

ACCOUNTABILITY AND PARENTHOOD IN LOCKE'S THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

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Abstract: According to John Locke, the conditions of human happiness establish the content of natural law, but God's commands make it morally binding. This raises two questions. First, why does moral obligation require an authority figure? Second, what gives God authority? I argue that, according to Locke, moral obligation requires an authority figure because to have an obligation is to be accountable to someone. I then argue that, according to Locke, God has a kind of parental authority inasmuch as he is bound by covenant to guide us by revealing the content of the moral law.

1. THE FORCE AND CONTENT OF NATURAL LAW

Nearly all seventeenth-century natural lawyers followed their medieval predecessors in offering deeply theistic moral theories. Indeed, even Hugo Grotius, who famously claimed that the natural law would be valid even if God did not exist or was uninterested in our behavior, granted that God does issue that law and that we ought to obey him ("On the Law of War and Peace," 92). Nevertheless, most members of this tradition distinguished the content of natural law from its binding force, arguing that while the force of law depends on God's commands, its content does not. For instance, Francisco Suarez and Thomas Hobbes, two thinkers deeply opposed in many respects, are in accord on this point. Suarez writes:

Divine volition, in the form of a prohibition or in that of an [affirmative] command, is not the whole reason for the good or evil involved in the observance or transgression of the natural law; on the contrary, it necessarily presupposes the existence of a certain righteousness or turpitude in these actions, and attaches to them a special obligation. ("On Law and God the Law-Giver," 77)

Similarly, Hobbes insists that, although the content of natural law is determined by its substantive aim (self-preservation, Hobbes thought), content becomes obligatory only once God issues it as law:

These dictates of reason men use to call by the name of laws; but improperly; for they are but conclusions or theorems concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves, whereas law, properly, is the word of him, that by right hath command over others. But yet if we consider the same theorems, as delivered in the word of God, that by right commandeth all things; then are they properly called laws. (*Leviathan*, 100; part 1, chap. 4, sec. 41)

John Locke shares at least the basic framework of this model with Suarez and Hobbes. According to Locke, the content of the natural law is determined by its aim, which is the preservation, or good, of the whole moral community. He writes in the *Second Treatise of Government* (henceforth *Second Treatise*): “Law . . . prescribes no farther than is for the general good of those under that law: could they be happier without it, the law, as an useless thing, would of itself vanish” (II 57).¹ However, natural law only obligates because God issues it. As Locke states forthrightly in the early *Essays on the Law of Nature* (henceforth ELN), “The basis of obligation . . . is the will of a supreme Godhead” (189). And in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (henceforth *Essay*), Locke writes, “[T]he true ground of Morality . . . can only be the Will and Law of a God” (E 1.3.6).²

It is important not to infer from Locke’s insistence that a commander is necessary in order for law to bind that he endorses a sanction theory of the sort we find in Hobbes, according to whom God’s commands obligate us solely on account of his “Irresistible Power” (*Leviathan*, 235; part II, chap. 31, sec. 5). Locke rejects this position. Perhaps with Hobbes in mind, Locke explains in the ELN that, if self-interest is the root of the natural law’s binding power, “virtue would seem to be not so much man’s duty as his convenience” (ELN 181). Moreover, he writes in the same text: “Not all obligation seems to consist in, and ultimately to be limited by, that power which can coerce offenders and punish the wicked, but rather to consist in the authority . . . which someone has over another” (ibid., 183–84). Locke reaffirms this judgment in the *Essay*, where he writes of God’s practice of issuing moral law: “He has a right to do it; we are his creatures: he has goodness and wisdom to direct our actions to that which is best: and he has power to enforce it by rewards and punishments of infinite weight and duration in another life” (E 2.28.8). If Locke’s position is that God’s authority derives straightforwardly from his power, the first two reasons he offers here make little sense in the context.

There are two objections someone might raise at this point. First, Locke claims that law without enforcement would be “in vain.” In the *Essay*, he argues the following:

For since it would be utterly in vain, to suppose a Rule set to the free Actions of Man, without annexing to it some Enforcement of Good and Evil, to determine his Will, we must, where-ever we suppose a Law, suppose also some Reward or Punishment annexed to that Law. It would be in vain for one intelligent Being, to set a Rule to the Actions of another, if he had it not in his Power, to reward the compliance with, and punish deviation from his Rule, by some Good and Evil, that is not the natural product and consequence of the Action it self. For that, being a natural Convenience, or Inconvenience, would operate of it self, without a Law. This, if I mistake not, is the true nature of all *Law*, properly so called. (E 2.28.6)

Locke makes the same point in the *Second Treatise*. He argues there that, outside civil society, each person must have standing to enforce the law of nature because “the *Law of Nature* would, as all other Laws that concern Men in this World, be in vain, if there were no body that in the State of Nature had a *Power to Execute* that Law, and thereby preserve the innocent and restrain offenders” (II 7). Why, someone might press, would law without enforcement be “in vain” if obligation under law is not just a matter of sanction and reward? The answer, I think, is that Locke’s point here is about what it would make sense for a law-giver to do, not about what constitutes obligation.³ This is especially clear in the passage from the *Essay* quoted above, in which Locke explains that it would be in vain “for one intelligent being to set a rule to the action of another” if that agent was not prepared to enforce it. The idea, I suggest, is that, if an agent means to secure obedience from a group of people, some of whom have no great love for her, it would be silly for that agent to withhold enforcement. If she did, the motivations of at least many of the people whose behavior she sought to modify would remain unchanged. It would not be in vain to withhold enforcement if the law-giver’s aim was to secure something like *loving* obedience rather than obedience *simpliciter*. But Locke (reasonably enough) does not suppose that political law-giving ever has this aim, and even God, who does seek loving obedience, seeks general obedience as well.

The second objection hinges on a more general observation about Locke’s moral psychology. Locke is a straightforward hedonist about motivation, including moral motivation. According to him, it is impossible for any intelligent agent, including even God, to be moved to action by anything other than the prospect of happiness or unhappiness.⁴ As Locke makes clear in the revisions he added to the second edition of the *Essay*, agents need not be moved by the strongest *immediate* prospect of happiness or unhappiness, because intelligent beings can “suspend” their action in order to consider how their options relate to their happiness in the long run (E 2.21.48, 53). Nevertheless, he consistently affirms, as

he does in the late fragment "Of Ethic in General," that "Happyness & misery are the two great springs of humane actions" (298). If we grant Locke this point, it might seem that no one could possibly be moved by anything about God's commands other than the rewards and punishments he annexes to them. Thus, it would seem that, if our obligation to obey God does not rest solely on his power to punish us, the grounds of moral motivation come apart entirely from the grounds of moral obligation. On any plausible conception of obligation, such a deep fissure between these two grounds would be very strange, to say the least.⁵

Happily, this is not a serious problem for Locke. Like any reasonable hedonist, Locke allows that it is possible take pleasure in any number of things, including duty and our relationships with God and others. People who love God and other people take pleasure in doing what the natural law requires. Such people, who have the character God would like to see in all of his rational creatures, are motivated to obey God quite apart from any considerations of rewards or punishments. Locke makes this clear in a fragment titled "Ethica A":

Happiness . . . is annexed to our loving others and to our doing our duty, to acts of love and charity, or he that will deny it be so here because everyone observes not this rule of universal love and charity, he brings in a necessity of another life (wherein God may put a distinction between those that did good and suffered and those who did evil and enjoyed by their different treatment there) and so enforces morality the stronger. (316)⁶

Thus, while some people find in the threat of hell or the promise of heaven whatever motivation to obey God they can muster, others can and do find it in grounds more closely linked to God's moral standing and to the content of morality. Moreover, a person's motivation to obey God will depend less on the prospect of punishment or reward the more virtuous she becomes.

I think we may safely conclude, then, that, according to Locke, the content of natural law is determined by the good of all those under it, but that law obligates us morally only inasmuch as God issues it. Furthermore, God's commands obligate us not just because God is powerful enough to enforce them with eternal rewards and punishments but because he has moral standing to issue them. While this is right as far as it goes, it leaves two important questions unanswered. First, why does the natural law need God's commands, or indeed anyone's commands, to bind? If its content derives from the conditions of our happiness, why is there any need for someone to promulgate that content authoritatively? Second, even if there is some work left over for God to do, what in particular gives God the special moral standing necessary for him to

do it? We have seen that it is not merely his power that explains this standing, but it is unclear what does explain it, vague gestures toward goodness and creation notwithstanding. Must we conclude, with David Gauthier, that Locke thinks it is simply obvious that God has moral standing to obligate us (“Why Ought One Obey God?” 431–31)? In what remains, I will try to answer these questions. I will argue that, as Locke understands obligation, to have an obligation is to be accountable to someone with appropriate standing to call one to account and issue blame for one’s failings. Consequently, Locke’s theory requires that all moral duties be owed *to* someone, and Locke casts God as that someone. Once this schema is in place, I will consider why Locke thinks God is suited to play the role in which Locke casts him, that is, why Locke takes God to have standing to hold us accountable. I will argue that, according to Locke, God has this standing because he alone can and does direct rational agents to their good by promulgating a moral law. In this way, Locke’s relationship is closely analogous to parents’ relationships with their children. Just as children are accountable to their parents because parents are bound to provide education and support that children cannot provide for themselves, we are accountable to God because he is bound, by covenant, to reveal our good to us through his moral law, which we cannot fully discern without his aid.

2. OBLIGATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In his recent book, Eric Mack argues that Locke leaves no work for God to do in his moral theory (*John Locke*, 33–34). As Mack reads Locke, the content of natural law is independent of God’s will, and it is accessible through rational reflection. How then, he asks, might God’s commands add some obligatory quality that was not already in place? Locke could have secured a place for God by collapsing moral obligation into the fear of divine punishment and the prospect of divine reward, but, as Mack recognizes and we have observed, Locke rejects this route. In light of the apparent absence of any clear role for God to play in Locke’s theory, Mack remarks that Locke *should* have followed Grotius and granted that natural law would bind even if God were nonexistent or disinterested (*ibid.*, 29).

If Mack is right, we can simply write off Locke’s theology, at least insofar as his moral theory is concerned. However, I do not think matters are quite so easy. For, according to Locke, an agent is obligated to perform (or omit) a given action just in case she is *accountable* for performing (or omitting) that action. And to be accountable for performing an action, a person must be accountable *to* someone for performing it. Thus, if we are obligated by natural law, we must be accountable to

someone for our obedience. God's most important role in Locke's moral theory is to make this accountability possible; he is the person to whom we are ultimately accountable for obeying the natural law.

To begin hashing out the relationship Locke sees between obligation and accountability, it will be useful to consider Samuel von Pufendorf, whom Locke read closely and professed to admire, because Pufendorf offers a conceptual template we can use to approach Locke's own account.⁷ According to Pufendorf, an action can have a moral quality only if it is imputable to an agent. For an action to be imputable to an agent, it is not enough for that agent to simply cause it. Rather, she must be responsible for it in the literal sense of being *answerable* for it; that is, she must be liable for an *account* of her decision.⁸ Moreover, she must understand herself as thus accountable, and this understanding creates a kind of "moral bond" in the agent":

By *Obligation* then is usually meant, *A moral Bond, whereby we are ty'd down to do this or that, or to abstain from doing them.* That is, hereby a kind of a Moral Bridle is put upon our *Liberty*; so that though the *Will* does actually drive *another* way, yet we find our selves hereby struck as it were with an *internal Sense*, that if our Action be not perform'd according to the *prescript Rule*, we cannot but confess we have not done *right*; and if any Mischief happen to us upon that Account, we may fairly charge *our selves* with the same; because it might have been avoided, if the *Rule* had been follow'd as it ought. (Pufendorf, *The Whole Duty of Man and Citizen*, chap. 2, para. 3)

According to Pufendorf, then, when we are accountable, we experience a kind of internal bondage or compulsion. As accountable agents, we owe accounts of our actions to others and, to the extent that we properly internalize our obligations, to ourselves as well.⁹

Locke offers a similar account in ELN. After stating that obligation is not just a matter of sanctions, Locke explains that, when a person is obligated by the command of a superior, she finds herself compelled to grant that she *owes* it to the superior to comply with her command:

Indeed, all obligation binds conscience, and lays a bond on the mind itself, so that not fear of punishment, but a rational apprehension of what is right, puts us under an obligation, and conscience passes judgment on morals, and if we are guilty of a crime, declares that we deserve punishment. . . . Anyone would easily . . . perceive that there was one ground of his obedience when as a captive he was constrained to the service of a pirate, and there was another ground when as a subject he was giving obedience to a ruler; he would judge in one way about disregarding obedience to a king, in another about wittingly transgressing the orders of a pirate or robber. For in the latter case,

with the approval of conscience, he rightly had regard only for his own well-being, but in the former, though conscience condemned him, he would violate the right of another. (ELN 185)

Locke and Pufendorf, then, seem to agree that to be morally obligated is to be accountable *to* someone who has standing to demand that we discharge the obligation and to rightfully accuse or blame us when we fail to do so. And when we understand our accountability to that person, we accuse *ourselves* in conscience just as the other person accuses us. To be obligated to perform an action is thus to be accountable to someone who has standing to demand it of us, in her own voice and on her own authority, in such a way that we recognize that we owe it to her to perform it. This picture finds confirmation in the *Essay*, where Locke argues that moral personhood requires the capacity to impute one's actions to oneself and to understand oneself as accountable for them:

Where-ever a Man finds, what he calls *himself*, there, I think another may say is the same *Person*. It is a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents, capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery. This personality extends it *self* beyond present Existence to what is past, only by consciousness, whereby it becomes concerned and accountable, owns and imputes to it *self* past Actions, just upon the same ground, and for the same reason, as it does the present. . . . Conformable to this, the Apostle tells us, that, at the Great Day, when every one shall *receive according to his doings, the secrets of all hearts shall be laid open*. The Sentence shall be justified by the consciousness all Persons shall have, that they themselves . . . are the same, that committed those Actions, and deserve that Punishment for them. (E 2.27.26)

Locke's point is clear; in order to be bound by law, and so be a person in the "Forensick" sense, one must have the capacity to impute one's actions to oneself as acts for which one is liable to a rightful authority figure for an account. In the case of moral accountability, with respect to which all will be settled at the Last Judgment, that authority figure is, ultimately, God. This is not because we lack moral obligations to anyone else; as Locke discusses at length, we are accountable to other human agents for our contracts (including marital contracts and political contracts; II 77–78); for charity and mutual aid (I 42; II 6); and, in the case of parents, for care and education (II 58). But Locke holds that accountability between created agents ultimately depends on our overarching moral accountability to God:

Indirectly and by delegated power the will of any other superior is binding, be it that of a king or a parent, to whom we are subject by the will of God. . . . [W]e are bound to obey them because God willed

thus, and commanded thus, so that by complying with them we also obey God. (ELN 187)

Locke's view, then, is that, in order for us to have moral obligations, we must be accountable, not just to the particular individuals with whom we have our various moral relationships but to an agent who endorses and ratifies the entire system of moral relationships. But why is God suited to play the role of anchoring the whole moral system by holding us accountable? That is, why are we accountable to God? Let us turn to this question now.

3. GOD'S STANDING AS PARENT

Does Locke offer any good reason to think that God has standing to hold us accountable? As we saw earlier, Locke seems to offer, in the second part of the *Essay*, two reasons why God has standing to hold us accountable: his status as creator and his supreme goodness (E 2.228.8.) But are these good reasons?

Let us begin with the appeal to creation. On the face of it, it is mysterious that the fact God creates us might mean that he has any particular standing.¹⁰ Some commentators, however, have suggested that Locke supplements his appeal to creation with the premise that God's creation makes us his *property* and that this is supposed to explain his special standing.¹¹ On this reading, it is a bedrock moral principle that agents, whether human or divine, own what they make; this principle is supposed to explain why, as Locke argues at length in the *Second Treatise*, human beings gain property rights in the fruit of their labor (II ch. 5, *passim*). Since God made us, we are his property. And since we are his property, we are accountable to him for obeying his commands.

If this is Locke's argument, it faces serious difficulties. First, it is not clear that it is valid. Even if we suppose that God owns me and so has rights to do what he wants with me, it does not follow that I am accountable to him for obedience. This is because the concept of ownership, in Locke's time as well as in our own, includes nothing about duties on the part of possessions. Rather, it has to do only with rights of owners and duties of third parties. According to Locke, the "nature" of property in "Estates and Possessions" is that "*without a Man's own consent, it cannot be taken from him*" (II 193). It follows from this definition that, if I am among God's possessions (supposing that he has some), no one may take me from God or otherwise prevent God from doing as he likes with me, unless God grants permission. This might generate the further conclusion that I may not destroy myself, as this could amount to taking one of God's possessions without his permission.¹² However, it does not follow that I have a general duty of obedience to God. Consider the case

of my ownership of my computer. It follows from the fact that I own my computer that I may impose my will on it as I see fit, including even to destroy it, and that no one may impose her own will on it without my permission. However, it does not follow that my computer has a duty to obey the commands I enter through its operating system. Now, you might respond that this is only because my computer is not the sort of thing that can have duties; *if* it could have duties, it would have a duty to do as I say. But what could ground the truth of this counterfactual? Certainly not ownership *qua* moral relationship between finite agents, as that kind of moral relationship strictly excludes things capable of duty from being objects of ownership; when people claim to own others, they are mistaken, at least insofar as morality (rather than mere convention) is concerned. If ownership as we know it has nothing to do with duties on the part of things we own, how can we conclude that such duties exist in the particular case of God's ownership of his human creations? Someone might reply that God's ownership of us, along with its concomitant power to bind us morally, is wholly *sui generis*. However, it is unclear how this move could amount to much more than an appeal to mystery.

Second, even if we were to grant the conditional claim that God has the standing to hold us accountable *if* he relates to us as we relate to the things we own, Locke's argument for natural human ownership rights provides no reason to think that God does bear this relation to us. This is true for two reasons. First, Locke does not think we have to make anything in order to attain an ownership right through labor (II 28, 46). For instance, to attain full natural ownership of a nut, one need only pick it up; there is no need to make anything out of it. Someone might urge that, since Locke forbids waste, one must at least eat the nut before it goes bad, thereby "making" sustenance out of it. But in addition to the fact that this move does almost comic violence to the ordinary sense of the word "make" and its synonyms, God's creation *ex nihilo* has nothing significant in common with simply putting an object into a digestive system. Moreover, Locke identifies the natural ownership rights we acquire through labor as individuations of a preexisting common right that we share, as a result of God's gift, with all other people (II 25–27). If our individual ownership rights in resources depend essentially on God's common gift, God's own rights can hardly be of the same variety. To be sure, Locke does insist that we, along with all creation, are, in some sense, God's property (II 6). But Locke consistently uses the term "property" to refer to rights in general, not just to rights of ownership. For instance, a human person's "property" includes not just her "estate," or possessions, but also her "life" and "liberty" (II 124). Thus, even if we suppose that we are God's property, it does not follow that we comprise his estate in the sense that houses, apples, and so forth might comprise a human being's

estate. There is no clear reason to think that the characteristically human institution of estate possession is one in which God participates at all.

The argument from God's property, then, is a nonstarter. But what about God's goodness? Taken simply, this argument is also off limits to Locke, as he quite explicitly rejects the notion that a person's goodness alone gives her standing to hold anyone accountable for doing as she says. This is perhaps clearest in the context of politics. Locke states unequivocally that no adult person can be accountable for obeying the dictates of anyone else unless she has given her consent (II 95). No matter how wise and good a person is, she has no standing to issue laws to other people and hold them accountable for obedience unless those others have chosen to invest her with authority. If goodness grants authority, this is hard to explain.¹³

If these appeals to creation and goodness are all Locke has to offer in support of God's standing to hold us accountable, his argument is a failure. However, I do not think that either of these appeals is meant to carry the weight of explaining why we are accountable to God. Instead, I believe that goodness and creation are constituents of a more nuanced explanation grounded in God's ongoing relationship with us. Consider once more Locke's explanation of God's authority from the *Essay*:

That God has given a Rule whereby Men should govern themselves, I think there is nobody so brutish as to deny. He has a Right to do it, we are his Creatures: He has Goodness and Wisdom to direct our Actions to that which is best: and he has Power to enforce it by Rewards and Punishments, of infinite weight and duration, in another Life; *for no body can take us out of his hands.* (E 2.28.8, emphasis added)

This final line suggests that we depend on God to direct us to our good. This suggestion finds confirmation in ELN, where Locke explains our obligation to God in terms of our dependence on God, not just for our existence but for our "work," or proper activity: "[W]e are bound to show ourselves obedient to the authority of His will because both our being and our work depend on His will" (ELN 183). For some reason that is as yet unclear, we need God in order to do what it is important for us to do as the sort of agents we are.

Locke's emphasis on our dependence on God calls to mind the classical Christian doctrine of God's fatherhood, according to which all of God's rational creatures relate to him in much the way that a child relates to her parents during her minority. He affirms this doctrine in the *First Treatise of Government* (henceforth *First Treatise*), where he grants Robert Filmer's point that "the Power which God himself exerciseth over Mankind is by Right of Fatherhood," although he insists, contrary to Filmer, that "this Fatherhood is such an one as utterly excludes all

pretence of [political] Title in Earthly Parents” (I 53). According to Locke, then, we depend on God as a kind of father. The idea I want to pursue in the rest of this section is that God’s right to hold us accountable is a *parental* right. To see if this will work, we need to turn to Locke’s analysis of parental authority.

By Locke’s lights, parents’ rights over their children are inextricable from their responsibilities to their children; they are what John Simmons calls mandatory rights, or rights to do what is morally required (*Lockean Theory of Rights*, 74). Indeed, it is not a stretch to suggest that Locke would agree with Jeremy Waldron, who urges that parental rights fall within a class of rights that *just are* responsibilities (“Dignity, Rights, and Responsibilities,” 1114). Parents are obligated to see to the well-being and education of their children, and they have the standing to authoritatively direct their children’s action to achieve these ends.¹⁴ Just as children are accountable to their parents, parents are accountable to their children, who have a legitimate complaint against their parents if the latter do not support, educate, and protect them. According to Locke, it is appropriate for parents to command their children, even though all persons are equal, because children are constitutionally incapable of seeing to their own good until they have reached adulthood.¹⁵ As he puts the point, minor children are born *to* equal standing under the moral law, but they are not born *with* it (II 55). For no matter how intelligent and promising a child might be, she is not in a position to responsibly direct and answer for her own action until she has reached what Locke calls the “Age of Discretion” (II 59). Once a child reaches this age, her parents’ duty to protect her and provide for her expires along with their authority over her. Although adult children retain a debt of gratitude to their parents throughout life, their parents have no more standing to hold them accountable for obedience than they have such standing over any other adult (II 67–68).

Since Locke grounds parental authority in the incapacities that typically accompany childhood rather than in childhood *per se*, it would seem to follow that adult human beings who fail to develop normal capacities might be subject to parental authority their entire lives. Locke explicitly affirms this upshot of his position:

But if, through defects that may happen out of the ordinary course of Nature, any one comes not to such a degree of Reason, wherein he might be supposed capable of knowing the Law, and so living within the Rules of it, he is *never capable of being a Free Man*, he is never let loose to the dispose of his own Will (because he knows no bounds to it, has not Understanding, its proper Guide) but is continued under the Tuition and Government of others, all the time his own Understanding is incapable of that Charge. And so *Lunaticks* and *Ideots* are never set free from the Government of their Parents. (II 60)

I want to suggest that all created agents are accountable to God throughout their lives in a way that is analogous to children's accountability to their parents, which endures as long as they are constitutionally unable to direct themselves responsibly. While children normally develop to a point at which they are no less capable than their parents, all finite agents require God to guide their action and reasoning by promulgating and clarifying the natural law, thereby allowing them to do the "work" Locke mentions in ELN. Unless God performs this service, normal adult human beings are no more able to live well than are children without their parents. Before God, we are all "*Lunaticks and Ideots*," so his parental authority is permanent.

To be clear, I am not claiming that God's standing to hold us accountable derives from, or is somehow less basic than, the rights human parents have to hold their children to account. Nor am I claiming that the standing of human parents derives from God's standing. What I *do* mean to claim is that both human parenthood and God's parenthood are instances of a single kind of moral office, namely, that of securing a good for another person that he is constitutionally unable to secure for himself.¹⁶ What explains both human parental standing and God's standing is the occupation of this office, albeit with respect to different classes of dependents.

I have urged that, according to Locke, God is suited to the moral office of parenthood with respect to all agents because he alone can direct us to our good via the natural law. It might seem, though, that God does not need to direct us in this way, since the moral law is accessible through reason. Although Locke argues that morality is, in principle, a demonstrative science (E 3.11.16) and although he asserts that the most basic norms of the law of nature are available to "all Mankind, who will but consult it" (II 6), he denies that human beings are capable of deducing the whole system of morality—or indeed even most of the system of morality—without divine aid. Locke sets out this position at length in the *Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* (henceforth *Reasonableness*), which appeared in print only six years after the *Two Treatises* and the *Essay*.¹⁷ He writes there,

'Tis true there is a *Law of Nature*. But who is there that ever did, or undertook to give it us all entire, as Law; No more, or nor no less, than what was contained in, and had the obligation of that Law? Who, ever made out all the parts of it; Put them together; And shewed the World their obligation? Where there any such Code, that Mankind might have recourse to, as their unerring Rule, before our Saviour's time? If there was not, 'tis plain, there was need of one to give us such a Morality. (*Reasonableness*, 197)

'Tis plain fact, that humane reason unassisted, failed Men in its great and Proper business of Morality. It never by unquestionable Principles, by clear deductions, made out an entire Body of the Law of Nature. And he that shall collect all the Moral Rules of the Philosophers, and compare them with those contained in the New Testament, will find them to come short of the Morality delivered by our Saviour, and taught by his Apostles; A College made up for the most part of ignorant, but inspired Fishermen. (Ibid., 196)

Locke seems to recognize that some of his readers might object that, if the law of nature is really the law of reason, it ought to be accessible to anyone who is rational. In response, he urges that we cannot conclude from the fact that a truth is suitable to being deduced from first principles that any finite agent can actually deduce it without help. The truths of divine revelation are often ones that we cannot deduce on our own, their rationality notwithstanding:

As soon as [the truths of revelation] are heard and considered, they are found to be agreeable to Reason; and such as can by no means be contradicted. Every one may observe a great many truths which he receives at first from others, and readily assents to, as consonant to reason; which he would have found it hard, and perhaps beyond his strength to have discovered himself. (Reasonableness, 195)

Someone might further object that, for the relationship between God and human beings to mirror the one between parents and children, God would have to be accountable to human beings for discharging his parental obligations, which cannot be. But Locke disagrees; he holds that God can be, and in fact is, accountable to us. In the *First Treatise*, he mocks Filmer's claim that human monarchs cannot have promissory obligations by pointing out that even God is accountable for his covenants:

SIR R.F.'s great Position is, that *Men are not naturally free*. This is the Foundation on which his absolute Monarchy stands, and from which it erects itself to an height, that its Power is above every Power, *Caput inter nubila*,^[18] so high above all Earthly and Human Things, that Thought can scarce reach it; that Promises and Oaths, which tye the infinite Deity, cannot confine it. (I 6, emphasis added).

He repeats the same point in the *Second Treatise*: "The Obligations of that Eternal Law . . . are so great, and so strong, in the case of *Promises*, that Omnipotency it self can be tyed by them. *Grants, Promises* and *Oaths* are Bonds that *hold the Almighty*" (II 195).

Moreover, in *Reasonableness*, Locke endorses the traditional view that God has entered human history through a series of covenants, or promises, with human beings. First, in what Locke follows tradition in

calling the “Old Covenant,” God covenanted with the people of Israel to lead and protect them in exchange for their obedience to his law. Second, God applied that law, along with an offer of salvation by faith, to the whole world through the New Covenant of the death and resurrection of Christ. Locke explains that, although the New Covenant lessened the “Rigour” of the Old Covenant, the latter’s “obligations . . . never ceased” (*Reasonableness*, 182). According to this picture, God binds himself to his rational creatures by covenant, thus making himself accountable to them for guidance and protection, no less than they are accountable to him for obedience.

It might seem odd that God can be accountable to us, since his power is infinitely greater than ours. Due this difference in power, no one could ever compel God to keep a covenant he was inclined to break. While it is true that no one could compel God to do anything, this does not mean that God cannot be accountable to us. For as we saw above, Locke understands accountability as a *moral* relationship whereby one agent is able to issue a demand authoritatively to another agent who is, in turn, morally liable for compliance. There is no need for an agent to possess any particular degree of power, either relatively or absolutely, for others to be accountable to her. This corresponds to our normal moral intuitions. For instance, few would claim that we are *less* accountable to the poor or the weak than to the rich and the powerful. The difference between our power and God’s, then, does not interfere with God’s being accountable for his covenant to guide us as our parent.

4. CONCLUSION

I have argued that, by Locke’s lights, obligation under natural law depends on accountability to God, which is, in turn, grounded in God’s covenant with us to guide us to our good by clarifying the moral law. At this point, it is reasonable to wonder whether Locke is right to suppose that our moral relationships with one another ultimately depend on accountability to God. Since this question would take us well beyond the scope of this paper, the aim of which is to reveal the structure and motivation of Locke’s theological ethics, I will not pursue it here. However, it is perhaps worth noting that, even if Locke’s assertion that all moral accountability depends on our relationship with God is unsustainable, his theological ethics is hardly a failure. For, in grounding God’s authority in his standing as a parent, Locke develops a plausible explanation of why, as most people of faith believe, God has standing to hold us accountable. This, surely, is no small achievement.

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NOTES

1. Henceforth, I will cite the *First Treatise* and the *Second Treatise* with a roman numeral (I or II, respectively), followed by a section number. This passage, along with Locke's claim (which I will examine later) that God is bound by covenants, count strongly against the view, recently endorsed by Antonia LoLordo, that the content as well as the binding force of natural law depends on God's will. For if this were correct, law that did not serve the end of happiness would not vanish "of itself" but would rather require God to remove it. See LoLordo, *Locke's Moral Man*, 7–8.

2. In what follows, I will refer to the *Essay* using the capital letter E followed by arabic numerals separated by periods to designate the book, chapter, and section.

3. Here I agree with LoLordo. See *Locke's Moral Man*, 23.

4. Concerning God's necessary pursuit of happiness, Locke writes, "God Almighty himself is under the necessity of being happy; and the more any intelligent Being is so, the nearer is its approach to infinite perfection and happiness" (E 2.21.50).

5. Stephen Darwall sees just such a deep fissure between the motivational force and rational standing of morality. As he reads Locke, fear of punishment alone makes God's commands binding on us. He writes that, for Locke, "what makes God's commands morally obligatory seems to have nothing intrinsically to do with what makes them rationally compelling" (*The British Moralists*, 37).

6. Patricia Sheridan also notices this text and uses it to make the same point. See Sheridan, "Pirates, Kings, and Reasons to Act," 43.

7. On Locke's debt to Pufendorf, see Peter Laslett's "Introduction," in Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 75.

8. See Darwall, "Pufendorf on Morality, Sociability, and Moral Powers," 219. I am indebted to Darwall for much of my understanding of accountability in Pufendorf.

9. Darwall develops this basic structure of accountability in his own moral theory. See Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*.

10. This is how Antonia LoLordo reads Locke. See *Locke's Moral Man*, 21–22.

11. See, for instance, Feser, *Locke*, 111–13.

12. Locke suggests something like this at II 6. But, as I suggest in the main text, I think God's property rights in us are distinct in kind from ownership rights—which make up a particular class of property rights—that human beings can hold against one another. Moreover, it is worth noting that it is not clear how anyone could successfully contravene a decision on the part of God—an omnipotent being—to use something in a particular way. For instance, if God adopts the aim of keeping me alive, it follows that I will remain alive. If it is impossible to prevent God from using things as he sees fit, that is one more

reason to think that God and his actions are ill suited to the moral categories associated with ownership.

13. Some commentators have argued that Locke makes an exception for exceptionally good rulers. See, for instance, West, "The Ground of Locke's Law of Nature," 9. They have in mind the following passage from the *Second Treatise*: "Such God-like princes indeed had some Title to Arbitrary Power, by that Argument, that would prove Absolute Monarchy the best Government, as that which God himself governs the Universe by: because such Kings partake of his Wisdom and Goodness"(II 166). However, the argument Locke refers to here, which "would prove absolute monarchy the best government," is Robert Filmer's, which Locke spends the entire *First Treatise*, not to mention much of the *Second Treatise*, attacking, or a closely related one. Consequently, this passage can hardly be read as an endorsement of a natural right for "God-like princes" to rule.

14. For Locke's account of parental power, see II 52–76. It is important to note that it is not an anachronism to attribute to Locke a doctrine of parental power rather than merely paternal power. He writes, "Whatever obligation Nature and the right of Generation lays on children, it must certainly bind them equal to both the concurrent Causes of it. And accordingly we see the positive Law of God every where joyns them together, without distinction, when it commands the Obedience of Children, *Honour thy Father and thy Mother*, Exod. 20. 12" (II 52). For more on Locke on the equality of the sexes, see Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality*, 21–43.

15. According to Locke, biological parents have a natural duty either to raise their children themselves or see to it that someone else takes up the office of parent with respect to them (II 55, 69). His reasons for this are not, I think, especially deep; he seems to observe simply that children need parenting once they come to exist and that biological parents are uniquely responsible for this state of affairs and so naturally suited to take on the concomitant responsibilities. Nothing in his text, however, suggests that he would object to a culture in which other people reliably took up the office of parenthood.

16. For more on Locke's conception of parenthood as a moral office, see Franklin-Hall, "Creation and Authority," 273–78.

17. This work appeared anonymously in 1695, while the *Two Treatises* and the *Essay* appeared (the former also anonymously) in 1689. While it is perhaps tempting to think that Locke's admission in the *Reasonableness* that human beings cannot successfully demonstrate the content of morality on their own reflects a change in position from the *Essay*, I see no reason to believe that it does. For, in the *Essay*, Locke claims only that moral demonstration is *possible*, as "the precise real Essence of the Things moral Words stand for, may be perfectly known" (E 3.11.16). He does not claim that anyone is able to carry out the entire demonstration, and it does not follow from the fact that something is demonstrable in principle that anyone can, in fact, demonstrate it.

18. That is, "head among the clouds."

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