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White The Philosophy of the
American Revolution



The Philosophy of the American Revolution

Morton White

Oxford

Oxford University Press, New York

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The Philosophy of the American Revolution

Prologue

The Changeable Philosophy of the Immutable

In this study of the fundamental philosophical ideas associated with the American Revolution, I focus on the Declaration of Independence and refer on many occasions to other American revolutionary writings of the eighteenth century in an effort to analyze the epistemology, metaphysics, philosophical theology, and ethics upon which the revolutionaries rested their claim to independence. Since they leaned heavily on transatlantic thinkers whom we may rightly call the founding forefathers, I frequently refer to the views of those foreign moralists and jurists whose ideas were used by rebels seeking to justify the steps they took at Philadelphia in 1776. Now that we have passed from celebration in 1976 to sober cerebration, we may repeat what scholars have always known, and what the most candid rebels always admitted, namely, that they did not invent a single idea that may be called philosophical in the philosopher's sense of that word. The self-evidence that the revolutionaries applied to their truths when they used an old term of epistemology, the essence or nature of man to which they appealed in their metaphysical

moods, the concept of equal creation that loomed so large in their theology, the unalienable moral rights they defended, and the happiness they were so bent on pursuing as individuals and as a people—all of these ideas were familiar to distinguished Western philosophers and jurists before they were used in the political slogans of American revolutionaries. But we cannot understand how the revolutionaries used these ideas without detailed probing of their writings and of those writings from which they borrowed.

In spite of being philosophical borrowers, the revolutionaries deserve to have their philosophical reflections read carefully because they seriously used philosophical ideas while leading one of the great political transformations of history. Though they wrote their philosophy as they ran, many of them were men of considerable intellectual power, trained in the law and fully capable of grasping most of what they read in the writings of distinguished moralists and jurists. Historians of the twentieth century may speak of the "pragmatism" of Franklin Roosevelt or John Kennedy, but no one can suppose this to mean that those politicians seriously applied the technical doctrines of William James to public affairs. On the other hand, when historians speak of the impact of the doctrine of natural law on Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams, and James Wilson, they most certainly call attention to the influence of technical philosophy on politicians. It is obvious that Jefferson made far more serious use of the writings of Locke than Roosevelt or Kennedy made of the papers of Peirce or the works of any other philosopher for that matter. And for this reason I shall not be recording what the philosopher F. H. Bradley once called "an unearthly ballet of bloodless categories." Such categories as I shall study here were enshrined in the Declaration by a man who wrote that "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." But in order to understand what Jefferson understood by words like "liberty," I

shall try to fill a gap which has been left in the history of the Revolution by a failure to study the revolutionary understanding of such words with care, to examine the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical borrowing by the colonists from more distinguished thinkers, and to reflect on the uses to which the philosophical ideas they borrowed could be and were put.

I should make clear, however, that my discussion of Locke or Burlamaqui—to take two of the more important influences on the revolutionaries—is not offered merely to show that they influenced the Americans, for that goes without saying. I aim to improve our understanding of what the Americans believed by exposing the Lockean or Burlamaquian antecedents of their beliefs and not simply to answer the question: "Who got what from whom?" The present work is not a mindless history of American revolutionary thought in which names of pre-Revolutionary thinkers are rattled off *seriatim*, as if that alone could be expected to produce the requisite knowledge of how terms like "self-evident truth," "unalienable right," and "the nature of man" were used in the philosophical literature that American revolutionaries studied and imitated. Merely dropping the names of Locke, Burlamaqui, Hooker, Hobbes, Grotius, Pufendorf, Aquinas, Aristotle, Wolff, Vattel, Richard Price, Cicero, Francis Hutcheson, and other figures in the history of Western thought will do very little to clarify the views of Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, or Wilson. That is why there is an opportunity for a historian of philosophy to say something new and useful on a topic which has attracted so many opaque pages to itself.

Let me emphasize that in taking this opportunity, I do not intend to restrict myself to the exposition of texts. I shall expound some, to be sure, but not uncritically. I shall not confine myself to translating what Revolutionary and pre-Revolutionary thinkers say into terms that are more compre-

hensible. When it is hard or impossible to make what they say more comprehensible, I shall not hesitate to assert or to conjecture that they are *incomprehensible*. Nor will I hesitate to call attention to ambiguity or indefiniteness in their writings, especially ambiguity or indefiniteness which may have political significance. Let me also emphasize that by concentrating on the philosophical writings of the revolutionaries I do not wish to imply that those writings contain within themselves a complete causal explanation of the Revolution which makes it unnecessary to deal with the society, the economy, and the politics of eighteenth-century America and Britain.¹ I believe, however, that the philosophy of the rebellious colonists was one causal factor in a conjunction that led to the Revolution and that we shall not be able to explain the Revolution unless we understand that philosophy in more than a superficial way.²

This brings me to the theme expressed in the title of this

1. I wish to emphasize that in concentrating on the explicit philosophical language of the revolutionaries, I am not committed to the view that their philosophical beliefs by themselves "explain" why the Revolution occurred. By contrast, Bernard Bailyn has concluded after studying the pamphlets of the American Revolution that they were eminently "explanatory." See his book, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967). Bailyn thought that he had discovered confirmation for his "rather old-fashioned view that the American Revolution was above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy" (*ibid.*, p. vi). However, I must confess to being unable to understand as well as I should wish Bailyn's statement that the Revolution was "above all else" or "primarily" an ideological, constitutional struggle, nor do I find any further statement in his study which improves my understanding of these difficult words. In this connection, see my review of Richard Hofstadter's *The Progressive Historians*, in *American Historical Review*, 75 (December 1969): 603; reprinted in my *Pragmatism and the American Mind* (New York, 1973), p. 208. See also my *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York, 1965), Chapter IV, "Causal Interpretation."

2. See my article "Why Annalists of Ideas Should Be Analysts of Ideas," *The Georgia Review*, XXIX (Winter 1975): 930-947.

Prologue, one that will appear at different times throughout this work. I shall try to record it here with enough clarity to give the reader some idea of what to expect, and that may best be accomplished by means of an illustration which will receive fuller treatment later on. It concerns the idea of self-evident truth, which, as we shall see, is so conspicuous in the epistemology of the doctrine of natural law accepted by the revolutionaries. There is an old philosophical tradition according to which a truth may be self-evident to some people but not to others, a tradition which goes at least as far back as Aquinas, who emphasized that a learned man can see as self-evident a truth which an ignorant and rude man cannot see as self-evident. The idea appears in Locke, and it also appears in a slightly different form in Burlamaqui. But what about their revolutionary disciples in America? The answer to this question is not altogether clear if only because Jefferson and his associates did not write as fully on such topics as Burlamaqui and Locke did. Yet the fact that the Americans did not abandon the terminology of the older writers and announced the self-evidence of certain truths suggests that they operated within a philosophical tradition according to which the power to see self-evidence was attributed to a restricted group and not to every person. Therefore, the American revolutionaries were working with a terminology that could sanction various forms of elitism even though some of the revolutionaries professed great admiration for the people.

Such ambiguity and indefiniteness were not limited to epistemology. Turning to metaphysics, we may ask how the revolutionaries conceived of the nature or essence of man, a notion notorious for being identified by different philosophers in different ways. Much in the theory of natural law depended on how the essence or nature of man was identified, since the ends and inherent rights of man were supposedly derived from that mysterious entity which Jefferson came to disparage in later life but whose existence he assumed when

he spoke of "inherent" rights in the Rough Draft of the Declaration. And it must always be remembered that the essence of man, as conceived by most philosophers of natural law, was created by a God whose purposes in creating man could have been identified differently by different philosophers. Those who held that God created man with a desire for happiness as part of his essence could regard the pursuit of happiness as an *inherent* duty and right of man, but those who held otherwise could not regard the pursuit of happiness as an *inherent* right of man. Moreover, if the essence of government was identified with the purpose proposed for it by God, then one philosopher who saw God's intentions in one way might define government so that it was obliged to *aid and abet* man in the pursuit of happiness, whereas another might think it obliged only to *protect* man's right to pursue happiness—a crucial difference in political philosophy.

I have listed these examples in a sketchy manner in order to give the reader a glimpse of one thread that will run through my discussion, a thread which links my efforts at purely philosophical interpretation of philosophical ideas with reflections on the political uses to which those ideas may be put. However, I should add that a considerable part of this book may gain the assent of readers who cannot agree with my reflections on what may be called the politically exploitable ambiguities of the Revolutionary version of the doctrine of natural law. I can imagine my readers treating this work much as they would a loose-leaf book, discarding the pages they deem false or indefensible and saving what they regard as remnants of truth, but needless to say, I hope that they will not find themselves tearing out many pages.

. I .

Self-evident Truth and Democracy

Since one of my main concerns in this volume is to expound and analyze the fundamental philosophical ideas of the American Revolution, I shall concentrate in the opening three chapters on a question in the theory of knowledge that interested many of the revolutionaries: How do we know that the truths of morality or of natural law are true? In this first chapter I shall present some of the antecedents of their doctrine that we can know some of them to be true by the use of reason; in Chapter 2 I shall show the influence of that doctrine on the revolutionaries, especially by considering their famous announcement in the Declaration of Independence that they held certain moral truths to be self-evident; and in Chapter 3 I shall focus on their attitudes toward the rival moral theory of the eighteenth century which asserted that we have a faculty called "the moral sense" and that it, rather than reason, was the faculty or power men exercised in discovering the moral truths that underlay the proposition that the American colonists had a right, in fact a duty, to rebel against Britain.

Although I shall begin my investigations by examining the epistemology of the revolutionaries, my reason for doing so is not obvious. So let me admit at once that other historians of Revolutionary philosophy might prefer to begin with the ethics and the metaphysics of the revolutionaries, to tell us first *what* the revolutionaries thought they knew, and *then* to tell us how they thought they knew it, whereas I shall turn to the more substantive beliefs of the revolutionaries in later chapters. In my opinion, however, if one begins with some understanding of Revolutionary epistemology, one is better able to see why the American Revolution was, among other things, a chapter in the Age of Reason or Enlightenment. Furthermore, once the reader sees that many of the revolutionaries adopted a rationalistic theory of knowledge, the reader will be better prepared to see why the revolutionaries thought they knew certain propositions in metaphysics about the essence of man and certain propositions in ethics about the rights of man.

The Courage To Use One's Own Reason

The first thing to observe about the notion of self-evident truth in the Declaration is this: if Jefferson and other signers had been challenged to say how they knew that some propositions were true, each might have thought it proper to reply, "I know it by intuition." Such a reply is equivalent to saying that the truth expressing the knowledge in question is self-evident. As we know, the signers of the Declaration assert very early that when "it becomes necessary for one People to dissolve the Political Bands which have connected them with another"—in short, to make a revolution—"a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation." And then, in their effort to persuade *mankind*, for whose opinion they expressed so much respect, of the rightness of their cause,

they start laying down their axioms or the truths which they hold to be self-evident. If asked by mankind: "How do you know that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, and that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness?", the signers might have been quite content to answer that they knew these propositions by intuition, that they could not give *arguments* for them, that these propositions were like the mathematical axioms that the whole is greater than any part and that things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. Whether they were justified in giving such an answer is, of course, another question. The revolutionaries were under the influence of a theory of knowledge which John Locke had defended, and I focus on him because he was the most eminent philosopher whom the American colonists were likely to take as an authority in such matters. However, the tradition behind this theory stretches very far back into the history of philosophy, being linked with the ancient claim that one can search only so far for premises when one is trying to prove something, and that at a certain point one must stop and say that some propositions—one's axioms—are known to be true without being deducible from anything else. And this claim is also present in Aquinas and in the rationalism of Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza.

We shall have occasion later to concentrate on Locke's and Aquinas's views of self-evident truth as they figured in their doctrines of natural law, but we should bear in mind that the idea that there are self-evident principles of natural law was espoused by a number of less famous but nonetheless important figures in the history of that doctrine who likened such principles to elementary truths of mathematics, simple truths of logic, or so-called essential predications which are true by definition. This was the position even of thinkers who held that the natural law was decreed by God and that it was revealed by God to a chosen few. The great Grotius likened

some principles of natural law to the proposition that two times two make four, and he insisted that even God could not make that proposition false. Grotius supported this proposition by citing a passage in the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle says that "Some things are thought of as bad the moment they are named," meaning that the very names of certain acts and feelings which do not admit of observance of a mean connote evil and that they are therefore blamed without attention to whether they exhibit an excess or deficiency of something. "It is impossible," Aristotle added, "ever to go right in regard to them—one must always be wrong." And although Pufendorf takes issue with Grotius and Aristotle on this point because he fears that Grotius minimizes the role of God as legislator and Aristotle the role of moral principle (because Aristotle does not appeal to the principle of the mean) in the examples mentioned above, Pufendorf also regards the fundamental principles of natural law as necessarily true dictates of reason.¹ Nathanael Culverwel, who influenced Locke, wrote in his *Discourse of the Light of Nature* (1652) that the principles of natural law "have so much of certainty in them, that they are near to a tautology and identity; for this first principles are."² The "judicious Hooker," as Richard Hooker was called by Locke and others, characterized all of the allegedly obvious propositions of natural law by saying, as Locke came to say, that as soon as they are "proposed the mind doth presently em-

1. See Hugo Grotius, *De jure belli ac pacis*, trans. F. W. Kelsey et. al. (Oxford, 1925), Book I, Chapter I, Part X, Section 5, p. 40. The passages in Aristotle to which Grotius refers may be found in *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb ed., II, vi. For Pufendorf's views see *De jure naturae et gentium*, trans. C. H. and W. A. Oldfather (Oxford, 1934), Book II, Chapter III, and especially p. 203. For his discussion of Grotius and Aristotle on the point in question, see pp. 29–30.

2. Nathanael Culverwel, *Discourse of the Light of Nature*, ed. John Brown (Edinburgh, 1857), p. 127. See W. von Leyden's Introduction to Locke's *Essays on the Law of Nature* (Oxford, 1954), pp. 39–43.

brace them as free from all possibility of error, clear and manifest without proof."³

This appeal to intuition or self-evidence was made in many different fields of intellectual activity. It was most frequently made in philosophical comments on mathematics, usually by appealing to the method of geometers like Euclid. It was also made in the discussion of theology, though less frequently in the eighteenth century after the great inroads that empiricism had made in that century. And it was made in moral philosophy, which contains the theory of natural law and natural rights that appears in the Declaration. Moral philosophy, in a way that may strike some contemporary readers as odd, has often been a field in which mathematics has been looked up to as a logical model, even by so-called empiricists like John Locke. And to make matters more interesting, mathematics was used as a model by moralists who sought to justify popular revolutions. But how, it might be asked, could democrats think that such an appeal was democratic in effect? To some readers it might appear incompatible with what they might think of as the spirit of the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment. They might think, as John Stuart Mill and John Dewey thought, that appealing to self-evidence and intuition was hardly compatible with being prepared to de-

3. Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (Everyman ed., 1954), Volume I, p. 177. The work originally appeared in 1593–1597. Just before saying this, Hooker calls upon the authority of Theophrastus, whom he translates as asserting: "They that seek a reason of all things do utterly overthrow Reason." Hooker himself says in this same paragraph that "to make nothing evident of itself unto man's understanding were to take away all possibility of knowing any thing." Gabriel Towerson, one of Locke's friends, writing well before Locke's *Essay* appeared, refers to the "judicious Hooker" as one who had observed that "all knowledge is at length resolved into such things as are clear and evident of themselves," *An Introduction to the Explication of the Decalogue*, Part II of *An Exposition of the Catechism of the Church of England*, Discourse I, "Of the Law of Nature," p. 2. This *Explication* was published in 1676, according to von Leyden, *op. cit.*, p. 36, note 2. I have used an edition of *An Exposition of the Catechism* published in London in 1681.

fend one's views to all of mankind since both Mill and Dewey identified the appeal to intuition and self-evidence as conservative, undemocratic, and authoritarian because it implied the existence of a faculty which was employed only by a few who might seek to impose their views on the many. One can even find signs of such an attitude in a very famous essay by Immanuel Kant. In 1784, between the Declaration and the Constitutional Convention, Kant looked at the times in which he lived and published "What Is Enlightenment?" In that essay Kant complains: "I hear on all sides, 'Do not argue!' The officer says: 'Do not argue but drill!' The tax-collector: 'Do not argue but pay!' The cleric: 'Do not argue but believe!'"⁴ In the light of this complaint one may ask: Did the signers expect mankind to believe their self-evident truths without argument? It would appear that they did if only because they used the word "self-evident" in the final version of the Declaration. But it must be remembered that in the Rough Draft, Jefferson first called his truths "sacred and undeniable" rather than "self-evident," and later on we shall see that the revolutionaries might have been better off if they had not used the word "self-evident," since it would appear that some of them really accepted their so-called self-evident truths on the basis of an argument that they did not make explicit in the Declaration. That argument, which I shall present in a later chapter, rested on other premises that would have been regarded by them as self-evident so long as they retained their belief in a certain form of moral rationalism. Therefore, so long as they accepted *any* truths as self-evident, they would have been forced to say "Do not argue but believe!" at some point. And if they did so by resting on premises that the majority of the people could not expect to

4. A translation of this essay by L. W. Beck appears in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason, And Other Writings in Moral Philosophy* (Chicago, 1949), p. 287.

understand, much less believe, one might well ask how this was compatible with the American revolutionaries' being men of the Enlightenment, which, according to Kant, was the age in which *the people* were to be encouraged to use their own reason.⁵

Innate Principles and Dictators

To answer these questions we must turn first to the philosophy of Locke and call attention to a number of things that he bequeathed to the eighteenth century. First of all, he believed that there was a fundamental contrast between what he called *innate principles*, the existence of which he was determined to refute, and *self-evident principles*, the existence of which he confidently asserted. Secondly, Locke regarded the doctrine of innate principles as conservative, whereas he regarded the doctrine of self-evident principles as very different just because he thought it encouraged the people to use their own reason. But there are, he held, two kinds of reason, one intuitive and the other discursive. The first was used to see the truth of self-evident principles and the second to deduce theorems from them. And, as we shall see, Locke held in some places that just to the extent that intuition was a branch of the faculty of God-given reason, an ordinary man had the power to exercise it if some "dictator of principles" should try to palm something off on him as true which he himself did not intuit or see as true. To use one's own intuition, Locke held, was to use a faculty that God had given to *all* men for their use whereas, according to the doctrine of innate principles, one would be forced to *swallow*, as he put it, a lot of principles without checking them oneself. When he spoke in this way, Locke saw the doctrine of self-evident principles as a great advance, from a

5. Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

political point of view, on the doctrine of innate principles but as we shall see, he said other things which pointed in another political direction.

Since I believe that in the Declaration the use of the word "self-evident" was directly or indirectly influenced by John Locke's use of the word,⁶ I want to present a more detailed exposition of Locke's views on this matter. Having pointed out that Locke distinguished sharply between what he called "innate principles" and what he called "self-evident principles," and that one of the main tasks of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) was to demolish the idea that there are innate principles, I do not intend to linger too long over what Locke meant by "innate principles." However, I want to say enough about his view of them to explain why he tried to distinguish them from self-evident principles both for epistemological and political reasons. In the opening book of his *Essay* Locke argues vehemently against what he calls an established opinion amongst "some men"—and his failure to mention the men in question launched a vast literature of speculation as to the men he had in mind—that there are in the understanding certain innate principles, some primary notions which, like characters, are *stamped* upon the mind of man, and "which the soul receives in its very first being, and brings into the world with it."⁷ And although many of Locke's critics have held that there is virtually no

6. For an interesting discussion of an indirect route whereby Locke's concept of self-evidence exerted an influence on the Declaration, see W. S. Howell, "The Declaration of Independence and Eighteenth-Century Logic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, XVIII (October 1961): 463-484. Howell emphasizes the importance of certain books on logic which Jefferson had in his library, notably William Duncan's *Elements of Logick*, first published in London in 1748. Howell believes "that Jefferson must certainly have studied the *Logick* [of Duncan] when he was enrolled at William and Mary between 1760 and 1762" (p. 471).

7. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Book I, Chapter I, Section 1, ed. A. C. Fraser (Dover Publications, New York, 1959); often referred to below as "*Essay*."

difference between Locke's conception of an innate principle and his conception of a self-evident principle, Locke himself certainly believed there was. For him an innate principle would have to be "imprinted on the soul" from birth, and if it were so imprinted on the soul, it would have to be perceived and understood from birth. "No proposition," he held, "can be said to be in the mind which it never yet knew, which it was never yet conscious of."⁸ So, for example, principles of logic like "Whatsoever is, is" and "It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be," the strongest candidates for innateness, so to speak, *cannot* be innate because they, Locke holds, cannot be imprinted on the minds of children from birth since infants surely "have not the least apprehension or thought of them."⁹

On the other hand, Locke insists that these logical truths are self-evident. But what is a self-evident truth? In one place he says that "universal and ready assent upon hearing and understanding the terms is . . . a mark of self-evidence,"¹⁰ and it would appear from his use of the word "mark" that he is not giving a definition of "self-evident" but merely a characteristic that all self-evident truths possess. But later in the *Essay*, it would seem that he defines the idea of self-evidence and goes beyond a mere "mark" of it when he discusses the "degrees of evidence" for a proposition and tells us that "sometimes the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas *immediately by themselves*, without the intervention of any other: and this I think we may call *intuitive knowledge*."¹¹ Here, Locke goes on to say, the mind is at no pains in *proving* or examining, but sees the truth "as the eye doth light, only by being directed toward it."¹² In illus-

8. *Ibid.*, Book I, Chapter I, Section 5.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, Book I, Chapter I, Section 18.

11. *Ibid.*, Book IV, Chapter II, Section 1.

12. *Ibid.*

trating self-evidence, Locke also offers the propositions that white is not black, that a circle is not a triangle, that three exceeds two, and that three equals two and one. He adds that "such kinds of truths the mind perceives at first sight of the ideas together, by bare intuition; without the intervention of any other idea: and this kind of knowledge is the clearest and most certain that human frailty is capable of. This part of knowledge is irresistible, and, like bright sunshine, forces itself immediately to be perceived, as soon as ever the mind turns its view that way; and leaves no room for hesitation, doubt, or examination, but the mind is presently filled with the clear light of it. *It is on this intuition that depends all the certainty and evidence of all our knowledge*; which certainty every one finds to be so great, that he cannot imagine, and therefore not require a greater."¹³

After drawing this purely epistemological contrast between innate principles and self-evident, intuitively seen principles, Locke proceeds, as some present-day thinkers might say, to "politicize" his preference for self-evident principles over innate principles. Once he has finished his epistemological argument, Locke tells his reader that he has just done him a great political favor by destroying the politically pernicious doctrine of innate principles. Locke held that the doctrine that certain propositions are inscribed on the mind from birth discouraged men from using their own powers of reason and encouraged them to take allegedly innate principles "upon trust without further examination." "In which posture of blind credulity," he goes on to say, "they might be more easily governed by, and made useful to some sort of men, who had the skill and office to principle and guide them." Summing up his political opposition to the doctrine of innate principles, Locke said: "Nor is it a small power it gives one man over another, to have the authority to be the

13. *Ibid.*

dictator of principles, and teacher of unquestionable truths; and to make a man swallow that for an innate principle which may serve to his purpose who teacheth them."¹⁴

Locke's main political point is that because innate principles are allegedly *stamped* by God on man's mind at birth, and hence not arrived at by the *exercise* of man's reason, the doctrine of innate principles is, or certainly can be, a tool of dictators. According to Locke, the nefarious nativist or innatist first persuades his unwitting dupe that principles which are really self-evident are innate. Hence the dupe is prevented from seeing that he himself sees the truth of the self-evident principle through the use of intuitive reason. Once the dupe has been led this far, he is supposedly sunk. For now the nativist will get him to accept what Locke calls a principle of principles, namely, "that principles must not be questioned." So, as soon as the dupes are fallaciously persuaded that some of their beliefs—which are really self-evident and hence testable by the exercise of reason—are *innate*, the dictators of principles can persuade them to stop using their own reason and judgment and to take what the dictators say on trust. Once that happens, "no small power" over the people is given to the dictators of principles.

It will be recalled that I asked earlier how a democrat could appeal to intuition and to self-evident principles without the sort of concern that developed later in the writings of Mill and Dewey. And the answer I have so far offered on behalf of Locke is that a self-evident principle must be certified by a man's intuitive reason. *He* had to see the truth of the principle immediately upon understanding its terms; therefore, he could not be forced to swallow principles "upon trust without further examination," and he could not be forced into a "posture of blind credulity" which would allow others to govern him, to guide him, and to "principle" him.

14. *Ibid.*, Book I, Chapter III, Section 25.

*Aquinas on Self-evidence:
The Learned and the Ignorant*

The answer offered above might be acceptable to complaining democrats were it not for a certain tradition within the history of the doctrine of natural law, the tradition of insisting that only a certain kind of person could see self-evidence. We shall see that Locke himself was part of this tradition, but he was anticipated by Thomas Aquinas, one of the most influential theorists of natural law. Aquinas held that a person who did not have certain ideas or who did not know the meanings of certain words would not—indeed, *could not*—see that certain propositions were self-evident. Aquinas made two distinctions in his treatment of the matter. His first was between a proposition's being self-evident "in itself" and its being self-evident "in relation to us." To be sure, the concept of being self-evident *in itself* is not an easy one to understand, but apparently what Aquinas had in mind was that there are certain concepts between which certain objective relations hold and that when a proposition asserts that such a relation holds, the proposition is self-evident in itself. For example, he thinks that *Man is a rational being* is a proposition which is self-evident in itself. It is self-evident quite apart from what anyone thinks about it just as it is *true* that snow is white quite apart from what anyone thinks about it. But what does it mean to say that a proposition is self-evident in itself? It means, according to one translation of Aquinas, that it is a proposition whose "predicate is contained in the notion of the subject."¹⁵ In other words, the notion of being rational is objectively *contained* in the notion of being a man. Therefore, by its very nature, the proposition is self-evident, according to Aquinas.

On the other hand, Aquinas says: "to one who does not

15. See note 16 below.

know the definition of the subject, such a proposition is not self-evident. For instance, this proposition, *Man is a rational being*, is, in its very nature, self-evident, since who says *man*, says a *rational being*; and yet to one who does not know what a man is, this proposition is not self-evident."¹⁶ But, Thomas goes on to say, "certain axioms or propositions are universally self-evident to all; and such are the propositions whose terms are known to all."¹⁷

For us, the most important implication of what Aquinas has to say here is that certain terms are understood by all, whereas some, as he puts it, are understood only by the learned and are not understood by the ignorant. Aquinas, in the context I have been discussing, uses a theological example: ". . . to one who understands that an angel is not a body, it is self-evident that an angel is not circumscriptively in a place." But it is not self-evident to the ignorant because they do not grasp the fact that an angel is not a body. The point he stresses in this context is that self-evidence will not be perceived by one who fails to know the essence of something.¹⁸ In other places, however, he seems to adopt a view not unlike Locke's when he is identifying a proposition which is self-evident.¹⁹ Thus, in a discussion of the question whether the existence of God is self-evident, Aquinas writes in response to an objection which he is considering: "those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known."²⁰ Aquinas seems to accept this formulation of what is meant by "self-evident," which anticipates

16. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part of the Second Part, Question XCIV, Second Article. See A. C. Pegis (ed.), *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York, 1945), Volume II, p. 774. Aquinas's Latin for a proposition "whose predicate is contained in the notion of the subject" is "*cuius praedicatum est de ratione subiecti*."

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Aquinas's Latin for "self-evident" is "*per se nota*."

20. *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question II, First Article; Pegis, *op. cit.*, Volume I, p. 18.

the mark of self-evidence mentioned by Locke. And in Aquinas's statement that some terms are known to or understood by *all men*, a statement for which he finds authority in Boethius, we also find the basis for Boethius's and Aquinas's view that "certain axioms or propositions are universally self-evident to all." Note that they are not only *believed* by all, but they are *self-evident* to all. Among the illustrations of propositions said to be self-evident to all, we find Aquinas citing two given by Boethius, namely, the mathematical axioms, "Every whole is greater than its part" and "Things equal to one and the same are equal to one another." He lists a third which is a logical principle he takes from Aristotle, namely, "That the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time," and a fourth which is a precept of natural law, as Aquinas calls it, namely, "Good is to be done and promoted, and evil is to be avoided."²¹

Taking as my point of departure Aquinas's idea that some truths are self-evident only to the learned, I want to turn now to Locke's own statements on self-evidence and allied topics in order to show the extent to which he subscribed to similar views—views that make it easier to see how the doctrine of *self-evident* principles might also be exploited by

21. *Summa Theologica*, First Part of the Second Part, Question XCIV, Second Article; Pegis, *op. cit.*, Volume II, p. 774. It is important to note that although for Aquinas some self-evident propositions like "Man is a rational being" are essential predication and what Locke later called "trifling propositions," such propositions did not exhaust the class of self-evident propositions for Aquinas or, at any rate, it would be difficult for Aquinas to argue successfully that they did. It is worth noting that Aquinas argues as follows: "... the first principle in the practical reason is one founded on the nature of the good, viz., that *good is that which all things seek after*. Hence this is the first precept of law, that *good is to be done and promoted and evil is to be avoided*" (*ibid.*). The difficulty here is that if the nature or essence of the good is that which all things seek after ("rationem boni, quae est, *Bonum est quod omnia appetunt*"), it is hard to see how Aquinas can extract from the notion of the good as that which is *in fact* sought after, the notion of being that which *ought to be* done and promoted.

those whom Locke had called dictators of principles. This procedure is justified on historical grounds because Locke was indebted—directly or indirectly—to Aquinas for some of the views to be found in the English philosopher's *Essays on the Law of Nature*,²² to which I now turn for further light on what power the people allegedly had to see the rational truths of natural law.

How Democratic Was Locke's Appeal to Self-evidence?

It will be recalled that Locke, when describing self-evident truth and intuitive knowledge in the *Essay*, said that such knowledge was irresistible, and it forced itself like bright sunshine "*as soon as ever the mind turns its view that way.*" The qualification I have emphasized was interestingly exploited by Locke in his unpublished *Essays on the Law of Nature*, a work which shows that he held that truths of reason were not self-evident to *all*. Locke's figurative reference to light and the mind turning its view in the proper direction makes it easy for him to say that some men did *not* turn their minds or eyes in the proper direction, that some men were blind, that some men did not open up their eyes, and so on. Therefore, he responds to certain critics of his rationalistic doctrine of natural law as follows:

Some people here raise an objection against the law of nature, namely that there is no such law in existence at all, since it can nowhere be found, for most people live as though there were no rational ground in life at all nor any law of such a kind that all men recognize it; on the

22. John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature: The Latin Text with a Translation, Introduction, and Notes, Together with Transcripts of Locke's Shorthand in His Journal for 1676*, ed. W. von Leyden (Oxford, 1954). See von Leyden's Introduction, p. 36, for comment on the relationship between Locke's views and those of Aquinas.

contrary, on this point men appear to disagree most of all. If indeed natural law were discernible by the light of reason, why is it that not all people who possess reason have knowledge of it?

My answer to this is, first, that as in civil affairs it does not follow that a law does not exist or is not published, because it is impossible for a blind man, and difficult for one who sees badly, to read a legal notice displayed in a public place, so, in other circumstances, a man who is occupied is not free, nor an idle or bad man disposed, to lift his eyes to the notice board and learn from it the nature of his duty. I admit that all people are by nature endowed with reason, and I say that natural law can be known by reason, but from this it does not necessarily follow that it is known to any and every one. For there are some who make no use of the light of reason but prefer darkness and would not wish to show themselves to themselves. But not even the sun shows a man the way to go, unless he opens his eyes and is well prepared for the journey. There are others, brought up in vice, who scarcely distinguish between good and evil, because a bad way of life, becoming strong by lapse of time, has established barbarous habits, and evil customs have perverted even matters of principle. In others, again, through natural defect the acumen of the mind is too dull to be able to bring to light those secret decrees of nature. For how few there are who in matters of daily practice or matters easy to know surrender themselves to the jurisdiction of reason or follow its lead, when, either led astray by the violence of passions or being indifferent through carelessness or degenerate through habit, they readily follow the inducements of pleasure or the urges of their base instincts rather than the dictates of reason. Who, as I might almost say, is there in a commonwealth that knows the laws of his state, though they have been promulgated, hung up in public places, are easy to read and to understand, and are everywhere exposed to view? *And how much less will he be acquainted with the secret and*

*hidden laws of nature? Hence, in this matter, not the majority of people should be consulted but those who are more rational and perceptive than the rest.*²³

Later on in his *Essays on the Law of Nature*, Locke says something else of importance to us. While trying to explain why some mortals lack knowledge of the law of nature and why nearly all of them think of it differently, he writes:

... granted that our mental faculties can lead us to the knowledge of this law, nevertheless it does not follow from this that all men necessarily make proper use of these faculties. The nature and properties of figures and numbers appear obvious and, no doubt, knowable by the light of nature; yet from this it does not follow that whoever is in possession of mental faculties turns out a geometer or knows thoroughly the science of arithmetic. Careful reflection, thought, and attention by the mind is needed, in order that by argument and reasoning one may find a way from perceptible and obvious things into their hidden nature. Concealed in the bowels of the earth lie veins richly provided with gold and silver; human beings besides are possessed of arms and hands with which they can dig these out, and of reason which invents machines. Yet from this we do not conclude that all men are wealthy. First they have to equip themselves; and it is with great labour that those resources which lie hidden in darkness are to be brought to the light of day. They do not present themselves to idle and listless people, nor indeed to all those who search for them, since we notice some also who are toiling in vain. But if in matters that relate to the practice of ordinary life we meet but few who are directed by reason, since men only seldom delve into themselves in order to search out from thence the condition, manner, and purpose of their life, then it is not to be wondered at that of the law of nature, which is much less easy to know, men's opinions are so

²³. *Ibid.*, pp. 113-115. The emphasis is mine.

different. For most people are little concerned about their duty; they are guided not so much by reason as either by the example of others, or by traditional customs and the fashion of the country, or finally by the authority of those whom they consider good and wise. They want no other rule of life and conduct, being satisfied with that second-hand rule which other people's conduct, opinions, and advice, without any serious thinking or application, easily supply to the unwary. It does not therefore follow that the law of nature cannot be known by the light of nature because there are only few who, neither corrupted by vice nor carelessly indifferent, make a proper use of that light.²⁴

And while we are examining Locke's view on the people's relationship to the law of nature, let us also quote what he says in his *Essays on the Law of Nature* about the maxim "The voice of the people is the voice of God":

Surely, we have been taught by a most unhappy lesson how doubtful, how fallacious this maxim is, how productive of evils, and with how much party spirit and with what cruel intent this ill-omened proverb has been flung wide [lately] among the common people. Indeed, if we should listen to this voice as if it were the herald of a divine law, we should hardly believe that there was any God at all. For is there anything so abominable, so wicked, so contrary to all right and law, which the general consent, or rather the conspiracy, of a senseless crowd would not at some time advocate? Hence we have heard of the plunder of divine temples, the obstinacy of insolence and immorality, the violation of laws, and the overthrow of kingdoms. And surely, if this voice were the voice of God, it would be exactly the opposite of that first fiat whereby He created and furnished this world, bringing order out of chaos; nor does God ever speak to men in such a way—unless He should wish to throw

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 133-135.

everything into confusion again and to reduce it to a state of chaos. In vain, therefore, should we seek the dictates of reason and the decrees of nature in the general consent of men.²⁵

The point of quoting these passages from Locke is to show that although he was so politically hard on the doctrine of innate principles because he thought it could be used by "dictators of principles," the political potentialities of his own doctrine of *rational* principles do not seem very different. The passage quoted earlier which begins with the words "Some people" is to some extent linked with the doctrine of Aquinas. We see that after "admitting" that all people are by nature endowed with reason and saying that natural law can be known by reason, Locke adds that from this it does not necessarily follow that natural law is known to any and every one. But then Locke goes on to list the various ways in which man can fail to use his natural endowment of reason. Some simply make no use of the light of reason. Indeed, they *prefer* darkness; and it is in describing such people that Locke observes that one must open one's eyes even to see the sun. A second group of non-seers Locke describes in moral terms. They are brought up in vice and therefore "scarcely distinguish between good and evil." A third group of non-seers resembles more closely the non-seers of self-evidence described by Aquinas. In them, "through natural defect the acumen of the mind is too dull to be able to bring to light those secret decrees of nature." No wonder, then, that Locke concludes this passage by saying that in trying to discover what the law of nature is, "not the majority of people should be consulted but those who are more rational and perceptive than the rest."

The second passage, which begins with "granted that,"

25. *Ibid.*, p. 161. The "unhappy lesson" to which Locke refers is said by von Leyden, his editor, to be "the Civil War and its aftermath."

seems even more pessimistic in its estimate of the number of people who use their reason, though it does end with some indications that this state of affairs is deplorable. I have in mind, first of all, Locke's saying that some people rely on "the authority of those whom they consider good and wise" where there is a suggestion that the emphasis should be placed on the word "consider" and therefore an implication that those relied on might *not* be so good and wise. I also have in mind the statement by Locke that people who rely on others in this way are "unwary."

The suggestion and the statement I have just mentioned are linked with Locke's later warnings about dictators of principles in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In both cases we find him worried about people being deceived or taken advantage of, but when he mentions this possibility in the *Essays on the Law of Nature* he does not mention it as an *objection* to the theory of natural law. Moreover, we should observe that in the *Essays on the Law of Nature* Locke does assert that some people are more rational and perceptive than the rest, that the former are in the minority, and that senseless crowds can advocate abominable and wicked deeds. Furthermore, when he mentions the things that prevent some people from seeing truths of natural law by the light of reason, some of these obstacles do seem insuperable even though these people have been endowed by nature with reason. Take, for example, those who are said by Locke to be too dull to bring to light the secret decrees of nature because of natural defects in their minds. It seems hard to avoid the conclusion that *they* might be just as vulnerable to a dictator of principles as the people about whom Locke is so solicitous when he worries about the political consequences of the doctrine of innate principles in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. After all, the defect in question is said by Locke to be *natural* and presumably one which is not remediable, in which case those suffering from it

might easily fall victim to dictators of the principles of natural law and, therefore, be incapable of questioning what those dictators had told them was a dictate of reason. And let us not forget that it was the unquestionableness of what the dictators of principles asserted that worried Locke greatly.

In the light of this, it seems that there is a very fine line between the doctrine of innate principles and the doctrine of self-evident principles if one focuses on their possible political consequences. It is true that Locke makes much of the fact that self-evident principles *can be* perceived by the exercise of reason, whereas innate principles are so construed by him that, being *inscribed* on the mind, they do not require the exercise of a God-given faculty, reason. But so many people are, for one reason or another, *unable to exercise* that faculty in Locke's own view that it seems hard to see why—leaving aside the question of the epistemological *truth* of the doctrine of self-evident principles—one might not condemn it almost as harshly as Locke condemned the doctrine of innate principles on the score of its political consequences. Later, I shall try to show that certain thinkers tried to avoid these consequences by adopting the so-called doctrine of moral sense. They abandoned ethical rationalism for a theory which attributed the power of "seeing" moral principles to a faculty which was, on their theory, more widely possessed or more easily exercised than Locke's intuitive reason. But I must not conclude this discussion of Locke without remarking on what may be viewed as the ultimate irony in Locke's *political* attack on innate principles, his own appeal to religious authority in moral matters.

In 1692, two years after the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* appeared, Locke's correspondent, Molyneux, urged him to write a treatise on morals which would make good his claim that ethics could be developed as a demonstrative science. To this Locke replied in the same year: "Though by the view I had of moral ideas, whilst I was con-

sidering that subject, I thought I saw that morality might be demonstratively made out; yet whether I am able so to make it out, is another question." Molyneux repeated his request a few years later, but Locke continued to decline the invitation, saying in 1696: "The Gospel contains so perfect a body of ethics, that reason may be excused from that inquiry, since she may find man's duty clearer and easier in revelation than in herself."²⁶ I say that this is ironical because of Locke's contention that the doctrine of innate principles would encourage men to take allegedly innate principles "upon trust without further examination" and that once they were in a "posture of blind credulity, they might be more easily governed by, and made useful to some sort of men, who had the skill and office to principle and guide them."²⁷ Obviously, Locke's appeal to revelation and to the Gospel might easily be seized on by a debating defender of innate principles or, for that matter, by anyone bent on questioning Locke's concern for those who might be bullied by "dictators of principles." For here Locke seems to be taking moral principles "upon trust without further examination" from the Gospel and seems to acknowledge that even a man of his own intellectual powers was unable to get very far by the exercise of reason in developing a demonstrative science of ethics. This could have meant that virtually everyone would be forced into a "posture of blind credulity" and "made useful to some sort of men who had the skill and office to principle and guide them"—namely, the sort of men who claimed to be teachers of "unquestionable truths" and who might "make a man swallow that for a *self-evident* principle which may serve to his purpose who teacheth them." The reader will have noticed that I have simply taken one of Locke's remarks on the dangers of the doctrine of *innate*

26. Locke, *Works* (1823; reprint ed., London, 1963), Volume IX, pp. 291, 294–295, 374, 377.

27. See note 14 above.

principles and replaced "innate principles" by "self-evident principles"²⁸ to show how easily the tables might have been turned on Locke. Once Locke himself appeals to revelation as the basis for accepting principles of morality or natural law, a critic might say that Locke resembled the cleric whom Kant described in his essay on the Enlightenment, the one who commanded: "Do not argue but believe!"

Such a critic might find even more to support his view in Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity, As Delivered in the Scriptures*, which appeared in 1695, the year before Locke wrote to Molyneux that the Gospel contained "so perfect a body of ethics, that reason may be excused from that inquiry, since she may find man's duty clearer and easier in revelation than in herself." For in that book he says something quite reminiscent of what he had said thirty-five years earlier in his *Essays on the Law of Nature* about the intellectual powers of the majority of men:

The greatest part of mankind want leisure or capacity for demonstration; nor can carry a train of proofs, which in that way they must always depend upon for conviction, and cannot be required to assent to, until they see the demonstration. Wherever they stick, the teachers are always put upon proof, and must clear the doubt by a thread of coherent deductions from the first principle, how long, or how intricate soever they be. And you may as soon hope to have all the day-labourers and tradesmen, the spinsters and dairy-maids, perfect mathematicians, as to have them perfect in ethics this way. Hearing plain commands is the sure and only course to bring them to obedience and practice. The greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe. And I ask, whether one coming from heaven in the power of God, in full and clear evidence and demonstration of miracles, giving plain and direct rules of morality and obedience;

28. *Ibid.*

be not likelier to enlighten the bulk of mankind, and set them right in their duties, and bring them to do them, than by reasoning with them from general notions and principles of human reason? And were all the duties of human life clearly demonstrated, yet I conclude, when well considered, that method of teaching men their duties would be thought proper only for a few, who had much leisure, improved understandings, and were used to abstract reasonings. But the instruction of the people were best still to be left to the precepts and principles of the Gospel. The healing of the sick, the restoring sight to the blind by a word, the raising and being raised from the dead, are matters of fact, which they can without difficulty conceive, and that he who does such things, must do them by the assistance of a divine power. These things lie level to the ordinariness of apprehension: he that can distinguish between sick and well, lame and sound, dead and alive, is capable of this doctrine. To one who is once persuaded that Jesus Christ was sent by God to be a King, and a Saviour of those who do believe in him; all his commands become principles; there needs no other proof for the truth of what he says, but that he said it. And then there needs no more, but to read the inspired books, to be instructed: all the duties of morality lie there clear, and plain, and easy to be understood.²⁹

Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity*, and especially passages in it like the one just quoted, may be regarded as doubly ironical by a reader of his political attack on the doctrine of innate principles. For Locke not only appeals to the Gospel as a source of morality in a way that is not altogether in keeping with Locke's fear of dictators of principles but he makes a sharp distinction between two kinds of readers of the Gospel: men of improved understanding and others. By making this distinction Locke continues to provide a large loop-

29. John Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*, in *Works* (1823; reprint ed., London, 1963), Volume VII, pp. 146-147.

hole through which a human dictator might slip. For although Locke asserts that all men must rely on the Gospel, he also asserts that the few who are intellectually superior are able to confirm revealed moral truths by reason. He does this by maintaining in the *Reasonableness of Christianity* that all of us know of a great many truths which we at first receive from others, which we accept readily, and which we would not have discovered ourselves because we lacked the "strength" to have discovered them. He also maintains that Christian philosophers who read the Gospel merely give their immediate assent to principles which are revealed to them but which they do not discover.³⁰ This distinction between discovering a self-evident truth and merely seeing the self-evidence of a truth which Jesus discovered allows Locke to separate the "few, who had much leisure [and] improved understandings" from the day-laborers and their ilk since the latter not only could not *discover* self-evident truths but could not even see their self-evidence after they were discovered by others. This would permit one reader of the Gospel to dictate to another what it "really meant" and would be strikingly reminiscent of Aquinas's statement that the learned can see the self-evidence of the religious proposition that no angel is circumscriptively in a place whereas the rude and ignorant cannot. So, although Locke puts the many and the few on the same level by making both of them depend on revelation for their morality, he gives a decided advantage to "the most elevated understandings" over "the lowest capacities of reasonable creatures."

It must be noted, however, that the fact that men of elevated understanding may see the self-evidence or undeniability of moral truths uncovered in the Gospel is not enough to show that the Gospel contains a demonstrative science of

30. *Works*, Volume VII, p. 140. Locke also tells us that as soon as these principles are "heard and considered," they "can by no means be contradicted," *Ibid.*

morality. Even if it were to contain all of the axioms of such a science, it would still lack the theorems and their proofs. I emphasize this because Lord Bolingbroke, whom the youthful Jefferson admired, seems to have misunderstood Locke on this point. Seizing on Locke's statement that a "body of ethics, proved to be the law of nature, from principles of reason, and teaching all the duties of life" was not available before Christ³¹ and that pre-Christian philosophers had not "from undeniable principles given us ethics in a science like mathematics, in every part demonstrable,"³² Bolingbroke erroneously concluded that Locke held in the *Reasonableness of Christianity* that there is in the Gospel just such an axiomatized code of morality.³³ But Locke never says that such a systematic code is to be found in the Gospel. On the contrary, when he wrote that a philosopher must give rational assent to Christ's principles, Locke wanted to contrast the unsuccessful deductive method of a rationalistic philosopher like himself and that of Christ. That contrast is connected with Locke's distinction between two ways in which one can become a "dictator of rules"—itself an interesting phrase when we think of Locke's pejorative use of "dictator of principles" in his attack on innate principles. According to Locke, such a dictator "must show, that either he builds his doctrine upon principles of reason, self-evident in themselves; and that he deduces all the parts of it from thence, by clear and evident demonstration: or must show his commis-

31. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 146. Readers of Jefferson's Rough Draft of the Declaration of Independence should note that here Locke applies the term "undeniable" to "self-evident" principles since the latter term was substituted for the former by Jefferson himself, or by Franklin, before the final version was prepared.

33. *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke* (Philadelphia, 1841), Volume III, p. 406. This appears in his *Essays on Human Knowledge*, Essay the Fourth, Section VII, parts of which were copied into Jefferson's so-called *Literary Bible*, about which we shall have something to say later. See below, Chapter 2, note 22.

sion from heaven, that he comes with authority from God, to deliver his will and commands to the world."³⁴ But nobody, Locke continues in a passage not fully comprehended by Bolingbroke, constructed morality in the first manner before or after Christ's time, not even Locke himself. Still, Locke held, mankind needs a complete moral code "as their unerring rule," not merely parts of the law of nature which fall short of the whole; and "such a law of morality Jesus Christ hath given us in the New Testament." However, Jesus gave it to us by revelation.³⁵ He gave us a rule which is "conformable to that of reason" but—and this is crucial for some critics who might wish to taunt Locke about some of his political statements concerning the doctrine of innate principles—Locke held that "the truth and obligation of its precepts have their force, and are put past doubt to us, by the evidence of [Jesus'] mission. He was sent by God: his miracles show it; and the authority of God in his precepts cannot be questioned. Here morality has a sure standard, that revelation vouches, and reason cannot gainsay, nor question; but both together witness to come from God, the great law-maker."³⁶

We now see more clearly what Locke meant when he said that he would have to rely on revelation, but we can also see why the ethics of Locke might easily be characterized as authoritarian by those who did not share his belief in Christ's miracles and his consequent acceptance of Christ as a revealer of God's law. Naturally, Locke would have insisted in reply that there was a profound difference between an ordinary human dictator and one who, by the evidence of his miracles, showed that he was a messenger of God. But if the miracles were questioned or denied, Locke's argument would collapse.

34. Locke, *Works*, Volume VII, p. 142. Note the Thomistic phrase "self-evident in themselves."

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 142–143.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

And, what is more, a critic of Locke's inconsistency might well have reminded him of the passage in his own *Essay* which anticipated by almost a century Kant's exhortation, "Have courage to use your own reason," namely:

I think we may as rationally hope to see with other men's eyes, as to know by other men's understandings. So much as we ourselves consider and comprehend of truth and reason, so much we possess of real and true knowledge. The floating of other men's opinions in our brains, makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was science, is in us but opiniatrety; whilst we give up our assent only to reverend names, and do not, as they did, employ our own reason to understand those truths which gave them reputation. Aristotle was certainly a knowing man, but nobody ever thought him so because he blindly embraced, and confidently vented the opinions of another. And if the taking up of another's principles, without examining them, made not him a philosopher, I suppose it will hardly make anybody else so. In the sciences, every one has so much as he really knows and comprehends. What he believes only, and takes upon trust, are but shreds; which, however well in the whole piece, make no considerable addition to his stock who gathers them. Such borrowed wealth, like fairy money, though it were gold in the hand from which he received it, will be but leaves and dust when it comes to use.³⁷

*Burlamaqui, the "Stupid Wretches,"
and Self-evidence*

As we have seen, Locke's account of the light of nature and its uses was not as luminous as might be wished. But, as often happens in the history of philosophy, he acquired transmitters who would make some of his ideas more accessible to

37. *Essay*, Book I, Chapter III, Section 24.

American colonists, though they, of course, were able to read his own words in some of the works from which we have previously quoted as well as in others, notably his *Two Treatises of Government*. One of the more effective transmitters of Locke's ideas was Jean Jacques Burlamaqui (1694-1748), a Swiss-born jurist of Italian extraction who exerted a very great influence on several American founding fathers, especially on James Wilson. We know from Chinard's edition of *The Commonplace Book of Thomas Jefferson: A Repertory of His Ideas on Government* (Baltimore, 1926) that Jefferson had read and excerpted Wilson's pamphlet, *Considerations on the Nature and Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament* (1774), in which Wilson leaned heavily on Burlamaqui's *Principles of Natural and Politic Law*, first published in French in 1747. The first volume of this work was translated into English in 1748, and in 1769 Jefferson bought a copy of it in French.³⁸ It is fair to surmise that Burlamaqui's work was one of those "elementary books of public right" to which Jefferson referred when he described the views he was trying to "harmonize" while writing the Declaration.³⁹

38. Marie Kimball, *Jefferson: The Road to Glory* (New York, 1943), p. 210.

39. Letter to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. A. A. Lipscomb and A. E. Bergh (Washington, 1903), Volume XVI, pp. 118-119. (Hereafter this collection is sometimes referred to briefly as "*Writings*." However, the reader should not confuse this collection of Jefferson's writings with that edited under the same title by Paul Leicester Ford.) I use the word "surmise" because Jefferson refers only to the authors of these books as "Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc." My surmise, therefore, is that Burlamaqui's book was one of the *cetera* to which Jefferson referred. And as to the colonists' familiarity with the works of Burlamaqui, it is of interest to find William Bradford writing James Madison in 1774 that "The Congress sits in the Carpenter's Hall in one room of which the City Library is kept & of which the Librarian tells me the Gentlemen make great & constant use. By which we may conjecture that their measures will be wisely plan'd since they debate on them like philosophers; for by what I was told Vattel, Barlemaqui [*sic*], Locke and Montesquieu[u] seem to be the standar[d]s to which they refer either when

Burlamaqui's dependence on Locke's epistemology is evident in a number of respects. For example, he denies the existence of innate principles, but he believes in self-evident principles, asserting "that the most general and most important maxims of the law of nature are so clear and manifest, and have such a proportion to our ideas, and such an agreeableness to our nature, that so soon, as they are proposed to us, we instantly approve of them."⁴⁰ Burlamaqui's view about who can know these truths and how they can know them is also consonant with what we have seen in our discussion of Locke and Aquinas. It is therefore not surprising to find Burlamaqui saying that not all men are capable of discovering the principles of natural law and their consequences, and that there are some men "who, having taken a particular care to cultivate their minds, are qualified to enlighten others" by giving instructions to "the common run of mankind," who exhibit "rudeness and ignorance."

The word "rude," it will be recalled from the earlier section dealing with Aquinas's views on self-evidence, was applied by him to those who could not see the self-evidence of certain propositions, and he also speaks of them as ignorant. His Latin words are "*rudibus*" and "*ignoranti*." Locke applied similar words to those who failed to discern self-evident moral truth, even though he sometimes asserted that there were no self-evident moral principles. In a similar vein,

settling the rights of the Colonies or when a dispute arises on the justice or propriety of a measure," *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. W. T. Hutchinson and W. M. E. Rachal (Chicago, 1962-), Volume I, p. 126. For an account of the ideas of Burlamaqui and his impact on American Revolutionary thinkers, see the useful work of R. F. Harvey, *Jean Jacques Burlamaqui: A Liberal Tradition in American Constitutionalism* (Chapel Hill, 1937).

40. See Burlamaqui's *Principles of Natural and Politic Law*, trans. Thomas Nugent (Cambridge, Mass., 1807), Volume I (*The Principles of Natural Law*), p. 126. The passage appears in Part II, Chapter V, Section I of Volume I. For a French version see *Principes du droit naturel* (Genève et Copenhague, 1762), p. 112.

Burlamaqui at one point exclaims about the "multitudes" of "stupid wretches, who lead a mere animal life, and are scarce able to distinguish three or four ideas, in order to form what is called ratiocination."⁴¹ Can such "stupid wretches" see by the light of Locke's intuitive reason all of the truths listed as self-evident in the Declaration of Independence? It is very unlikely that they can if they have only four ideas. And if they cannot, what is to be said by the signers to someone who complains that the Declaration argues for the people's revolution from assumptions which many people cannot understand, much less intuit as true in Locke's sense? Could the signers really believe that *all men* had a sufficient grasp of *all* of the ideas in the so-called self-evident truths listed in the Declaration, "creation," "equal," "right," "liberty," and so on, so as to say that the people's knowledge of these truths was, in the language of Locke, "irresistible, and, like bright sunshine, force[d] itself immediately" upon them, leaving "no room for hesitation, doubt, or examination"? Certainly not all of the signers believed this.⁴²

Burlamaqui insisted that one "*can (peut)* discover all [the principles of natural law], and deduce from them several duties, by that natural light, which to no man has been ever refused," and he added that "it is in this sense we are to under-

41. *Ibid.*, Part II, Chapter III, Section IV. On Locke, see below, p. 178, note 46.

42. Thus John Adams writes: "We often hear and read of free states, a free people, a free nation, a free country, a free kingdom, and even of free republics; and we understand, in general, what is intended, although every man may not be qualified to enter into philosophical disquisitions concerning the meaning, or to give a logical definition of the word liberty," *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, Works of John Adams*, ed. C. F. Adams (Boston, 1851), Volume IV, p. 401. The remark is relevant because of the Declaration's statement in the Rough Draft that it is undeniable that the right to preserve liberty is derived from the equal creation of man, as well as the statement in the final version that it is self-evident that men are endowed with the right to liberty. To see that this is self-evident, one would have to be able to do more than "understand, in general, what is intended" by the word "liberty." See Locke, *Essay*, Book IV, Chapter XII, Sections 14-15.

stand what is commonly said, that this law is naturally known to all mankind."⁴³ However, Burlamaqui's use of "can," which I have emphasized, was compatible with a man's being able to see self-evidence only after receiving "succours" from others qualified to enlighten him. It was Burlamaqui's awareness of the difficulty that some men might have in rationally perceiving the self-evidence of certain principles that led him to say that it was sufficient for some men of "middling capacities" to comprehend the principles when they were "explained" to them and "to feel the truth and necessity of the duties, that flow from them, by comparing them with the constitution of their own nature." And finally, when he confronts the possibility that there are "capacities of a still inferior order," he is compelled to say that "they are generally led by the impressions of example, custom, authority, or some present and sensible utility."⁴⁴

It is necessary to understand Burlamaqui's use of the word "can" in his statement that every man can discover all the principles of natural law by natural light. And it is especially important to realize that although the enlightened few can and do know these principles in the strictest sense of "know" by using their own reason, the many are held responsible for knowing them even if they fail to know them for lack of intelligence or education. According to Burlamaqui, lesser minds are responsible for knowing these truths because they may receive them from more enlightened minds, even though lesser minds do not know them to be true by intuition or by deduction. According to Burlamaqui, inferior minds can also know the natural law through the impressions of example, custom, and authority, or even by seeing its utility. Therefore, Burlamaqui can support a form of élitism which says that only the few "really know" the principles of natural law and their duties and hence are able to dictate to others. And

43. Burlamaqui, *Principles of Natural Law*, Part II, Chapter V, Section 1.

44. *Ibid.*, Part II, Chapter V, Section II.

to lesser minds who say that they cannot or do not see the self-evidence of an allegedly self-evident proposition, Burlamaqui will reply that they can have a second-class kind of knowledge on the basis of example, custom, authority, or utility. This makes it possible for Burlamaqui to hold that lesser minds who cannot "really know" can know these truths in some weaker sense of "know." Therefore, he continues, the "law of nature is sufficiently notified to empower us to affirm, that no man, at the age of discretion, and in his right senses, can allege for a just excuse an invincible ignorance on this article."⁴⁵ It follows that since such people *can* know the truths in question in Burlamaqui's second-class way, they may be treated *as if* they know them in the first-class way that Locke celebrated when he spoke of knowing such truths by bare intuition and being irresistibly forced to acknowledge them. This is a practical implication of Burlamaqui's asserting that so-called inferior capacities cannot *excuse* their ignorance of the principles of natural law. If their ignorance is, as he says, not "invincible," then they *can* know the principles; and if they *can* know them, any failure on their part to perform the duties prescribed by these principles is not excusable by an appeal to their actual ignorance of the natural law.

Self-evidence and Utilitarianism

The upshot, then, of certain statements by Locke and by Burlamaqui is that they both depart from the anti-authoritarianism so dramatically expressed in Locke's *Essay* when he says that we may as rationally hope to see with other men's eyes as to know by other men's understandings, and that the floating of other men's opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true.⁴⁶ As we have seen in our discussion of Locke's *Reasonableness*

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, Chapter III, Section 24.

of Christianity, he was quite prepared to have "the day-labourers and tradesmen, the spinsters and dairy-maids" believe without knowing moral propositions they found in the Bible, saying: "Hearing plain commands is the sure and only course to bring them to obedience and practice. The greatest part cannot know, and therefore they must believe."⁴⁷ And Burlamaqui subscribed to essentially the same doctrine, except that he was willing to say that the day-laborers, tradesmen, spinsters, and dairy-maids could know propositions even if they had been led to their "knowledge" by impressions of example, custom, authority, and utility. The difference, however, between Locke and Burlamaqui on this point was purely terminological since Locke, like Burlamaqui, would have held his day-laborers and tradesmen, his spinsters and dairy-maids culpable if they violated precepts of the Scriptures, even though Locke believed that these lesser beings did not know these propositions.

It is amusing to note that pre-Christian thinkers such as Solon, Cicero, Confucius, Aristippus, Zeno, Epicurus, and Seneca were put by Locke in the same category as the day-laborers and dairy-maids simply because these great minds also failed to "know" the principles of natural law. Like the lesser beings mentioned by Burlamaqui, these great men were led to some of these principles by impressions of utility, convenience, or beauty since Locke writes: "The law of nature is the law of convenience too: and it is no wonder, that those men of parts, and studious of virtue (who had occasion to think on any particular part of it) should, by meditation, light on the right, even from the observable convenience and beauty of it; without making out its obligation from the true principles of the law of nature, and foundations of morality."⁴⁸ By contrast, as we have seen, Locke held that certain enlightened post-Christian thinkers managed to assent im-

47. *Works*, Volume VII, p. 146.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

mediately to the moral precepts of Jesus, but as we have also seen, even they had not constructed a demonstrative system of morality. However, Locke tells us, the wisest of those who have read the New Testament "must acknowledge" that it presents "a complete rule of life" which "tends entirely to the good of mankind" and that "all would be happy, if all would practise it."⁴⁹ Whether this last proposition is true or not, it is not self-evident and therefore not an axiom from which Locke could have deduced theorems of morality. It is in the same category as Burlamaqui's statement that the precepts of natural law have "sensible utility" and Locke's own statement that they have "observable convenience and beauty." Locke did not believe that knowing of the happiness, utility, or convenience produced by following the precepts of natural law was tantamount to knowing the truth of those precepts. On the other hand, Locke did believe that revelation presents us with moral truths which, when they receive immediate assent, receive it only from the learned and the perceptive. And this makes it hard to defend him against the charge that his view of how moral truths are known is just as exploitable by "dictators of principles" as the doctrine of innate principles is.

Having argued that Locke, even though he believes the proposition that all men would be happy if they all lived in accordance with the natural law, does not regard this proposition as a *foundation* for morality, I want to say something now, however brief, about the question whether Locke is a utilitarian. In my opinion he is not, and it is reassuring to know that Henry Sidgwick held this opinion.⁵⁰ Some of the most striking evidence for it is to be found in the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, where Locke says quite explicitly that convenience, which I take to be equivalent to utility, is

49. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

50. Henry Sidgwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, 5th ed. (London, 1906), pp. 175-178.

not the basis for accepting principles of natural law. Then there are all the passages in defense of the view that morality can be a demonstrative science and therefore that there must be axioms that are seen to be true immediately. Like Sidgwick, I admit that there are places where Locke claims that following the precepts of natural law will contribute to general happiness, but this is not enough to make him a utilitarian. I say this with full awareness of Locke's having said that "God . . . by an inseparable connexion joined virtue [the observance of natural law] and public happiness together, and made the practice thereof necessary to the preservation of society, and visibly beneficial to all with whom the virtuous man has to do."⁵¹ Indeed, I take this as supporting the view that Locke is *not* a utilitarian because I do not regard the "inseparable connexion" to which Locke refers as showing that the predicate "true moral precept" is synonymous with "precept the following of which promotes the general happiness." According to most utilitarians, the former phrase means the same as the latter, whereas for Locke the "inseparable connexion" between virtue and public happiness is merely causal, a fact of nature. I reiterate that when Locke spoke of presenting the foundations of morality, he meant giving a reason why, for example, "one should do as he would be done unto," and that giving a reason why, as he says explicitly, is to prove the proposition by giving a self-evident proposition from which it may be deduced.⁵² In further support of my interpretation, I should like to note that

51. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, Chapter II, Section 6. Also see *Essays on the Law of Nature*, Essay VIII *passim*.

52. *Essay*, Book I, Chapter II, Section 4. ". . . should that most unshaken rule of morality and foundation of all social vitrue, 'That one should do as he would be done unto,' be proposed to one who never heard of it before, but yet is of capacity to understand its meaning; might he not without any absurdity ask a reason why? And were not he that proposed it bound to make out the truth and reasonableness of it to him? . . . So that the truth of all these moral rules plainly depends upon some other antecedent to them, and from which they must be deduced."

if one tries to establish the golden rule by means of an argument which begins with these two premises: (1) *A moral precept the following of which promotes the general happiness is a true moral precept*; and (2) *The golden rule is a precept the following of which promotes the general happiness*, then one cannot *prove*, in the sense required by Locke, (3) *The golden rule is a true moral precept*. And the reason why Locke cannot prove or demonstrate (3) in this way is that the second premise is not self-evident or undeniable. Even if one should hold that Locke regards the first premise as self-evident—which I doubt—it would be hard to see how Locke could regard the second as self-evident. It asserts that if men were to do certain things, they would promote general happiness; and such a statement is hardly in the same category as " $1 + 1 = 2$."⁵³ This, I think, constitutes a refutation of one version of the view that Locke is a utilitarian and to that extent reinforces the claim that he is what is sometimes called a rational intuitionist.

Failure to see that Locke is an intuitionist has been, as Sidgwick once said, connected with the mistaken belief that "the founder of English empiricism must necessarily have been hostile to 'intuitional' ethics."⁵⁴ And this misinterpretation of Locke has been indirectly responsible for a failure on the part of some of his readers to observe the anti-democratic potentialities of his theory of morals and natural law. Perhaps the most striking example of this kind of misinterpretation is to be found in the writing of John Stuart Mill. In his essay, "Coleridge," Mill attributes to Locke the view that there are "no truths cognizable by the mind's inward light, and grounded on intuitive evidence."⁵⁵ So eager was Mill to

53. For an interesting effort to show that Locke was in some sense a utilitarian, see A. P. Brogan, "John Locke and Utilitarianism," *Ethics*, LXIX (1959): 79-93.

54. Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

55. J. S. Mill, *Collected Works* (Toronto, 1969), Volume X, p. 125. This volume is edited by J. M. Robson.

claim Locke as a leader of the forces who opposed Coleridge's intuitionism that Mill failed to see the intuitionistic elements in Locke's thinking. Mill tried his hardest to undermine intuitionistic rationalism in all fields by holding that all our knowledge—even our logical and mathematical knowledge—was empirical; and like Locke, Mill tried to "politicize" his epistemology by showing that those who held opposing views advocated a doctrine which stood in the way of the reformer. Mill believed firmly that the difference between the schools of philosophy which he called that of "Intuition" and that of "Experience," the latter being his own, "is not a mere matter of abstract speculation; it is full of practical consequences, and lies at the foundation of all the greatest differences of practical opinion in an age of progress."⁵⁶ Mill's main point was that the reformer must continually demand that certain established things be changed and therefore that they not be regarded as "necessary" and "indefeasible." But, Mill continues, the intuitionist, by defending the existence of necessary and indefeasible truths, becomes an object of the reformer's hostility because the intuitionist subscribes to "a philosophy which is addicted to holding up favourite doctrines as intuitive truths, and deems intuition to be the voice of Nature and of God, speaking with an authority higher than that of our reason."⁵⁷

I wish to emphasize that insofar as Mill claims Locke as an ally in the onslaught against intuitionism Mill glossed over the sharp distinction made by Locke between innate principles and intuitive principles. Indeed, because Mill glossed over this distinction, he failed to realize that when he attacked intuitionism, he also attacked Locke, the defender of intuition, who was not, as I have argued, a utilitarian. The intellectual gulf between Mill and Locke on this issue is dramati-

56. J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. J. J. Coss (New York, 1924), pp. 191–192.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

cally illustrated by Mill's statement in his essay *On Liberty*: "I forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right, as a thing independent of utility. I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on ethical questions." But I think that in his essay on Coleridge, Mill underestimated this gulf. In subscribing to utilitarianism Mill seemed to think that he could establish moral precepts without using intuition, whereas we have seen that Locke did not think so, when he was using the word "establish" in a very strict sense. Therefore, if Mill held that appealing to intuition rather than experience made a thinker conservative and anti-democratic because such a thinker would deem "intuition to be the voice of Nature and God, speaking with an authority higher than that of our reason," Mill would have had a hard time bringing Locke into his own camp on several grounds that we have made sufficiently obvious. In effect, Mill seems to have said to the people: "Don't listen to self-appointed dictators of alleged *intuitive* principles, but do listen to experience." In effect, Locke said to the people: "Don't listen to self-appointed dictators of alleged *innate* principles, but do listen to the voice of God as revealed by Jesus, and do listen to the learned few who can come closer than you can to intuiting the moral principles revealed by Jesus and closer to forming a system of demonstrative morality than you can come."

On the other hand, even though we may contrast Locke the intuitionist and Mill the utilitarian on the grounds I have just presented, Mill's utilitarianism contained a qualification that must not be forgotten by those who might be inclined to see *him* as an epistemological tribune of *all the people*. Just after informing us that he regards utility as the ultimate appeal on ethical questions, he tells us: "but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being. Those interests, I contend, au-

thorize the subjection of individual spontaneity to external control, only in respect to those actions of each, which concern the interests of other people."

What, we are entitled to ask, is a progressive being? But even if we cannot get an acceptable answer, we are entitled to observe that Mill's progressive being is the counterpart of Aquinas's learned man, Locke's perceptive man, and Burlamaqui's natural and undepraved man. Just as Aquinas and Locke say, in effect, that self-evidence is *self-evidence to the learned*, so Mill says that utility is *utility to the progressive*. And the reason for this is clear. Just as intuitionists don't want to have their moral principles rest on the intuitions of any being whatever, so Mill doesn't want his to rest on the utility that may be reaped by a being who lacks qualities that might well have coincided with some of those possessed by Locke's accredited seers of self-evidence. One may add that if Locke *had been* a utilitarian in the way in which he linked virtue with public happiness, he could have incorporated his political prejudices into that doctrine by a sufficiently narrow definition of the word "public."

Having spent so much time on the epistemology of the doctrine of natural law as defended by Locke, I want to assure the reader that I have not forgotten that I am writing a book on American thought. I also want to say that I am preparing the way for showing that the enunciation of "self-evident" truths in the Declaration of Independence revealed an acceptance of an epistemology of natural law which was basically Lockean and rationalistic in tendency, and that when the word "self-evident" appeared in the Declaration, it was used as it had been by Locke and by other rationalistic theorists of natural law. I have tried to show that in spite of Locke's protestations about how dictators of principles could make use of the doctrine of innate principles but could *not* make similar use of the doctrine of self-evident principles, the

fact is that the latter doctrine was exploitable by the few who might seek to take advantage of the many. The theory of self-evident principles, like other theories of knowledge, contains "jokers," as they are called by card-players, which could have been used so as to favor "the *right* people" as opposed to "the people." So it is obviously important that we proceed to see what American revolutionaries thought about an epistemology of self-evident principles which distinguished between what was self-evident to the rational, perceptive few but not to the "multitude of stupid wretches."⁵⁸ We should not be surprised to find some of them prepared to accept an epistemology of self-evident truth which was consonant with John Adams's favorable quotation of the following passage in a note by Barbeyrac to Pufendorf's *Law of Nature and Nations*: "When we speak of a tyrant that may lawfully be dethroned by the people, we do not mean by the word *people*, the vile populace or rabble of the country, nor the cabal of a small number of factious persons, but the greater and more judicious part of the subjects, of all ranks."⁵⁹ Nor should we be surprised to find Burlamaqui using almost the same words *without* indicating that he is quoting from Barbeyrac.

Burlamaqui, who held with Aquinas and Locke that the rude, the ignorant, and the stupid could not see the truths of natural law, refused to identify *the people*, who have a right

58. Many of the points made in this chapter about Aquinas and Locke on self-evidence were made by me in my "Original Sin, Natural Law, and Politics," *Partisan Review* (Spring 1956): 218-236 and in an expanded version of that article which formed the "Epilogue for 1957" to a paperback edition of my *Social Thought in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957). This also appears in a paperback edition published by Oxford University Press in 1976.

59. John Adams, *Works*, Volume IV, p. 82. Adams's reference is to Pufendorf, Book VII, Chapter VIII, Sections 5 and 6 as well as to Barbeyrac's note on Section 6. However, the passage I have reproduced is from Barbeyrac's note to the first sentence of Section 6.

to resist or depose a tyrant, with "*la vile populace ou la canaille du Païs*."⁶⁰ In the same vein, Locke's eighteenth-century editor, Thomas Elrington, argues that Locke used the term "people" "to signify only those who were possessed of such property as was sufficient to secure their fidelity to the interests of the state, and to make it probable that they were qualified to judge of those interests as far as was requisite for the due performance of the duty entrusted to them."⁶¹ Elrington is also quick to ask a profound question after Locke has asserted that while a child lacks an understanding to direct his own will, "he is not to have any will of his own to follow: He that *understands* for him, must *will* for him too; he must prescribe to his will, and regulate his actions."⁶² Elrington asks: "May not this incapacitating deficiency of understanding exist among adults as well as minors? and if any class of adults be, from inevitable circumstances, inferior in point of intellectual attainments, or any other qualities requisite to make them *competent* and *unprejudiced* judges of right and wrong in matters of polity, ought they not be in the same proportion inferior in political power?"⁶³

It is hard, therefore, to avoid the conclusion that many philosophical tutors of our founding fathers built into their theories of *how we know* the natural law a requirement which was the analogue of property qualifications for voters. I say "the analogue" with confidence, but there are those who might also argue for a logically stronger proposition, namely, that these philosophical tutors and many of their American students thought (1) that there was a causal connection be-

60. *Principes du droit politique (Principles of Politic Law)*, Part II, Chapter VI, Section XXIX.

61. Thomas Elrington, in his annotated edition of Locke's *Second Treatise* (Dublin, 1798), "Advertisement," p. v.

62. *Second Treatise*, Section 58.

63. Elrington, *op. cit.*, note to Section 58. See P. Laslett's reference to this note by Elrington in the former's edition of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, England, 1970), p. 324.

tween possessing the intellectual qualifications for knowing moral truths and the property qualifications for, as it were, entering electoral booths and (2) that *the people*, as distinct from the rabble, possessed both of these qualifications. Which qualification came first for these thinkers is a chicken-egg question. It is sufficient for our purposes to know that the qualifications were thought by some to be causally linked and also to know that the phrase "the people" often referred to a narrow class.⁶⁴ If the people were identified as those who possessed the intellectual capacity to see the truths of natural law, then those who held that the natural law was an instrument of the people so identified, avoided a problem that is hard to avoid when one identifies the people with *all* of the people. For if it takes intellectual qualifications that *not* all of the people possess to know the moral truths upon which the argument for government by *all* of the people rests, then some, and perhaps the majority, of the people must be asked to accept that argument on trust. They must trust the few who allegedly know moral truths that they, the majority of the people, do not know. But if the majority of the people do not know the truths allegedly known by their leaders, by what signs will they know which dictator of principles is to be trusted? We have seen that Locke thought that Jesus could be trusted to produce true moral precepts because his miracles showed that he was a messenger of God. But what miracles could the many attribute to the few who supposedly saw the moral principles upon which the rule of the many supposedly rested? The question is as difficult as it is profound for anyone who thinks about the moral foundations of a democracy of *all* of the people.

64. "By 'people' most seventeenth-century Republicans had meant people of some state and consequence in the community. Cobblers, tinkers, or fishermen were not people but *scum* to Whigs like James Tyrrell—who used the term—to Locke, Withers, and Trenchard," Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 16.

I should emphasize that I am concerned with the question whether all of the people were thought by the revolutionaries to have the power to see the self-evidence of the fundamental principles of *morality*, and not with the question whether all the people have a power to see the truth of technical statements that may be involved in a democracy's coming to a vital decision. We have become accustomed to the idea that all of the people cannot be authorities in nuclear strategy and that they must rely in great measure on so-called experts in that area. But we are not accustomed to hear that according to our founding fathers, many, and perhaps a majority, of the people are incapable of seeing the self-evidence of moral truths upon which our Revolution and the formation of our government supposedly rested. Yet this was part of the epistemology of natural law as expounded by some of its most famous advocates in England and on the Continent, and the question that I shall discuss later on is whether this form of epistemological elitism was adopted by American followers of Locke and Burlamaqui. We have already seen that John Adams implicitly acknowledged that most people could not see the self-evidence of moral truths about liberty for want of a thorough grasp of what "liberty" meant.⁶⁵ But what about some of the others, for example, Jefferson, ostensibly a greater friend of all the people? To answer the query we must press on further, bearing in mind that since the Declaration appealed to a Lockean rationalism in ethics, then according to the signers, seeing self-evidence was indispensable for seeing the moral truths upon which the Revolution rested. For, like Locke, our revolutionaries were not utilitarians; they did not think that the principles of natural law were empirical propositions or that they could be established by the so-called inductive methods of certain utilitarians.

65. See above, note 42.

Locke, the Laboring Classes, and Divine Sanctions

Although I have written at length about Locke's views on rational moral truth and on their possible political impact, I should like to say a few words about the views of Professor C. B. McPherson, who has said certain things on matters that I have discussed. McPherson has focused on Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* mainly to show that when Locke calls attention to the utility of the Christian doctrine of rewards and punishments, he has his eye primarily on the laboring classes: "The implication is plain: the labouring class, beyond all others, is incapable of living a rational life. One can detect a shade of difference in his attitude towards the employed and the unemployed. The idle poor he seems to have regarded as depraved by choice; the labouring poor as simply incapable of a fully rational life because of their unfortunate position. But whether by their own fault or not, members of the labouring class did not have, could not be expected to have, and were not entitled to have, full membership in political society; they did not and could not live a fully rational life."⁶⁶

In the course of coming to this conclusion, McPherson says a number of things which are compatible with or which support my own point of view, but there are certain other points on which I cannot altogether agree with him. I begin by pointing out that it is questionable whether Locke held that the laboring poor could not live a fully rational life. It is true that they might not be able to produce a demonstrative system of morality, but according to Locke, *that* would not prevent them from living a fully rational life since if it did, neither Locke nor any other mortal could lead a *fully* ra-

66. C. B. McPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York, 1967, paperback), p. 226.

tional life. Furthermore, if the poor were to follow fully, in the sense of comply fully with, the moral principles of the Gospel, they *might be* said by Locke to lead a fully rational life because Locke holds that the Gospel presented them with moral principles which were rational truths, even though no one might see that they were or had as yet incorporated them in a demonstrative system. On the other hand, how can one suppose that Locke held that *anyone* could fully comply with the moral principles of the Gospel, whether he was a laborer, a merchant, or a philosopher, when Locke spoke so vehemently of man's capacity to be biased, vicious, prejudiced, and, in general, so apt to violate or fail to understand the law of nature as to make it necessary for him and his fellow men to leave the state of nature for civil society?

I infer, therefore, that living a fully rational life is identified by McPherson with *knowing the truth* of moral propositions. Yet, though I myself have asserted that according to Locke, some men of elevated understanding would immediately assent to the moral truths of Jesus, I have also pointed out that Locke held that some men of elevated understanding might not be able to *discover* those moral truths and, *to that extent*, have no advantage over a laborer in the realm of morals. Moreover, it is hard to argue that Locke singled out the laboring poor as the *only* class capable of coming to erroneous beliefs, moral or otherwise. One may see this in Book IV, Chapter XX of the *Essay*, part of which McPherson cites. There Locke, in the course of discussing the sources of error, first takes up the class of persons who fail to discover either proofs "nowhere extant" or proofs which exist. Under this head, he first lists those who lack the *opportunity* to find proofs of either kind, saying that "these men's opportunities of knowledge and inquiry are commonly as narrow as their fortunes; and their understandings are but little instructed, when all their whole time and pains is laid out to still the croaking of their own bellies, or the cries of their children."

A man "who drudges on all his life in a laborious trade," Locke goes on, should not be expected to be "more knowing in the variety of things done in the world than a pack-horse, who is driven constantly forwards and backwards in a narrow lane and dirty road, only to market, should be skilled in the geography of the country." Finally, Locke draws a general conclusion about those who, through lack of opportunity to discover proofs, fall into error because of the narrowness of their fortunes, saying that "the greatest part of men, having much to do to get the means of living, are not in a condition to look after those of learned and laborious inquiries." Still, just after having said this, Locke affirms: "*No man* is so wholly taken up with the attendance on the means of living, as to have no spare time at all to think of his soul, and inform himself in matters of religion. Were men as intent upon this as they are on things of lower concernment, there are none so enslaved to the necessities of life who might not find many vacancies that might be husbanded to this advantage of their knowledge."⁶⁷

Now I come to another class of persons whom Locke lists among those who fall into error. They are not poor laborers, who have *no opportunity* to engage in inquiry, but rather rich persons who *lack the will* to engage in it. "Their hot pursuit of pleasure, or constant drudgery in business, engages some men's thoughts elsewhere: laziness and oscitancy in general, or a particular aversion for books, study, and meditation, keep others from any serious thoughts at all; and some out of fear that an impartial inquiry would not favour those opinions which best suit their prejudices, lives, and designs, content themselves, without examination, to take upon trust what they find convenient and in fashion." Locke goes on to say that he does not understand how men "whose plentiful fortunes allow them leisure to improve their understandings,

67. *Essay*, Book IV, Chapter XX, Sections 2-3. The emphasis is mine.

can satisfy themselves with a lazy ignorance." But he warns "those who call themselves gentlemen, That, however they may think credit, respect, power, and authority the concomitants of their birth and fortune, yet they will find all these still carried away from them by men of lower condition, who surpass them in knowledge. They who are blind will always be led by those that see, or else fall into the ditch: and he is certainly the most subjected, the most enslaved, who is so in his understanding." So, just as Locke takes occasion earlier in this chapter of the *Essay* to tell the busy laborer that he should find time to think of his soul and to inform himself in matters of religion, he now advises the lazy gentlemen who take care to appear always in neat and splendid clothes but "suffer their minds to appear abroad in a piebald livery of coarse patches and borrowed shreds . . . how unreasonable this is for men that ever think of a future state, and their concernment in it, which no rational man can avoid to do sometimes."⁶⁸

From these statements by Locke I conclude that the laboring poor are not, according to him, the only persons who are incapable of living a fully rational life. I am not prepared to say on the basis of these passages that it is "plain" that he holds that "the labouring class, *beyond all others* [my emphasis], is incapable of living a [fully?] rational life." I do not find Locke holding that the busy, poor laborer's *lack of opportunity* makes him *incapable* of knowing true moral principles, whereas the lazy gentleman's *lack of will* does not make him *incapable* of knowing true moral principles. If both a will to inquire and an opportunity to do so are necessary conditions for being able to know the religious moral truth that is so central in Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity*, then those who lack the will *and* those who lack the

opportunity are both incapacitated, so far as I can see; and it becomes difficult to say that the laboring class is incapacitated "beyond all others" on the basis of what Locke says in Book IV, Chapter XX, Sections 2–6, though I take note of McPherson's citation only of Sections 2 and 3 which, unlike 6, do not refer to the error-making, lazy rich.

I come now to a second place where I think McPherson has not accurately represented Locke's thought. McPherson holds that Locke's alleged belief—just considered—that the laboring class, beyond all others, is incapable of living a rational life, is *implied* by Locke's "repeated emphasis on the necessity of the labouring class being brought to obedience by believing in divine rewards and punishments."⁶⁹ Here my criticism is connected with Locke's previously quoted statement that no man can avoid thinking of a future state. And the reason why *no* man—not just poor laborers—can avoid doing this, from Locke's point of view, is that he regards the moral law as divine and therefore sanctioned by adequate rewards and punishments. Locke holds this even though he also holds that the moral law is perceivable by reason since, as Sidgwick points out, he "rejects the view that the mere apprehension by the reason of the obligatoriness of certain rules is, or ought to be, a sufficient motive to their performance, apart from the foreseen consequences to the individual of observing or neglecting them."⁷⁰ The most striking evidence for this is to be found in the following passage: "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 nobody can take us out of his hands.

69. McPherson, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

70. Sidgwick, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

68. *Ibid.*, Book IV, Chapter XX, Section 6.

This is the only true touchstone of moral rectitude; and, by comparing them to this law, it is that men judge of the most considerable moral good or evil of their actions; that is, whether, as duties or sins, they are like to procure them happiness or misery from the hands of the ALMIGHTY."⁷¹ This passage makes abundantly clear that, according to Locke, *everyone*, and not merely the laboring poor, must be brought to obedience by believing in divine rewards and punishments.

Having differed from McPherson on these matters, I want to emphasize that I do not deny that Locke was aware that the mental powers of men exhibited great differences that he often correlated with social and economic position, as when he says that one does not have to visit "Westminster Hall or the Exchange on the one hand" or the "Alms-houses or Bedlam on the other" to see that some people are better than others at using the evidence of probabilities, carrying an argument in their heads, or determining on which side the strongest proofs lie.⁷² And I have also remarked that in the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, he holds that those who can reason well can be taught morality in a less authoritarian way than those who cannot. But I do not think we can say of Locke what McPherson seems to say of him, namely, that because he held that *only* the laboring poor are brought to obedience by divine rewards and punishments, he also held that the laboring class, beyond all others, is incapable of living a fully rational life. This statement is false if only because Locke did *not* hold that *only* the laboring poor are brought to obedience by divine rewards and punishments, but I should also challenge it by asserting that Locke did *not* hold that the laboring class, beyond all others, is incapable of living a fully rational life.

It may be that McPherson is aware that Locke said in his

71. *Essay*, Book II, Chapter XXVIII, Section 8.

72. *Ibid.*, Book IV, Chapter XX, Section 5.

Essay what I have already quoted about divine rewards and punishments as well as the following: "God . . . has in his hand rewards and punishments, and power enough to call to account the proudest offender."⁷³ Nevertheless, McPherson may believe that this piece of news, so to speak, is *more frequently* published by Locke in an effort to advocate the obedience of the laboring poor than to advocate the obedience of other members of society, and that this greater frequency somehow shows that Locke had the laboring poor in the forefront of his mind when he warned of God's rewards and punishments in the *Reasonableness of Christianity*. However, there are only two passages that McPherson quotes from that work as examples of Locke's "repeated emphasis" on the need to bring the laboring poor to obedience by warning them of divine sanctions,⁷⁴ and they are not sufficiently emphatic in singling out the poor to make us forget Locke's unqualified view that *all* persons—even the proudest—may be called to account by the use of divine sanctions. Furthermore, that avid reader of Locke, John Adams, does not, in the following passage, single out the laboring poor as especially in need of divine sanctions when it comes to learning and following the principles of natural law: "One great advantage of the Christian religion is that it brings the great principle of the law of nature and nations, Love your neighbour as yourself, and do to others as you would that others should do to you, to the knowledge, belief and veneration of the whole people. Children, servants, women and men are all professors in the science of public as well as private morality. No other institution for education, no kind of political discipline, could diffuse this kind of necessary information, so universally among all ranks and descriptions of citizens. The duties and rights of the man and the citizen are thus taught, from early

73. *Ibid.*, Book I, Chapter II, Section 6.

74. McPherson, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-226.

infancy to every creature. The sanctions of a future life are thus added to the observance of civil and political as well as domestic and private duties. Prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, are thus taught to be the means and conditions of future as well as present happiness."⁷⁵

75. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), Volume 3, pp. 240-241.

• 2 •

Self-evident Truth and the Founding Fathers

For obvious reasons, it is not easy to discover what *all* American revolutionary thinkers held concerning an epistemology of self-evident principles of the kind we have been discussing, and I shall therefore limit my discussion to major figures who gave the matter some thought. But before beginning that discussion I want to emphasize that we must first distinguish between the question whether someone believed that there were self-evident moral principles and the question whether he thought, as Locke and Burlamaqui did, that relatively few people did or could see the self-evidence of those principles. I shall begin this chapter by concentrating on the first question while examining Jefferson's views because of the importance of the Declaration in catapulting the word "self-evident" out of the pages of Locke and into the language of American politics. This means that I shall be concentrating on a period in Jefferson's life when, as it seems to me, he was under the influence of what may be called an intuitionistic or a rationalistic view of morality, according to which we use our intuitive reason in perceiving self-evident truths of natural law.