

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<sup>1</sup> Locke 1996: *Thoughts*, section 1. Hereafter in text and notes T, sec and for *Conduct* in text and notes C, sec.

<sup>2</sup> The *Thoughts* was first published in 1693 and expanded considerably for the 1695 edition. The *Conduct* was written in 1697, but only published posthumously in 1706. The “Essay on the Poor Law” was drafted in 1697.

which would have made providing educational opportunity on a massive scale a legitimate public policy objective arguably for the first time in history.

This study proceeds in three sections. In section one, we consider Locke's account of the importance of socialization in early education and the training in moral virtues Locke sees as the natural corollary of proper socialization. These are fundamentally democratic virtues designed to deepen the individual's egalitarian sympathies, while simultaneously preparing for rational autonomy upon maturity. Section two turns to Locke's treatment of higher education in the *Conduct* and his recommendations for producing an informed citizenry, open to rational discourse and scientific advance. The final section examines Locke's argument in the "Essay on the Poor Law" for the extensive use of public power to promote education as a societal goal, which he insists will not only enhance the "welfare and prosperity of the nation" (T, p. 8) by making more rational citizens. It also promises to support the individual reflection upon the issues of politics, religion and science that comprises the very essence of democratic citizenship in Lockean liberal society.

### **The Thoughts: Socialization and Moral Virtue**

Locke opens the *Thoughts* with the admission that his collected reflections on education were not originally intended "for public view," but he came to the decision to publish them only once he became convinced that they "might be of some use if made more public" (T, p. 7). From the private correspondences with his friend Edward Clarke, in which he proposed an educational regime for that gentleman's son, Locke concluded that the "method here proposed" may have much more general application than that for which it was initially designed. What is perhaps most striking about this method from the outset is the extent to which Locke emphasizes the deep underlying connection between physical and mental education: "A sound mind in a sound body is a short but full description of a happy state in this world" (T 1).

This initial foray into physical education immediately sets a democratic tone that permeates through the entire treatment of early education. All children should be trained to endure physical hardship so as to be hardy and adaptable adults later in life. Effeminacy, morbidity and valetudinarianism are presented by Locke as the pernicious effects of physically corrupting habits acquired in youth. Much to the anticipated horror of "fond mothers," Locke insists that the young gentleman's "bed should be hard," and he should be brought by insensible degrees of change when still an infant to become accustomed to wearing wet shoes and light clothing (T 22, 7). With perhaps more than a hint of democratic *ressentiment* Locke insists: "gentlemen should use their children as the honest farmers and substantial yeomen do theirs" (T 4). Locke amplifies the jarring novelty of this reverse snobbery by extending the recommendation for robust physical exercise to include the daughters of the gentry as well as the sons (T 9).<sup>3</sup> By forcing parents to confront their own deeply rooted prejudices about gender, Locke seeks to encourage an open minded attitude as the natural default position of parents and teachers concerned with education more generally.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the significance of advocating similar physical education, Locke never indicates any area of intellectual development or academic training that would be any less suitable for daughters than it is for sons.

The central theme of this discussion of physical education is Locke's effort to demonstrate the malleability of human understanding through the interconnection of mind and body. With changes introduced by gentle and insensible degrees "we may bring our bodies to anything without pain" (T 7). Insofar as habituation plays an important role in education, the key for success lies in correctly deciding "what habits you settle" in the child (T 18). Locke spares no occasion to excoriate what he takes to be the many ill-conceived and pernicious customs of childrearing among English gentry relating to poor diet, constrictive clothing and enforced physical delicacy. However, the ultimate effect of this external influence on a child's development is not simply to accustom the body to hardship, but rather to begin the process of habituating the mind to rational control of the desires by reducing their number and intensity. Inuring a child to the effects of cold and wet through habit is simply the earliest and wholly somatic practice in developing the cognitive capacity of suspending desires that grounds Locke's account of intellectual freedom in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke 1975: 2.21.47.263). Freeing a child from an impulsive response to pain and discomfort is the first step in somewhat removing him or her from the mechanism of natural sensation.

Whereas the key for physical development is avoiding corrupting customs that encourage delicate sensibilities, Locke indicates that the most important, and potentially dangerous, issue in mental development relates to proper punishments and rewards. Use of incorrect rewards and punishments will undermine any system of education, much as proper rewards and punishments are the irreplaceable instruments for correct socialization. The main thrust in Locke's effort to direct early education toward proper socialization involves replacing the ubiquitous practice of corporal punishment with a new system of incentives based on esteem and disgrace. Locke rejects the "rough discipline of the rod," which is the "ordinary way of education" in the grammar schools as well as with private tutors, on the grounds that it provides no positive reinforcement for good conduct and the inculcation of good habits (T 74). Children who are whipped for failing their lessons will simply hate and resent the books and subjects (as well as the teachers) that are the cause of their torment (T 37, 47). Moreover, corporal punishment contradicts the physical education directed to training endurance toward hardship. Indeed, children raised with a Lockean system of physical education would be least responsive to corporal punishment precisely because they have been trained since infancy to see pain as not being a great, or at least not the greatest, evil.

Cultivating a child's sensitivity to esteem and shame is the lynch pin of Lockean socialization. He calls this "the great secret of education" because praise and disgrace are "the most powerful incentives to mind, when once it is brought to relish them" (T 56).<sup>4</sup> Unlike corporal punishment, shame and esteem appeal to a child's nascent sense of oneself as a rational being. Locke does not argue that the desire for esteem is natural in the strict sense, but he maintains that sensitivity to one's estimation in the eyes of others emerges much earlier than is typically supposed (T 35, 57). The mental aspect of the hedonic principles woven into the fabric of human understanding produces even in very young children an enjoyment in possessing a "state of reputation" (T 59). He admits that his call to reason with even small children is novel and will be "wondered at," but he maintains that "gentle persuasion" is almost always more effective in shaping behavior than compulsion (T 80).

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<sup>4</sup> Harris (1994: 281, 287) identifies Nicole and Bayle as potential sources for Locke's sensitivity to the educational and social power of opinion.

The key for Locke is not to confuse the desire for being thought reasonable with the actual state of being fully rational. While these two phenomena are related, Locke clarifies that it is the desire or passion to be esteemed as rational that needs to be cultivated: “They love to be treated as rational Creatures...’Tis a pride should be cherished in them” (T 81, 34). The reason guiding young children is properly speaking that of the parent or teacher, however, the child’s willing participation in this superintending *nous* is itself both an indication of nascent rational faculties and an exercise in their gradual development.

Habituation is the conceptual bridge linking the desire for esteem and rational autonomy in Locke’s theory of early education. The foundation of the method of education is early training of the mind to act in a rational way. Esteem and disgrace are the quasi-natural, hedonic basis of a system of reward and punishments that allow the preliminary efforts to make a child’s mind “pliant to reason,” even if at first this is the reason of others (T 34). Locke presents habituation as a means to bring a child closer to the achievement of rational control over desires. Esteem without habit requires constant reaffirmation by external agents; good habits without the need for constant praise is a vital milestone on the path to rational autonomy. Good mental and physical habits originating in the supervening reason of parents and teachers is required at least in part as a means to prevent bad habits or customs from being implanted in a child’s mind. Locke practically equates custom with bad habits rooted in the mind’s early acceptance of erroneously associated ideas at a period when the mind has not yet fully developed its critical faculties. In addition to the prophylactic dimension of habituation, Locke also sees a more constructive element in it. Habit stands as a kind of mid-point between custom and critical thinking. In this respect, his notion of habit is a departure from the traditional Aristotelian idea of the role of habit in ethical training. In Aristotelian ethics, good habits originate in a conscious activity that gradually becomes practically natural or a kind of second nature embedded in one’s character. Thus, an individual learns to be courageous, for instance, by deliberately experiencing dangers in battle.<sup>5</sup> One cannot learn to be courageous by playing football or climbing tall trees.<sup>6</sup> For Aristotle, the serious business of ethical training only gradually, and perhaps only in rare cases, becomes genuinely pleasant once the individual has developed a powerful predisposition toward the beauty and nobility of morally virtuous action.<sup>7</sup>

However, Locke’s education operates on the basis of a different understanding of habit and experience. He maintains that early education is advanced by making all tasks a form of play: “I have always thought learning might be made play” (T 147). By employing the hedonic motivation natural to children, Locke suggests parents and teachers can teach them to read more effectively by making it a game than through dry memorization and beatings (T 155-8). In contrast to Aristotle, Locke sees habituation originating in unreflective and even pleasant activity that only gradually becomes more self-conscious and less intrinsically pleasant over time. For Locke, what originally seems natural such as learning to read through games necessarily

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle 1962: Book III, chapters 6-9. See also Ward 2001: 71-83.

<sup>6</sup> In this respect note Aristotle’s insistence that ethical training is emphatically not for the young (1962, Bk I, ch. 3, 1095a2-7). While Locke does not disagree with Aristotle that immaturity makes full understanding of virtue virtually impossible, he does place an emphasis on appealing to the nascent rationality of even very small children that seems, if not incompatible with Aristotle, at least to have been philosophically uninteresting to the ancient master.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle 1962: Bk. II, ch. 3, 1104b5-12.

becomes a more conscious and deliberate activity such as reading a particular book on a certain subject.

Given the emphasis on experience and radical diminution of the importance of rules in Locke's account of socialization in early education, it is perhaps not surprising that Locke presents virtues as mental habits that like reading and foreign languages should be learned by children through experience rather than as academic studies. There are two prominent features of Locke's treatment of virtue. First, each of the virtues he considers in detail including liberality, courage, and humanity are eminently practical, geared to the age and capacity of the student, and are understood to be in service of the general educational goal of socialization. Second, the virtues are presented to the educator less as goods in themselves than as learned behavior designed to counteract certain natural vices or anti-social propensities. The obverse of the natural love of liberty and desire to be treated as a rational being is, according to Locke, the even more basic "love of power and dominion," which shows itself practically in the cradle as children try to bend those around them to their will through "peevish" crying (T 103). The second, and related natural vice, is the covetous "desire of having in our possession and under our dominion more than we have need of." This natural "wanting more" Locke identifies as "the root of all evil" (T 106).

Locke's remedy to the problem of natural vice is a method of inculcating virtue that relies on a curious blend of hedonism and self-control. On the one hand, Locke insists that parents and teachers should never submit to imperious demands of children. While parents must always be attentive to a child's genuine needs, one should never satisfy their superfluous desires for specific things (T 106). The aim is to inculcate mental habits of self-control so that children become accustomed to master their desires and learn to consult their reason. Self-denial, which Locke admits is "so contrary to unguided nature," must initially be imposed on children with the expectation that it will gradually become habitual. Locke maintains that without this capacity to suspend desires prior to forming judgment about action, they can never have virtue (T 45). On the other hand, Locke's account of virtue also emphasizes the need to make virtuous action as pleasant, or at least as painless, as possible. For instance, in order to teach liberality children should not only be conspicuously esteemed for freely sharing or parting with what they have, parents and teachers should always ensure that a child loses nothing by his or her liberality: "Let all the instances he gives of such freeness be always repaid, and with interest" (T 110). The key to developing habits of liberality, as well as humanity, as an antidote to natural covetousness or cruelty respectively is to make virtue appear to be both easy and as a reward in itself.<sup>8</sup>

One striking feature of Locke's treatment of virtues is the extent to which he de-emphasized the role of religion in encouraging good moral habits.<sup>9</sup> While Locke claims that the foundation of virtue requires imprinting "very early" on the mind "a true notion of God" who

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<sup>8</sup> In this respect Brady exaggerates the importance of the natural desire for self-preservation in Locke's early education. As she observes (2005: 168) Locke only mentions self-preservation once in passing at sec. 115. Given Locke's aim to promote virtue indirectly through experience and habit, rather than harsh reminders of one's mortality—a concept Locke doubts is accessible to children—it is perhaps fair to say that he seeks to radically de-emphasize, if not entirely eliminate, preservationist concerns in early education.

<sup>9</sup> See also Mehta 1992: 128; Pangle 1988: 203; and Tarcov 1984: 87. In this respect, Harris (1994: 283, 289) and James Tully (1993: 231-2) tend to exaggerate Locke's sense of the importance of religion as a practical support for training young children in virtue.

“loves us and gives us all things,” he is silent as to how this providentialist disposition assists in making a child liberal, courageous, just or humane (T 136). Locke’s religion in the *Thoughts* is a simple non-dogmatic creed with an at best inchoate notion of a providential God suited to the capacities of children. There is no notion of an Afterlife with eternal rewards and punishments, indeed Locke explicitly discourages the “promiscuous” reading of Scripture by children (T 158). The vague sense that there is a God who knows everything and does “all manner of good to those that love and obey him” suffices for children (T 136). Locke’s aim here is not to undermine the traditional Judeo-Christian connection between religion and moral education, but rather to reinforce his contention that any form of education, including moral education, must be suited to the age of the pupil.

“Breeding” replaces religion as the practical foundation of virtue in Locke’s proposals for early education. Locke distinguishes breeding or “civility” from virtue, for breeding is a character trait that “sets a gloss on virtues” in a social context (T 145, 93). Breeding is both the superintending principle of all the virtues and the social manifestation of the virtue of humanity in particular. Breeding supple “natural stiffness” and “softens men’s tempers” so that without it courage appears as brutality, learning becomes pedantry, and wit mere buffoonery (T 143, 93). The well-bred individual makes those he “converses with easy without debasing himself” (T 143). In a remarkable reevaluation of a traditionally aristocratic prejudice, Locke interprets the idea of breeding to involve inculcating deeply egalitarian sympathies. Breeding means avoiding showing contempt for anyone in conversation and indeed teaching children “to love and respect other people” (T 144). It involves more than just good manners, although this is clearly a part of it. Instilling good breeding essentially involves the encouragement of democratic sentiments and humane impulses. This is Locke’s quasi-conventional supplement to natural compassion. Breeding not only bridges the concerns of the self-regarding individual to his or her community in the immediate social context, Locke presents breeding, rather than religion, as the first practical manifestation of a child’s growing awareness and experience of universality and membership in a common humanity.<sup>10</sup> Locke’s reinterpretation of breeding is, then, meant to support the later development of the more sophisticated philosophical and theological commitment to equality that is the moral core of his vision of a natural rights-based society.

It is in this context of education by experience that the teacher, as opposed to the specific content of the teaching, assumes special significance for Locke. In what Locke calls a crucial digression from “our method,” he directs his audience of concerned parents to reflect upon the vital question of who should teach their children. While Locke operates from the assumption that families should retain a tutor for their children, he is at pains to express his conviction that a good tutor is exceedingly rare. Parents should spare no expense in securing such a precious commodity and they should always show utmost respect to the tutor as a valued member of the household: “As to the charge of it, I think it will be the money best laid out that can be about our children” (T 90, 88).

The primary qualification of a tutor is good breeding and knowledge of the world. Locke does not expect a good tutor to have expertise in an array of academic subjects as he more or less abandons the teaching of classical languages and rhetoric, the cornerstones of humanist

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<sup>10</sup> While Forde (2006: 252-4) sees breeding as a bridge between the interests of the individual and membership in the community, I extend this sentiment into a nascent identification with a broader sense of humanity.

education with its pedagogic system of rules, drills, and memorization. The tutor's role in the academic element of education is simply to introduce the student to the basics of civil history, geography, arithmetic and foreign languages such as French that will be of use in a future career. The main job of the tutor is to develop good breeding. Breeding is not taught from books, but by good example, therefore the tutor must himself be well-bred (T 93). By knowledge of the world, Locke means the tutor's familiarity with a variety of social contexts and the diversity of human types. This allows the tutor to impart to the student through habit and use the proper and free composure of language, look, motion and posture suited to conversation with various people and occasions. Locke suggests that the fundamental problem in private education in the family is the natural tendency to a certain parochialism, which a good tutor can reduce by introducing a worldly and urbane element into an otherwise potentially quite insular institution (T 70). Parents, of course, are charged to reinforce their children's good manners assiduously.

Locke's account of the qualifications and pedagogic duty of a tutor represents a kind peak in his treatment of early education. The tutor's task encompasses the full scope of Locke's new method of education with its combination of socialization and communication of ideas. The great secret of education is to develop strategies geared to the optimum effect possible given the student's level of maturity. Thus, the "great skill of a teacher," is not filling the mind with wisdom, but rather "to get and keep the attention" of the student through carefully devised activities (T 167). The tutor, then, is an integral element of Locke's overarching theme in the *Thoughts*, which amounts to a call to standardize or even professionalize a new method of childhood education with a focus on adapting learning to the capacities of the students and designing a sensible curriculum that helps prepare student's for their life and career. As such the *Thoughts* points beyond itself to the outline of a graduated system of education extending from primary right through to higher and continuing education.

### **Higher Education: The Conduct**

In the introduction to the *Conduct of the Understanding* Locke signals that this book on education has a different purpose and intended audience than his earlier *Thoughts*. While the argument of the *Thoughts* registered some movement from very early education through to introductory level studies of the various disciplines, Locke's focus in this work was primary and secondary education. The *Conduct*, however, is focused exclusively on higher education. In particular Locke highlights what he takes to be the need to replace the system of "logic now in use...in the Schools" with a new method of higher learning (C 1). He appeals to the authority of no less than Francis Bacon, who many years earlier criticized England's universities for failing to provide a model of education that would support the promising new experimental science (C 1). The *Thoughts* and the *Conduct* are thus the root and branch of Locke's larger program of educational reform.

In the *Conduct*, however, Locke's aim is to replace habituation that characterized the *Thoughts* with conscious activity and to progress his methodology toward practice in critical thinking, an activity not to be expected in children. The *Conduct* operationalizes the vision of



rational or “epistemic” autonomy undergirding, but largely nascent in the *Thoughts*.<sup>11</sup> The flower of the seed planted in early education is the promise of forming a rational individual possessing the “vigor of mind to contest the empire of habit” and able to resist accepting “their teachers notions and tenets by an implicit faith” (C 41). In transferring his method from the early goal of freeing children from the mechanism of nature to development of the more complex mental operations of critical reason, Locke replaces socialization and habituation with an inherently individualist and skeptical attitude that ceases to be habitual precisely by virtue of its self-conscious character.

The philosophical foundation of Locke’s method in the *Conduct* is identical to that of the *Thoughts*; namely, the relative equality of natural intellectual faculties. Both the foundation and objective of his educational methods are deeply egalitarian. Not only do the natural capacities of human beings differ little in “the woods of America, as well as the schools of Athens,” Locke insists that “we are born with faculties and powers capable of almost anything” (C 2, 4). The fundamentally leveling effect of Locke’s teaching is reflected in his assumption that it is the application of correct or incorrect methods of thinking that creates significant intellectual differences among people, not their natural abilities. Whereas the *Thoughts* distinguished the proper means to educate and socialize an ordinary “man of business” from the production of scholars or prodigies, the *Conduct* consistently blurs the distinction between the scholar and the ordinary citizen. Locke attacks the narrowmindedness and intellectual laziness of the English gentry and asserts that contrary to custom, reading and study is the proper business of a gentleman (C 3). Indeed, in the *Conduct* Locke extends his focus beyond the gentry class by attributing to all adults the duty and capacity to expand their intellectual horizons through rigorous reflection on issues of political legitimacy and religious salvation that are in principle accessible to and impact all (C 19). With this Locke presents epistemic autonomy as a realistic goal not only of a few, but as a cultural expectation of liberal society.

The evil twin of relative equality of natural capacities is, according to Locke, the all-too-natural temperamental and intellectual defects common to human understanding. First, there is the disposition toward intellectual laziness in which one is content to rely uncritically upon the opinions of others in important practical and speculative matters (C 3). In other words, the natural and healthy default position of Locke’s early education becomes inherently problematic in adults. Second, Locke identifies the problem of partisanship displayed by individuals who put “passion in the place of reason” when confronted by an issue that affects their humor, interest or party (C 3). Locke suggests such people are capable of being openminded on matters that do not touch their interests, but are incapable of critically examining their own most deeply rooted prejudices. The third defect, and the one that elicits Locke’s lengthiest treatment by far, is partiality or pride in one’s own reason. Locke concedes that it is impossible for one individual to examine any issue from all perspectives: “From this defect I think no man is free” (C 3). However, the defining characteristic of the intellectual sectarian is the failure to recognize that one’s basic principles and commitments are but a part of a complex reality. It is all too common for even, or perhaps especially, intellectually inclined individuals to converse with only one sort of person and read only one sort of book for they “will not venture out into the vast ocean of

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<sup>11</sup> “Epistemic autonomy” is the useful term employed to describe Locke’s practical goal of education by Neill 1989: 227 and Schouls 1992: 26-7.

Knowledge.” Unwilling to engage in meaningful contact with diverse ideas and opinions, they think there is “no truth but in the sciences that they study, or the books they read” (C 3).

Locke’s intellectual method in the *Conduct* is designed to liberalize higher education by encouraging scholars and the broader educated class to not only recognize the intellectual defects and sectarianism endemic in the current system, but also to remedy these problems by combining a new awareness of the internal operations of mind with an attitude encouraging direct and systematic engagement with a variety of studies and texts. The cardinal virtue in Locke’s new system of higher education is probity. Probity is both the enemy of habit and, paradoxically, the final product of habituation to self-control instituted in childhood. It is important to recall that Locke always maintained throughout his account of early education that knowledge is distinct from habit (Neill 1989: 238). Knowledge properly speaking presupposes what Locke calls “indifferency,” which is not passivity, but rather a form of mental activity that makes possible self-examination of one’s own opinions (C 10-11). Indifferency addresses, without entirely neutralizing, the natural problem of perspectivalism. By achieving a condition of mental equanimity in which one “must not be in love with any opinion, or wish it to be true,” the individual can be confident that only genuine evidence and examination can secure one’s assent to any proposition (C 11, 34).

In contrast to the syllogistic reasoning characteristic of the formal logic of the universities, Locke’s new method focuses on the mind’s ability to control its own internal operations. The first stage involves developing the “habit of attention and application” required to focus the mind on the connections in a train of ideas (C 30). Locke insists that the ability to direct the train of ideas may be one of “the great differences that carry some men in their reasonings so far beyond others” (C 30). In order to facilitate this practice, Locke suggests that the individual needs to adopt the Cartesian methodology of reducing every argument to “clear and distinct ideas” (C 29). Locke is fully aware that this induced decompositionism runs directly counter to the more natural tendency of the human mind to construct composite ideas in order to make the world intelligible to us, however unexamined or erroneous our judgment of the association of these ideas may prove to be.<sup>12</sup> Much as Locke’s proposals for physical education strove to make play out of necessity for children, similarly his method of higher education appeals to an individual’s epistemic egoism to encourage a relish for mentally deconstructing arguments and opinions.

One of the most important aims of Locke’s method is to develop what he calls the practice of “bottoming.” Whereas his early education was designed to enhance the natural taste for reason by encouraging children to participate in problem solving exercises with parents and teachers, it is only with maturity that the individual is capable of reaching the bottom of problems by self-directed mental activity. Bottoming is a complex process in which an individual reduces one’s beliefs or the elements of a particular question down to their clear, distinct, and self-evident propositions (Schouls 1992: 218-9). Once the mind has reached this foundational principle or bottom, it “clears the doubt, and gives an easy solution of the question” (C 44). By carefully examining each link in the chain associating a number of ideas and tracing them to their self-evident source, the individual is then in a position to reconstruct the logical connections in a proposition on more solid epistemological ground. If an opinion does not reach

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<sup>12</sup> See Locke 1975: 2.12.1-2.163-4.

its bottom in a foundation of certain, self-evident principle, then it should be reconsidered or rejected. This process of mental deconstruction and reconstruction requires a form of skepticism related to indifference, but it is a limited skepticism informed by the possibility and, indeed necessity, of grounding arguments on self-evident propositions. Significantly, Locke's example par excellence of bottoming involves reducing particular questions of political legitimacy to the certain principle that "all men are naturally equal" (C 44). From this premise, Locke insists all manner of debates concerning the rights of individuals in society can be resolved.

Locke's emphasis on the mind's ability through training to become conscious of, and thus capable of directing, its own activity is perhaps even more apparent in the mental activity he terms "transferring." Transferring involves conscious exercise of the "habits of attention and application" by which the mind learns to transfer its thoughts from one subject or idea to another without distraction or loss of focus. Practice in transferring tests the extent of an individual's "full power over his own mind," and helps establish mental processes that will be of "great use both in business and study" (C 45). The radical implication of Locke's argument is that complex mental activities such as bottoming and transferring are not natural intellectual gifts enjoyed by a lucky few. Rather they are products of training and the application of a method capable of improving the understanding of practically anyone, regardless of their calling or natural disposition.

For Locke, the application of the method relates primarily to reading and study. One crucial difference between the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct* is the emphasis on books in the latter. Early education based on experience and a general de-emphasizing of book learning now becomes education through the experience of reading, or more properly learning how to read carefully. In a small but important digression in the *Thoughts* Locke suggested that those training to become scholars should follow La Bruyere's recommendation to ground their education on close study of "the original texts" (T 195).<sup>13</sup> Locke endorses Bruyere's textualism not only because it allows insights into a given author or text, but also, and even primarily, because it accustoms the mind to method and order by reducing arguments to "the simplest and most uncompounded parts it can divide the matter into" (T 195). In the *Conduct* Locke systematizes this call for close study of original texts and offers it as an alternative to the study of formal logic as the basis of higher education. He is far from insouciant about the advantages of reading: "there is no part wherein the understanding needs a more careful and wary conduct than in the use of books" (C 24). Locke warns vociferously against the dangers of adopting opinions on the basis of sloppy, hasty, or prejudiced reading. However, with due attention to the requirement of indifference, close reading of original texts is the ideal training ground for application of methodical reasoning: "Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking makes what we read ours" (C 20). Reflecting upon the structure, design and logic of an argument in a text does more to develop the understanding than the bare collection of facts or memorization of axioms.

The application of methodical reasoning to reading is the hallmark of Locke's treatment of the various studies to which the adult individual, and especially the university student, should aspire. He strongly recommends an interdisciplinary approach as an antidote to the problem of restricting the understanding to "narrow bounds" and not "looking abroad into other provinces of

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<sup>13</sup> Locke quotes a passage from Bruyere's *Mouers de ce siecle* (1696).

the intellectual world” (C 22). However, two subjects stand out in Locke’s account. First, Locke expands on his earlier recommendation to study mathematics in the *Thoughts*. The value of math is twofold. It makes the assumption of indifference much less problematic than in moral, political or religious studies, which more naturally produce a passionate or emotional response. More importantly, however, Locke sees studies in math as a way to train the mind of a scholar in following a chain of ideas and examining their connection. The aim is not to make everyone a mathematician, but rather to help “make them reasonable creatures” for “in all sorts of reasoning, every single argument should be managed as a mathematical demonstration” (C 6, 7).<sup>14</sup> Locke did not mean by this that all aspects of intellectual experience can be reduced to mathematical certainty. Rather his point here is that mathematics accustoms the mind to the useful practice of thinking in terms of probability and weighing the merits of various pieces of evidence before giving assent to a proposition. Mathematics and close reading of texts both accustom the mind to thinking consciously about thinking clearly.

The other subject that assumes great significance in the *Conduct* is religion. While in the *Thoughts* in-depth study of theology and questions of divine reward and punishment were seen as beyond the capacity of children, these concerns become essential elements of the mature individual’s efforts toward rational autonomy through higher and even continuing education. The relative equality of natural cognitive capacities assumes more of a primacy with respect to religion than possibly in any other subject to which Locke’s method can be applied as he insists that every adult has an intellectual interest in two things: their particular calling and in the “concern of a future life” (C 8). Soteriological concerns are, if not wholly natural, at least a basic function of human cognition, rather than advanced education. Locke refers to instances of “very mean people” who have raised their minds to a “great sense and understanding of religion” (C 8). The primary significance of Locke’s method with regard to religion is its encouragement to all people to think more clearly and rationally about morality and salvation, even as he excoriates the English gentry in particular for their notoriously bigoted and unreflective religious attitudes. Theology emerges for Locke as the democratic study *par excellence*, as a “noble study which is every man’s duty” because in principle questions of salvation are every individual’s concern (C 23). The egalitarian basis of Locke’s method ensures that the value in close reading of texts, especially Scripture, extends to all classes. The goal of epistemic autonomy thus is more than just a scholarly or elite concern, it becomes in effect the basis of an argument for education in liberal citizenship through the diffusion and application of Locke’s proposals on a scale far beyond the university.

## **Education and the Public**

We have seen that Locke’s educational proposals in the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct* address issues relating to pedagogical concerns ranging from primary to higher education, and even include recommendations for continuing education not only for gentlemen, but also common people inspired to reflection and examination of political, moral and religious beliefs. We have also

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<sup>14</sup> Mehta is incorrect to assert that Locke saw no practical importance in mathematics as a spur to speculative knowledge (1992: 101). As Locke made clear with his praise of Newton (T 194), he saw great promise that practical application of math to scientific questions would yield astonishing discoveries. Of course, Locke did not, however, believe that every one can be another Newton.

seen that Locke's educational method rests on a profoundly egalitarian epistemological foundation. This is not to say Locke believes that human beings can achieve absolute intellectual equality, but rather that the range property of human mental capacities is relatively narrow and all individuals are able to improve their understanding by virtue of improved educational methods. What we are still to consider, however, is the extent to which Locke believes the institutions of government and civil society play any significant role in his educational reforms. From the very opening lines of the *Thoughts* Locke suggested a certain ambiguity in his position. He admits that he only agreed to publish his private thoughts on education when he concluded that they could be of use to the public. But how and who does he think are the public?

It is somewhat surprising that Locke, the great opponent of patriarchy, appears to assign the crucial function of education to the family, at least with respect to the gentry. Moreover, it is noticeable that unlike Hobbes (1994: 113-14; 222-26), for instance, who charges the political sovereign with the job of reforming and monitoring education, Locke appeals rather to a vague societal force that can perhaps best be described as the "reading public" (Tarcov 1984: 3-4). While Locke's novel proposals for early education are clearly developed in the context of a new understanding of the natural rights family, does his appeal to the public importance of education suggest certain limits in the family's capacity to perform a function with such vital public importance? On the face of it, the answer would appear to be no given Locke's endorsement of the private education of gentlemen's sons and daughters in the family. However, Locke's reasoning on this issue is worthy of further examination.

To start, his endorsement of private education at home has a great deal to do with his assessment of the dismal state of English grammar schools at the time. The problems in these boarding schools are manifold. Locke identifies them as the bastions of pedagogic orthodoxy in which the curriculum is outdated, the teaching method bare memorization, and enthusiastic employment of corporal punishment is "the ordinary way of education" (T 74). Moreover, unlike tutors and parents who can mind their charges pretty much continuously, in the grammar school "let the master's industry and skill be ever so great, it is impossible he should have fifty or a hundred scholars under his eye any longer than they are in school together" (T 70). It is in the dorms and on the playing fields that Locke fears children adopt all the tricks, raillery, and vulgar code of *faux* manliness that plague these institutions. In this light, education at home is another aspect of the prophylactic character of Lockean early education.

Thus, Locke endorses private tutorial in the family, but it is hardly a ringing endorsement of private home schooling *per se*. Given the primitive state of transportation and the diffusion of population in pre-industrial and largely rural society, it is not surprising that Locke does not in the *Thoughts* seriously entertain the idea of public education familiar in many liberal societies today with its division of labor between formal day schooling and parental supervision at home. But is Locke's advocacy of private education at home incompatible with this modern system of education? It can be argued that Locke's account of the importance of the choice of tutors contains an implicit, but important, element of public involvement in education. As we have seen, Locke expressed concern about the problem of parochialism in familial-based education. Patriarchy, Locke's nemesis in the *Two Treatises*, is the natural logical extension, and politically most deleterious, manifestation of this parochialism. The tutor is charged by Locke with providing the student "knowledge of the world," and is, if not a representative of the public

strictly speaking, at least a prominent intermediary between the child and his or her parents. The importance Locke assigns to employing a good tutor, thus demonstrates that the problem of familial parochialism is only partly alleviated by a more enlightened reading public. Locke suggests that it is to the advantage of the family to welcome this quasi-public element into the household, especially when the tutor embodies the progressive principles of educational reform Locke advocates. Perhaps the very least we can say, therefore, about Locke's attitude toward the possibility of introducing day schools informed by new pedagogic methods and positive parental involvement and reinforcement at home, is that it clearly presents a very different set of problems than the grammar schools then in place.

However, does Locke's endorsement of private education in the family reveal a deeper class prejudice that inevitably diminishes the public application of his educational reforms (Horwitz 1986: 141)? On an even more fundamental level, might we not conclude that Locke's effort to contrast his scientific method of reasoning with "ordinary reason" requires, or at least justifies, the political and social disqualification of the many people who do not benefit from his new education? The charge that Locke endorses a theory of "differential rationality" that privileges the emerging bourgeoisie and undermines the egalitarian premises of his natural rights philosophy has been a theme among Locke scholars at least since C.B. McPherson's influential presentation of the theory of possessive individualism (McPherson 1962: ch. 5; Wood 1992: 685-9). In order to examine these issues in the context of Locke's educational writings, it is important to consider a number of issues.

First, Locke insists that the errors of human understanding are natural, in some respects transcend class difference, and can be remedied by disciplining the mind in the manner he recommends (Waldron 2002: 88-91). His emphasis on the importance of education rather than supposed natural cognitive differences indicates his assumption that education can be a means for both individual social mobility and for improving the general level of understanding in society as a whole. The difference between the understanding of the leisured class "who by the industry and parts of their ancestors have been set free from a constant drudgery," and the lower classes is, Locke insists, very real (C 6-7). However, the source of the distinction lies not in "the want of natural parts" among the poor, but rather "for want of use and exercise" of their rational faculties (C 6). Clearly, then, the question of Locke's supposed assumption of a differential rationality is misleading inasmuch as while he unhesitatingly endorses a new method of scientific or mathematical reason to replace custom, the social and political imperative this suggests is the need to improve education generally, not the development of a system of mass disqualification. That is, Locke subscribed to the view, uncontroversial today, that there is a general educational requirement for successfully establishing liberal societies, but he did so at a time when this view was hardly common, to say the least. McPherson and others completely miss the radical thrust of Locke's account of differential rationality.

A second aspect of Locke's educational theory that most versions of the theory of possessive individualism simply do not take seriously enough is Locke's consideration of the importance of religion as a support for educational reform. An important connection between Locke's epistemological and educational writings is his aim to inject rationalist principles into religion, in many respects the traditional bastion of orthodoxy. As we have observed, Locke expresses some of his most egalitarian sentiments in relation to the cognitive properties of

faith.<sup>15</sup> However, it would be a mistake to conclude as has Waldron that Locke hereby advanced a “profound validation of the claims of the ordinary intellect” in contradistinction to scientific reason (Waldron 2002: 105-06). Rather Locke’s point is that adult concern for salvation properly understood is a spur for the radical expansion of his new method of education. Locke’s endorsement in the *Thoughts* of instruction in current scientific theories, especially those based on “rational experiments and observation” rather than speculative systems should be understood as being in essential unity with his argument for the rationalist and probabilistic basis of faith in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (T 193). In both instances, Locke’s aim is to encourage a broad cultural attitude of openness to scientific research.

The thrust of Locke’s epistemological and educational writings is to persuade the believer that the compelling logic of soteriological concerns need not be an apology for obscurantism. These concerns rather encourage a taste and motivation for developing critical thinking that speak to the aspirations of individuals in any class. Broad based instruction in basic literacy need hardly exhaust the educational possibilities desired by a society awakened to the connection between education and well-grounded religious belief. It is in response to the complaint that common religious believers do not examine the principles of their faith that Locke insists this is often because of the “want of use and exercise” of their faculties due to a life of “constant drudgery,” rather than for “want of natural parts” (C 6). To the extent that Locke concedes the practical existence of differential rationality, the motivation for improving education supplied by religion is deeply subversive of the continuation of this educational inequality over the long term.

The public dimension of Locke’s educational reforms comes perhaps most clearly into focus in his famous policy recommendation to the Board of Trade in 1697 generally known to history as “An Essay on the Poor Law.” This policy paper devised in Locke’s role as a senior civil servant in the post-Glorious Revolution government, and written more or less contemporaneously with the *Conduct* and just a few scant years after the *Thoughts*, is often castigated as a draconian, insensitive and elitist piece of work meant to encourage paternalistic state control over the behavior of the poor and working classes (Spellman 1988: 207-08; McPherson 1962: 223). I submit that this interpretation misses the real significance of this essay as a means to acquire a fuller understanding of the potential role of the public in Locke’s educational program. The core argument of Locke’s report is that the problem of poverty must be addressed through the broad application of public power to educate poor children. The philosophic premise underlying this policy is, of course, natural equality.

Locke insists that the key to tackling the problem of poverty is persuading governments at the national and local level that the poor may be made “useful to the public.”<sup>16</sup> With respect to adult behavior Locke admittedly displays a quasi-Victorian moralism in identifying the social causes of poverty to be “the relaxation of discipline and corruption of manners” in *fin de siècle* England (PL 184). And his proposals for dealing with vagrancy and begging are hardly gentle as he suggests that dealing with these problems requires “restraint on their debauchery by a strict execution of the laws” with punishments including beatings, mutilation and impressments in the

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<sup>15</sup> Compare Locke 1975: 4.18 and C 8 and 23.

<sup>16</sup> Locke 1997: 183. Hereafter in text and notes PL.

navy (PL 184-7).<sup>17</sup> Corporal punishment, more or less abandoned in Locke's account of childhood education, returns with surprising *éclat* in his treatment of civil law. Where the truly enlightened and progressive aspect of Locke's proposal emerges is with respect to his ideas regarding the children of the poor. For the poor, as opposed to vagrants and beggars, Locke argues relief "consists in finding work for them" (PL 189). The most innovative element of this project is his call for the establishment of "working schools" for poor children between the ages of three and fourteen. The basic idea is that for part of the day the children will work in the factory spinning textiles from material supplied by local ratepayers, and for the rest of the day the children will attend school on-site (PL 190). In effect, poor children will through their labor defray at least part of the cost of an education provided largely by the public.

Before simply dismissing this proposal as a Dickensian nightmare, it is important to consider Locke's reasoning in the "Essay on the Poor Law." Besides the obvious advantage of dramatically expanding public access to education, Locke identifies several other benefits from this proposal. First, he argues that the establishment of public education will alter the family's role as a traditional obstacle to social, economic, and academic advancement among the poor. Significantly, Locke's "working schools" are not orphanages. They are intended for poor children who "live at home with their parents" (PL 190). Coming from families lacking the means to afford private instruction at home or to attend boarding schools, these children are destined to have little or no formal education. The goal is to partially remove children from their families by supplying educational possibilities independent of their family circumstances, rather than providing money directly to the father and head of household, who Locke suspects would spend it "on himself at the alehouse" (PL 190). The effect, he claims, would be to undermine patriarchy more generally in poor families inasmuch as relieving poor mothers of child care duties during the work day will allow a woman "more liberty to work" herself (PL 190). In Locke's working school proposal we can detect the germ of a primitive public day care system.

The main aim of the working school is, of course, to get poor children to attend school. A daily supply of a "bellyful of bread" provided by the public is both a way to improve health for poor children and an incentive for poor parents to send their little ones to school (PL 191). The work school is the means by which Locke envisions applying his method of education as far as feasible to the broadest possible spectrum of society. While Locke offers no suggestions as to how working the loom can be made child's play, he does insist that the local ratepayers hire teachers to "be paid out of" local taxes (PL 192). The "working school" teacher substitutes for the tutor in the gentry by playing a similar role as both instructor and social intermediary between the parents and their children. The logical outcome of the broad implementation of this proposal would be the creation of a new class of public teachers, presumably informed by Locke's novel method of education. Locke argues that this democratization of education would include boys and girls being taught together, and even allowing uneducated poor adults to attend the work schools "to learn" (PL 192-3). The effect on public morality is also a consideration for Locke. With improved education, he claims, poor children will be brought to the better "sense of religion" that comes with a certain freedom from the prejudices and deprivations of their families

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<sup>17</sup> It is only fair to point out that Locke also recommends a publicly supported system of long-term care for invalids "who are not able to work at all," and he insisted that "if any person die for want of due relief in any parish," the parish should be fined by the national government according to the circumstances of the case and the "heinousness of the crime" (PL 197-8).



(PL 191). While notably Locke founds his educational reform for the poor on a secular, publicly supported institution rather than the churches, he tries to soothe some sensibilities by stressing that a public system of education would support, instead of threaten, the religious institutions of civil society.

Locke's revolutionary proposal for reform of the poor law outlined an early system of public education that proved to be far too radical for the narrow oligarchy ruling England after the Glorious Revolution, and was thus promptly dismissed by the powers that were. While this plan would have produced a system of public schools coexisting with a private system at home and boarding schools for the affluent, when viewed in tandem with his proposals in the *Thoughts* and the *Conduct* it is clear just how progressive and innovative Locke's "Essay on the Poor Law" really was. Even in the *Thoughts* Locke suggested that although his audience was primarily gentlemen, he believed that these reforms would have a positive impact on society generally: "For if those of that rank are by their education set right, they will quickly bring all the rest into order" (T, p. 8). By this he meant primarily that improving the principles of education for gentlemen would be a key ingredient in the project of enlightening this politically vital class who will some day be in a position to introduce policies, and perhaps reforms, affecting society as a whole. But is important to observe that the emphasis on practicality and teaching how to think, rather than memorizing dead languages, is a common link between Locke's recommendations for both poor children in their "working schools" and for those to the manor born. The ultimate effect of Locke's various proposals is a movement toward the greater homogenization of education across class lines with a common method and similar curriculum. On this basis it is perhaps possible that the system of education familiar to us today with publicly supported day schools, professional teachers and an important role for aware and engaged parents would not be far from a kind of Lockean ideal.

## Conclusion

The "Essay on the Poor Law" indicates Locke's willingness to consider the use of public authority on a massive scale to combat the social ill of poverty. In this regard Locke points to what was then a whole new field of public policy. The parallel development to his call for expanded economic opportunity in a new acquisitive ethos is the possibility for expanding educational opportunity on a scale unimaginable previously in human history.<sup>18</sup> This idea of employing public power to modernize, and in a sense democratize, society derived from principles of natural equality implicit in the very "bottom" of his proposals for early childhood education in the *Thoughts* and for aspiring scholars and informed citizens in the *Conduct*. The danger of replacing traditional patriarchy and political and religious authoritarianism with a new kind of state paternalism, that would concern later libertarians, may perhaps have been a risk that Locke was prepared to take, at least in the beginning of the modernization process in England. However, it is more likely that Locke anticipated the institutions of civil society would flourish with the support of his new public approach to education. The prospect of creating a society

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<sup>18</sup> Public education was not, of course, unheard of prior to Locke. The ancient Greek cities clearly had such an idea, and frequently implemented it. However, perhaps the differences between the classical ideal and what Locke proposes are more significant than any superficial resemblances. For a good account of the classical ideal of civic education and how it differs from the modern view pioneered by Locke, see Rahe 1992: esp. Vol. 1.

imbued at all levels with the principles of respect for the ideal of individual autonomy, cultural openness to scientific advance and critical discourse seemed in Locke's view to set a progressive course that would gradually define the nature and limits of the liberal state.

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