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'John Locke, Edward Stillingfleet, and the Quarrel over Consensus',
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Abstract:

Philosophical antagonism and dispute — by no means confined to the early modern period — nonetheless enjoyed a moment of particular ferment as new methods and orientations on questions of epistemology and ethics developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. John Locke played a key part in them with controversies initiated by the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690). This essay develops a wider typology of modes of philosophical quarrelling by focusing on a key debate — the issue of whether human nature came pre-endowed with innate ideas and principles, resulting in a moral consensus across mankind, or remained, on the contrary, dependent on reason to achieve moral insight, and, in practice, divided by diverse and irreconcilable cultural practices as a result of the force of custom and the limited purchase of reason. The essay ultimately concludes on the idea that we should not only attend to the genealogy of disputes but also to the morphology of disputation as a practice.

The panoply of contexts and occasions in which early modern quarrels took place suggests the importance of identifying a spectrum associated with the art and practice of the quarrel. I have reasons for doing so, as will become clear, in order to pose a leading question, namely whether there can be a quarrel about consensus in the period. My focus will be on John Locke – who showed both a distaste for quarrelling and a keen capacity to engage in it – and one of the key disputes that he contributed to.

Before addressing the issue of quarrelling about consensus and its implications, we need a clearer sense of the methodological and theoretical options for looking at quarrels more generally. Three possibilities immediately suggest themselves. Perhaps the most obvious is the method of genetic criticism, which may be pursued in narrow or more expansive ways. The narrow technique begins with the assumption that quarrels are essentially unique occasions, or at least that there are sufficiently distinctive aspects to the quarrel conditioned by the personality and circumstances of the participants to make generalization difficult or improper.¹ We can in turn distinguish sceptical vs. inclusive variants in this approach insofar as they represent strands of microhistory. Sceptical

¹ Antoine Furetière's conflict with the Académie française over his dictionary of the French language might serve as an example.

microhistory rejects the search for larger patterns as fundamentally distortive of the contours of actual history as it can be reconstructed, either prompted by postmodern cultivation of fragmentary and discontinuous history or from an empirical attachment to discriminating evidence in a meticulous fashion; a more inclusive version of microhistory would still tell the story on its own terms but admit the potential in principle for significant continuities with substantive historical sequences.²

The second orientation is around morphology, in its biological rather than linguistic conception. Here the purpose is to construct an account of the form and structure of the quarrel as an entity with its own internal organizing principles. The supposition at some level is that the quarrel has generic status and that participants in it observe rules, conventions and protocols – whether self-consciously or otherwise – that preexist them and define the available moves and outcomes. Also at stake in this conception is that there is a differentiation principle – quarrels occupy a distinctive space in the intellectual world, marked off and discernable; their history, both as a collective practice and individually (in respect of specific examples), is thus a natural history. The appropriate technique of analysis in this context is that of anatomy. The exercise is partly taxonomic, predicated on the view that within a diversity of discursive practices something discrete can be identified. This approach risks producing a static account, but the problem can be remedied by returning to some of the sources of inspiration in Johann von Goethe, who pioneered the morphological understanding of botany, especially the dynamic perspective on nature, the notion of metamorphosis and transition (*Übergang*) between forms.³

The final suggestion I would like to make understands quarrels in terms of modalities, which implies something more provisional than a morphology, adopting a linguistic model. Without sacrificing the view that quarrels can be identified and defined in specific circumstances, the modal approach sees quarrels as occasions that are not always formal and staged (although they might be that too), but that they have different inflections, tones, or moods that might

² In his deliberations over microhistory, Carlo Ginzburg proposes ‘a constant back-and-forth between micro- and macro-history, between close-ups and extreme long shots, so as to continually thrust back into discussion the comprehensive vision of the historical process through apparent exceptions and cases of brief duration’, a process that nonetheless accepts that ‘reality is fundamentally discontinuous and heterogeneous’. He explicitly rejects a sceptical or relativizing position, and the ‘isolated contemplation of the fragmentary’. ‘Microhistory, Two or Three Things that I Know about It’, in *Threads and Traces* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 207, 212.

³ Chad Wellmon, ‘Goethe’s Morphology of Knowledge, or the Overgrowth of Nomenclature’, *Goethe Yearbook* 17 (2010): 153-77.

come in and out of play in an exchange, including satire, polemic, critique, and other forms of address. I am drawn to this method of analysis in part because it maintains the active character of quarrels and avoids the prospective rigidity of taxonomy. At the same time it may allow us to identify a wider range of moments within textual and discursive fields in which quarrels occur, as well as highlighting their rhetorical character.

These approaches are by no means exhaustive, of course. It should also be pointed out that they are not necessarily antithetical to one another. Indeed I intend to combine them in the following discussion. Genetic analysis lends itself to the morphological if we introduce the supplement of an evolutionary and metamorphic perspective. Similarly the genetic is readily compatible with an emphasis on modalities. The larger context of interpretation that I would propose is cultural history in which arguments are understood as embedded within a series of culturally defined relationships, shaped by a combination of tradition, genre, mode, occasion, status and hierarchy, and available parameters of communication.⁴ The potential to integrate cultural and intellectual history exists in seeing ideation as culturally conditioned, and by attending anthropologically to intellectual interaction which is social but situated in meanings, rituals and forms of exchange which benefit from cultural and anthropological analysis.⁵ The quarrel is, at least in part, a ritual and performative event, as well as community-defining (in ways I will go on to describe shortly).

With this in mind we can consider a few instances of quarreling in advance of the discussion of Locke that I propose. The most famous example of an early modern quarrel, the dispute over the priority of the ancient and moderns, can be assessed using all of these methods. Different accounts have been offered of the genesis of the dispute, some tracing it to Italian origins and most privileging the context of French argumentation in the era of Richelieu and Louis XIV, and the resulting spread of the topic as a subject of debate in learned circles in France and beyond.⁶ We could go further in citing two relevant traditions, the first an

⁴ For accounts of this practice, see Lynn Hunt, *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, 2nd ed (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); Melissa Calaresu, Filippo de Vivo, and Joan-Pau Rubiés, eds, *Exploring Cultural History: Essays in Honour of Peter Burke* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

⁵ On cultural history and intellectual history as 'a puzzling missed encounter', see Calaresu, de Vivo and Rubiés, 'Introduction: Peter Burke and the History of Cultural History', in *Exploring Cultural History*, 7, and more generally 7-11.

⁶ Marc Fumaroli places particular emphasis on the Italian origins in 'Les abeilles et les araignées', in *La Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, edited by Anne-Marie Lecoq (Paris: Galimard, 2001), 7, 24-91; August Buck gives a longer prehistory,

obvious one in the training in disputation embedded in university education, the second the energizing of dispute made possible by the Reformation and cultures of attack and reply that it fostered, often in vitriolic terms. As a morphology, we see essential constituent elements of taking of sides, clearly necessary in a quarrel, recognized processes of engagement, and awareness that participants are taking part in something contentious and unresolved (even if one seeks to have the last word).⁷ The quarrel of the ancients and moderns also manifested itself in a variety of modes, too numerous to describe here with any justice, including satire, polemic, and critique.

In cultural terms, this dispute has the purpose of consolidating what I would describe as an opinion community, a feature which defines a number of quarrel occasions in the period. Opinion communities are formed in a variety of ways but they can be galvanized by texts in which the rush to contribute is predicated on the understanding that one is 'taking a position' in what one already knows is a matter of contention and also that the issue is not subject to resolution and therefore simply presents an opportunity to clarify allegiances. Religious controversy lends itself especially to this mode of quarrelling. Among the examples we might consider are the English controversy over episcopacy in the 1640s, with Joseph Hall's defence of the institution and the attack by 'Smectymnuus', a group of puritan ministers, leading to Hall's *Defence of the Humble Remonstrance* (1641), the Smectymnuus reply to this work and Hall's ensuing reply to it. John Milton famously entered the field with his excoriation of Hall, *Animadversions upon the Remonstrant's Defence against Smectymnuus* (1641), which led to an attack on him possibly by Hall and his son, and Milton's reply to this work.⁸ John Toland's volley, *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696), inspired over twenty responses in the first two years following its publication,

beginning in the twelfth century: 'Aus der Vorgeschichte der Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes in Mittelalter und Renaissance', *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 20:3 (1958): 527-41. For a French focus, see Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature & History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and for England, Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). For a wide-ranging treatment, see the most recent contribution, see Paddy Bullard and Alexis Tadié, eds., *Ancients and Moderns in Europe: Comparative Perspectives* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016).

⁷ The open-endedness of this dispute is captured in Marc Fumaroli's title, 'La Querelle des anciens et des modernes, sans vainqueurs ni vaincus', *Le Débat*, no. 104 (1999), 73-88.

⁸ For some discussion, see Jameela Lares, *Milton and the Preaching Arts* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 109-26.

and two letters in his own defense.⁹ On the Continent, in the same period, the Chinese rites controversy absorbed an array of participants, including Jesuit authorities and their opponents; the Faculty of Theology of the Sorbonne, which condemned the rites in 1700; and the papacy itself with Clement XI's eventual decree banning them in 1704.¹⁰ As the eighteenth century progressed, the Bangorian controversy in Britain, which began in 1717, was also productive of a huge literature of vigorous disputation.¹¹ The career of Bernard Mandeville, especially in connection with *The Fable of the Bees*, confirms that religious controversy was not the only pretext for quarreling, even if clerics like George Berkeley joined in the fight.

The formal organization of a quarrel, as a demarcated event, often took place in the format of response or rejoinder, leading to a protracted series of exchanges without resolution. Here the territory could be very personal and direct, with a critic taking issue with a publication and chastising it for weaknesses in argument, dangerous implications, mistaken principles, and other errors and abuses. The potential for such encounters to become tedious is all too apparent in works that print the offending passage, followed by a critique, leading to a reprinting of the sequences of remarks with new rejoinders and attacks. Lurking behind this might well be the defense of an opinion community, but the foregrounding of the personal made reputation the crucial consideration, threatened by the sarcasm or stinging insight of the critic, whether known or anonymous. The opportunity to extend these debates afforded by periodical literature and the status achieved by editors and disputants like Pierre Bayle and Jean Le Clerc suggests the self-perpetuating nature of this style of argument and the emergence of the serial quarreler as a personality type, achieving reputation through relentlessness as well as vituperation. One of Bayle's late letters offers an insight. He informed the third Earl of Shaftesbury of the progress of one of his new disputes, on this occasion resulting from certain remarks he had made on a passage in the work of Ralph Cudworth concerning plastic nature. In reply Le Clerc had taken him to task. Bayle described what transpired:

⁹ Justin Champion, *Republican Learning: John Toland and the Crisis of Christian Culture, 1696-1722* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 69-90.

¹⁰ Virgile Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France (1640-1740)* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1932), 71-140.

¹¹ Andrew Starkie, *The Church of England and the Bangorian Controversy 1716-1721* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007). In terms of my typology of approaches, it is noteworthy that Starkie designates his fourth chapter as 'The Anatomy of the Controversy'.

Cette Remarque déplut à Mr. Le Clerc, il la réfuta: je lui répondis, il répliqua; je répliquai & me servis du Journal de Mr. De Beauval;¹² il dupliqua, & il joignit sa Défense pour l'*Origénisme* ... J'ai dupliqué à tout cela dans le troisieme volume de la *Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial*.¹³

(This remark displeased Mr. Le Clerc; he refuted it. I responded to him; he replied; I answered and made use of the periodical of Mr. De Beauval; he issued a rejoinder and attached his Defense of Origenism. I then rejoined to all of this in the third volume of the *Response to the Questions of a Provincial*.)

This particular conflict thrived in the midst of rivalries among Francophone protestants operating out of the Netherlands who had gained an international audience, making use of the network of the Republic of Letters sustained by book publication and periodicals. As Mara van der Lugt observes, in writing about Bayle and Jurieu, the Republic of Letters appears not as 'a single stable institution, unified by a set of shared ideals and values', but as 'multifarious, conflicted, diversified; a battleground of different ideals and values, where even the scholarly code was not universally agreed upon'.¹⁴ The conflict demonstrates the tendency of such disputes to become entangled in prior arguments and issues. Unsurprisingly the contest only came to a conclusion with the death of one of the antagonists, in this case Bayle.

II

This discussion sets the scene for an investigation of an argument over consensus in which John Locke intervened influentially, leading to a protracted set of disputes. Of course, during his long career Locke was no stranger to wrangling over the impact of his philosophy. In the case of his provocative position on toleration, Locke could anticipate backlash as well as support, and his lengthy set of replies to the rejoinders of Jonas Proast (published anonymously, as was the original *Letter concerning Toleration*) not only defend

¹² Henri Basnage de Beauval, founder of the journal *Histoire des ouvrages des savans*.

¹³ Rex A. Barrell, *Anthony Ashley Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) and 'Le Refuge Français'-Correspondence* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 33. Barrell notes that 'dupliquer' is an 'old juristic term from "duplique", a defendant's rejoinder' (35). The entire dispute, which continued even after Bayle's death, was reviewed by Jacobus Wetstein, with references to the various contributions by both parties, in *Eloge Historique de Feu Mr. Jean Le Clerc* (Amsterdam, 1736).

¹⁴ Mara van der Lugt, *Bayle, Jurieu, and the Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 11.

the logic of his views and question his antagonist's, but also consolidate an opinion community behind him.¹⁵ In relation to his two vindications of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke sought to defend a distinctive position without attaching himself to established labels, above all that of Socinian, which entailed refusing existing opinions communities while trying to develop one of his own.¹⁶ His best known conflict occurred in connection with the publication of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which prompted his most redoubtable critic, Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester, to comment on his position, which in turn generated a series of book-length rebuttals and replies. In addition to his status as a high-placed churchman, Stillingfleet had behind him a very substantial roster of major works and a record as an energetic controversialist.¹⁷

One of the many issues that Stillingfleet addressed in Locke's philosophy – the question of a consensus across mankind regarding belief in God – provides the focus of my paper. To reconstruct the genealogy of this particular encounter, we need to investigate the first book of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), the origins of that discussion in his early (unpublished) lectures on natural law in Oxford in the 1660s, and, above all, the implications of his taking a stance in a known territory of disagreement. A proper microhistory of all the argumentative contexts and moves exceeds the space I have available,¹⁸ but we can mark out the shape of the conflict in order to situate it in a matrix of quarrels.

The first book of Locke's *Essay* advanced a hugely significant critique of innate ideas and principles. In his view, human nature was not endowed innately with ideas, including the idea of God, or with moral and 'speculative' tenets that

¹⁵ Mark Goldie, 'John Locke, Jonas Proast and Religious Toleration 1688-1692', in *The Church of England c. 1689–c. 1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism*, edited by John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 143-71.

¹⁶ John Locke, 'A Second Vindication', in *Vindications of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, edited and with an introduction by Victor Nuovo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 177. Locke's contributions during the recoinage crisis saw him adopt the magnanimous position of openness to criticism and correction, predicated on the search for truth, yet in practice he chose not to respond to some of his more acerbic adversaries.

¹⁷ Robert Todd Carroll, *The Common-Sense Philosophy of Religion of Bishop Edward Stillingfleet 1635-1699* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975).

¹⁸ For the more technical aspects of the dispute and its afterlife in Bayle and Shaftesbury, see Daniel Carey, 'Locke, Shaftesbury, and Bayle and the Problem of Universal Consent', in *New Ages, New Opinions: Shaftesbury in his World and Today*, edited by Patrick Müller (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014), 203-21.

somehow underpinned knowledge and judgement.¹⁹ The working materials of knowledge were provided by experience and rational reflection, not by a pre-established 'content'. The larger goal was to support experimental natural philosophy on probabilistic foundations rather than specious internal principles or 'maxims'.

As part of his argumentative strategy, Locke insisted that his opponents must demonstrate the existence of universal consent to allegedly innate ideas or principles. Such consensus represented a necessary but not sufficient condition – in other words, his adversaries needed to show it, but even if they did so to his satisfaction it would not make their case. Nonetheless, he gained considerable leverage by making unanimity a requirement since it created an opening for the welter of evidence of cultural diversity, both in relation to moral practice and to belief (or the lack thereof) in God, which in his view decisively confirmed the absence of consensus. The latter issue – how widespread or otherwise is atheism – arguably constituted the crucial point since, as Locke observed, if God created human beings with innate notions then he would surely have begun with the idea of himself, and secondly because an internal idea of God would supply a normative moral structure at the same time. An ethnographic survey pointed out the problem for adherents to this view. In addition to atheists recorded in antiquity and the suspicion of others existing at home in the present day, recent travel accounts confirmed that 'whole Nations',²⁰ both primitive and polite, exist without a notion of God or indeed any religion.

Locke was clearly prepared to advance a challenging analysis that was bound to provoke consternation in some quarters. In short, he invited a quarrel about consensus. Aspects of his argument become more clear if we return briefly to the origins of his involvement in this discussion. He advanced his views in the early 1660s when he delivered lectures in Oxford on the foundations of natural law. In one of them he asked 'Can the Law of Nature Be Known from the General Consent of Men?', to which he answered in the negative. The diversity of customs and mores apparent in human life proved otherwise. Locke's examples are in some ways more wide ranging and less focused than they became in the revised version of his argument presented in the *Essay*, and they include the sanctioning of theft in ancient Egypt and Sparta, the sexual promiscuity allowed by the Garamantes in Ethiopia (according to Solinus), and the practice of parricide that Aelianus affirmed in Antiquity. He also included testimony from a modern source

¹⁹ Daniel Carey, 'Innateness', in *The Continuum Companion to Locke*, edited by S.-J. Savonius-Wroth, Paul Schuurman, and Jonathan Walmsley (London: Continuum, 2010), 165-8.

²⁰ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I.iv.8 (p. 87).

about sati in India that contradicted the natural law of self-preservation.²¹ Locke similarly disputed the view that unanimity could be shown in relation to belief in God. Citing examples that would survive in his catalogue of cases in the *Essay* twenty-five years later, he affirmed that entire nations in Brazil and Saldanha Bay near the Cape of Good Hope had no form of worship. Polytheists, meanwhile, had such distorted conceptions that one could legitimately regard them as 'disguised atheists'.²² The logic of his stance was more rigorous in the *Essay* but it depended on the same basic premise that unanimous consent did not exist and that its absence was telling.

Without acknowledging the moves he was making, Locke in fact revived an argument in antiquity between Sceptics and Stoics over a supposed *consensus gentium*. As the argument played out in modernity, what we discover, actually, is that this is a quarrel between ancients and ancients, although in its new form, Locke takes the side of the sceptics that, in its demolition of standing assumptions, represents the moderns and the new science. To fill out this genealogy, universal consent derived from a Stoic reworking of an originally Epicurean argument for the existence of God. In Cicero's dialogue *De natura deorum*, the Epicurean participant Velleius points out that Epicurus confirmed the existence of the gods on the basis that 'nature herself has imprinted a conception of them on the minds of all mankind'. Belief in the gods comes not from authority, custom, or law, but rests on 'the unanimous and abiding consensus of mankind' (*ad unum omnium firma consensio*).²³ Cotta, the sceptical interlocutor in the dialogue, responds by saying that the argument from the consent of all nations was inconclusive and untrue. How did Velleius know what foreigners believe? In reality, plenty of nations exist without a belief in the gods, and he mentions several individuals by name who subscribed to an atheist position (Diagoras, Theodorus, and Protagoras of Abdera).²⁴ In Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes* the same argument appears. Despite there being 'wrong notions' of the gods – a result of corruption – no one was so barbarous as to lack an inkling of their existence.²⁵ The sceptical pedigree of Locke's position is clear in the early lectures when he cites among the atheists Cotta's trio of

²¹ See Daniel Carey, 'The Problem of Sati: John Locke's Moral Anthropology and the Foundations of Natural Law', *Journal of Early Modern History* 18:1–2 (2014): 69–100.

²² John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, edited and translated by W. von Leyden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 175.

²³ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I.44. Translation based on the Loeb Classical Library edition by H. Rackam (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933).

²⁴ *De natura deorum*, I.62–3.

²⁵ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, translated by J.E. King (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), I.30.

Diagoras, Theodorus, and Protagoras of Abdera.²⁶ But beyond these specific examples, he uses a sceptical strategy by citing evidence of atheism and cultural diversity to undermine unanimous consent (and with it the innateness of the idea of God, and moral principles or tenets of natural law).

By posing the question and providing an answer in his lecture, Locke indicates that he takes a position on a standing subject of dispute, without naming specific opponents. In the discussion of innateness in the *Essay*, he also avoids citing particular parties (with the exception of the revealing reference to Lord Herbert of Cherbury).²⁷ Thus we have to recreate the intellectual context before seeing how the formal quarrel was engaged by Bishop Stillingfleet.²⁸ Montaigne's famous 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond', included in the first edition of the *Essais* (1580), took up the point that if certain laws claimed the status of being natural, then they must demonstrate universality of approval. What nature ordered should automatically enjoy 'commun consentement', but no such agreement could be found; nations simply did not agree on these matters, and he appealed rhetorically for just one example of consensus to be shown.²⁹ In the following year, Philippe du Plessis de Mornay published *De la Verité de la Religion Chrestienne* (1581), in which he insisted that the idea of God was 'gravée au Coeur de l'homme' (engraved on the heart of man) and that it enjoyed universal consent. This point held true even when attending to the recent discovery of primitive peoples living without laws or kings, who went around without clothing and ranged over the land, yet who nonetheless were not found to lack all knowledge or God or 'espece de religion' (sort of religion). The wise Brahmins and Persian Magi, as well as ancient poets, all testified to the same belief. Of course every century, Mornay admitted, had thrown up examples of 'quelques miserables' (some wretches) who refused to recognise God, but they were either foolish youngsters who later came around, or otherwise 'personnes desnaturées, confites en meschancetez, & qui en eux-mesmes auront violé leur nature proper'

²⁶ Locke, *Essays*, 175.

²⁷ On this subject, see Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson: Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 57-8. Locke was reproved for misrepresenting Lord Herbert's argument in John Milner, *An Account of Mr. Lock's religion, out of His Own Writings, and in His Own Words together with Some Observations upon It* (London, 1700), 154-78.

²⁸ For helpful accounts of the wide adoption of this argument (and its opponents), see Hans-Martin Barth, *Atheismus und Orthodoxie: Analysen und Modelle christlicher Apologetik im 17. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1971), 183-97; and Sergio Landucci, *I filosofi e i selvaggi 1580-1780* (Bari: Laterza, 1972), 185-272.

²⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 564.

(denatured people, preserved in wickedness, and who themselves have violated their own nature).³⁰

Mornay had some influence on one of the most important exponents of this view, Hugo Grotius. Grotius's jurisprudential work and Christian apologetics testify to his Stoic proclivities.³¹ In *De jure belli ac pacis* (1625), he introduced among his arguments in favour of natural law an *a posteriori* proof in which he claimed that what was generally believed by 'all', or, as he added, 'at least the most civilized Nations', offered insight not only into the content of the law but gave it additional authority on the grounds that a universal effect spoke to a universal cause.³² In support of this view, he cited a series of classical sources, including the version of this claim in Cicero (*Tusculanae disputationes*) and Seneca (*Epistulae morales*),³³ along with remarks from Quintilian, Aristotle, Hesiod, and Heraclitus. Grotius defended the important restriction of consent to the civilised (with further testimonials from classical authors) by urging that those who succumbed to vice simply failed to count against 'nature'.³⁴ In *De veritate religionis Christianae* (1627), Grotius repeated the argument in connection with a proof of the existence of God. Once again he excluded from the realm of testimony those who had manifestly 'lost the light of reason and good manners; and become altogether wild and savage'. Nor would he accept that evidence of a few atheists counted against his conclusion, since they were limited in number and their views encountered 'Universal rejection'.³⁵

As we move further in the seventeenth century, the differences of opinion concerning universal consent continue. The sceptic François de la Mothe le Vayer published a dialogue on divinity in his *Cinq autres Dialogues* (which appeared under a false date and imprint) in the early 1630s, assembling travel evidence in order to dispute the conclusions of Cicero and Seneca about unanimity. He

³⁰ Philippe du Plessis de Mornay, *De la Verité de la Religion Chrestienne: Contre les Athées, Epicuriens, Payens, Juifs, Mahumedistes, & autres Infideles*, 2nd edition (Antwerp, 1582), 2, 13, 14.

³¹ See J. P. Heering, *Hugo Grotius as Apologist for the Christian Religion: A Study of his Work 'De veritate religionis christianae' (1640)*, translated by J.C. Grayson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 97-101.

³² Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, edited by Richard Tuck, from the edition by Jean Barbeyrac, translated by John Morrice, 3 vols (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), 1:159 (I.i.12).

³³ Seneca, *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*, translated by Richard M. Gummere (London: W. Heinemann, 1917-25), 117.6.

³⁴ 'To judge of what is natural, we must consider those Subjects that are rightly disposed, according to their Nature, and not those that are corrupted' (*Rights of War and Peace*, 1:162).

³⁵ Hugo Grotius, *The Truth of Christian Religion*, translated by Simon Patrick (London, 1680), 2-3.

concluded that it was impossible to say that the idea of God 'soit née avec nous & que naturellement nous la possédions' (was born with us and that we naturally possess it).³⁶ But there were others just as ready to overturn the ethnographic testimony, including Johann Ludwig Fabricius and Johann Adam Osiander in Germany in the 1660s.³⁷

Significantly, in terms of sketching out a tradition pertinent to Locke and Stillingfleet, a number of figures associated with Cambridge Platonism had frequent recourse to this line of argument. Both Ralph Cudworth and Henry More argued that universal consent constituted a proof that the soul possessed an idea or inclination towards God. More acknowledged some deficiencies in the practice of certain peoples who 'ineptly and foolishly' embraced the divine, while others gave themselves over to ignorant worship of 'stocks and stones' or the heavens.³⁸ Cudworth introduced his supporting evidence without qualification, citing a familiar mixture of classical and contemporary examples, including the people of India, China, Siam, Guinea, and, in the New World, the inhabitants of Peru, Mexico, Virginia and New England. Despite the fact that some of these peoples were 'sufficiently Barbarous', they still acknowledged '*One Supreme or Greatest God*'.³⁹ Benjamin Whichcote, another key member of this group, had drawn attention to Seneca's views when he maintained that 'the sense of a deity is inherent in intellectual nature'. Whichcote quoted from the affirmation in *Epistulae morales* that all nations exhibit some indication of belief and recognise God's existence.⁴⁰

Edward Stillingfleet, who was educated in Cambridge in the 1650s in the era of Whichcote, Cudworth and More's prominence in the university, demonstrated his own stake in this argument in his oft-reprinted work, *Origines Sacrae, or a Rational Account of the Grounds of Christian Faith* (1662). In his chapter 'Of the Being of God', he endorsed the argument from general consent. This unanimity meant that 'it necessarily follows that there must be a Deity, because the Idea of it is so natural to us'. He upheld the view despite noting the reply of Cotta in *De natura deorum* who reported atheists in antiquity 'such as *Dionysius, Diagoras,*

³⁶ [François de la Mothe le Vayer], *Cinq autres Dialogues* (Frankfurt, 1606), 143.

³⁷ Johann Ludwig Fabricius, *Apologia barbarorum praesertim Brasiliensium aliorumque Americanorum contra calumniam atheismi* (Heidelberg, 1662); Johann Adam Osiander, *Deus in lumine naturae repraesentatus* (Tübingen, 1665), 119-20.

³⁸ Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheisme, or, An Appeal to the Naturall Faculties of the Minde of Man, whether there be not a God* (London, 1653), 34.

³⁹ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), 458-9.

⁴⁰ *The Works of the Learned Benjamin Whichcote, D.D.*, 4 vols (Aberdeen, 1751), 4:352-3.

Theodorus ... and others'.⁴¹ Furthermore, Stillingfleet took in a range of anthropological evidence in making his case. Directly contradicting what Locke would later maintain in the *Essay*, no 'whole Nation' was known to deny the existence of God, although some doubts had been entertained about certain barbarous peoples in the New World. They may have had 'grossly mistaken' conceptions, but they nevertheless worshipped something, he remarked, referring to the '*Toupinambors, Caribes, Patagons, Tapuiæ* and others'. He followed the Grotian turn by saying that the only ones suspected of irreligion were the barbarous, while the 'more civilized they have been, the more sense of Religion' they displayed. Here, he cited the Peruvians and Mexicans from discussions in José de Acosta and Justus Lipsius.⁴²

III

Having concluded this genealogy, we are now ready to look morphologically at the dispute between Stillingfleet and Locke, in which the question of consensus arose as one among many issues addressed by them at length. The sequence was as follows. In 1697, Stillingfleet published *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1697), in the tenth chapter of which he raised objections to Locke's position in the *Essay* on a number of matters. Locke replied with a book-length *Letter to the Right Reverend Edward Ld Bishop of Worcester* (1697).⁴³ Stillingfleet issued his own book-length rebuttal in *The Bishop of Worcester's Answer to Mr. Locke's Letter* in 1697 (dated March 27). Locke parried with *Mr. Locke's Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Letter*, also in 1697), to which Stillingfleet responded with *The Bishop of Worcester's Answer to Mr. Locke's Second Letter* (1698; dated Sept. 22, 1697). Locke then composed a 452-page *Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter*, dated 4 May 1698 but not

⁴¹ Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines Sacrae, or a Rational Account of the Grounds of Christian Faith* (London, 1662), 366, 364. Stillingfleet traced this atheism to polytheism and the bringing into contempt of religion by the obscene stories of poets about the gods.

⁴² Stillingfleet, *Origines Sacrae*, 394-95. See also 384, 392-94. The passage in question from Lipsius appears in *Monita et Exempla Politica* (Antwerp, 1605), 19-20.

⁴³ Stillingfleet's *Discourse* has a preface dated September 30, 1696, with a 1697 date on the title page. Locke's *Letter* in reply is dated Jan. 7, 1696/7, which suggests that Stillingfleet's book was in circulation before the end of year or that Locke received some advance version of it – given the length of his reply a reasonable lead time would have been required.

advertised until November 1698 (with a 1699 title page). Stillingfleet died in March of 1699, depriving him of the opportunity to extend the argument.⁴⁴

We have, then, a formal quarrel (or ‘controversy’ as they termed it), recognised by both participants, and staged in print with the appurtenances of a protracted argument, including a familiar repertoire of typographic conventions to indicate the source of comments being addressed, marginal references to Locke’s *Essay* and the cascading set of exchanges, and even, in Locke’s final contribution, the use of black letter for particular emphasis necessitated by the accumulated backstory. We see also the tendency of arguments to broaden and accumulate, as Locke’s lengthy first reply stimulated Stillingfleet to produce an ever-expanding and trenchant critique of his *Essay*. In the midst of these exchanges they maintained a largely polite mode of address, with Stillingfleet commending Locke for writing in a ‘*Grave and Civil*’ manner and hoping that he too had retained his civility, unlike the author of a Socinian pamphlet he took on in a postscript to his first *Answer*, whom he regarded as trifling and scurrilous.⁴⁵ Observing decorum was consistent with their pose of being reluctant participants, with Locke reminding his interlocutor that he had been drawn into the dispute, and Stillingfleet remarking: ‘I am no Lover of *Controversies*, however, I have been often Engaged in them’.⁴⁶ But this pose later became frayed with sarcastic remarks and provocations by Stillingfleet, including his chastisement of Locke for proliferating matters and ‘*Ebullition*’.⁴⁷ Locke, who had always referred to Stillingfleet respectfully (as Lord), now felt obliged to remark that ‘*Controversie*, though it excludes not good Manners, will not be managed with all that Submission which one is ready to pay in other Cases. Truth, which is inflexible, has here its Interest, which must not be given up in a Complement [*sic*].’⁴⁸ The structure of the discussion combines the orality of argument, in which each participant seeks to interrupt the other with clarifications and cavils,⁴⁹ with a strongly textual dimension. The latter feature emerges in the fact

⁴⁴ For discussion of the argument, see Matthew Stuart, ‘The Correspondence with Stillingfleet’, in *A Companion to Locke*, edited by Matthew Stuart (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 354-70.

⁴⁵ *The Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to Mr. Locke’s Letter, Concerning Some Passages Relating to his Essay of Human Understanding...With a Postscript in answer to some Reflections made on that Treatise in a late Socinian Pamphlet* (London, 1697), 133.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *The Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to Mr. Locke’s Second Letter wherein his Notion of Ideas is Prov’d to be Inconsistent with it self, and with the Articles of the Christian Faith* (London, 1698), 4.

⁴⁸ *Mr. Locke’s Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to his Second Letter* (London, 1699), 2.

⁴⁹ See, for example, John Locke, *A Letter to the Right Reverend Edward Ld Bishop of Worcester, Concerning Some Passages Relating to Mr. Locke’s Essay of humane*

that terms of engagement are glossographic, with commentary upon commentary, while the expectation appears to be that the reader has copies of the relevant books at hand to consult.

At one level the dispute is conducted as a search after truth on its own terms, but it becomes clear that Stillingfleet manages the argument as a way of consolidating an opinion community. Locke understandably hesitates about this move since Stillingfleet not only associates him with ‘Gentlemen of this new way of reasoning’ – based on Locke’s ‘way of ideas’ – but in the process makes this method tantamount to scepticism, posing a danger to religion, in tandem with the author of *Christianity not Mysterious*.⁵⁰ Kenneth Sheppard sees Stillingfleet as engaging in the classic mode of the *confutatio*, raking together arguments for the sake of it, while Locke attempted to defend the truth of the Christian religion in a civil manner that made truth the overriding objective.⁵¹

The issue of consensus arose as their argument proliferated. It represents an ‘add on’ to the core conflicts in that sense. In his first *Letter*, Locke had clarified that his objection to Descartes’s ontological argument for the existence of God was not to the argument itself but the tendency to treat it as the *only* viable proof. In shoring up his orthodoxy, he claimed that no arguments supporting the existence of God should be invalidated.⁵² This opened the door, conveniently, for Stillingfleet to address him in his *Answer* with a question about why, if this was so, Locke would disturb the proof from universal consent?

Here you must give me leave to ask you, what you think of the universal Consent of Mankind, as to the Being of God? Hath not this been made use of, as an Argument not only by Christians, but by the wisest and greatest Men among the Heathens? And what then would you think of one who should go about to invalidate this Argument?⁵³

Thus he returned to Book I of the *Essay* and its critique of innateness predicated on the absence of unanimity. Stillingfleet specifically mentioned the citation by Locke of ‘whole Nations at the Bay of *Soldania*, in *Brasil*, in the *Caribbe Islands*,

Understanding: in a Late Discourse of his Lordships, in Vindication of the Trinity (London, 1697), 116.

⁵⁰ Edward Stillingfleet, *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1697), 234; *Mr. Locke’s Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to his Letter* (London, 1697), 9, 11.

⁵¹ Kenneth Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism in Early Modern in Early Modern England, 1580-1720: The Atheist Answered and His Error Confuted* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 270.

⁵² Locke, *A Letter to the Right Reverend Edward Ld Bishop of Worcester*, 113-14.

⁵³ *The Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to Mr. Locke’s Letter*, 89.

and *Paraquaria*' who lacked an idea of God. In his estimation, these examples were 'ill-chosen' since they came from reports of travellers who either lacked adequate language skills or sufficient depth of acquaintance, or whose testimony had been contradicted by others better placed and informed. But the real nub came in his concluding salvo that Locke's account 'makes them not fit to be a standard for the Sense of Mankind, being a People so strangely bereft of common Sense, that they can hardly be reckoned among Mankind', as the best accounts of the '*Cafres of Soldania*, and the *Caiguae of Paraquaria*' demonstrated.⁵⁴ Here he reveals that this is really an argument about normativity in which no evidence will ever serve to prove Locke's point.

Locke refrained from responding to this matter (which Stillingfleet had treated as a digression) in his next letter, but he gave an extended answer in his final work in the controversy, his *Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter* in 1699. Locke clarified that the number of believers in God was incomparably greater than disbelievers, and that one could call this universal consent if one wished. However, proper universality could not be upheld, and hence 'your Lordship's *universal consent* reduces it self to only a great majority'.⁵⁵ Nonetheless he was prepared to accept the proof of God's existence on this qualified basis. If this move appears at some level to retreat in answer to the criticism, it also attempted to demonstrate that they were simply at cross-purposes, inviting the dispute to dissolve. Locke clarified that his intention in Book I was simply to show that some people exist in the world without an innate idea of God, and on this subject he was strict. One example of an atheist was sufficient to demolish innateness.

But Locke was not done. Stillingfleet had evidently stung him with his dismissal of his sources, so he expended some effort in reestablishing their credibility and adding to their number.⁵⁶ At the same time he did not neglect the normative side of the argument. In relation to Stillingfleet's objection that Locke's examples merited no consideration, he stated firmly: 'This, I think, may pass for nothing, till some Body be found, that *makes them to be a Standard for the Sense of Mankind*'. He used them only to show that they had no innate idea of God, not as norms of humanity. Then, with an interesting flourish suitable to the quarrel occasion, he remarked, 'But to keep something like an Argument going (for what will not that do?)', before stating: 'you go near denying those *Cafers* to be Men,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 89-90.

⁵⁵ *Mr. Locke's Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter*, 448.

⁵⁶ See Daniel Carey, 'Travel, Geography, and the Problem of Belief: Locke as a Reader of Travel Literature', in *History and Nation*, edited by Julia Rudolph (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2006), 117-20.

what else do these Words signifie?⁵⁷ Judging the precise degree of Locke's liberality here is difficult, but the strategy reminds us of his sceptical commitments in this context, that is, the use of diversity to unseat Stoic convictions about common notions (*koinai ennoiai*) and universal consent.

Thus far, a morphological account of the quarrel provides enough scope to address the encounter. But we can supplement this form of reading with attention to modes of dispute in order to capture two important additional contexts. First there is the posthumous edition of Stillingfleet's *Origines Sacrae* (1702), which contains a 'Discourse' printed from a manuscript dated 1697 in which he considered the 'atheistical pretense' of denying common consent.⁵⁸ Significantly, Locke is not named, but the discussion makes it clear that he is the target. The modes that we include within the quarrel territory must therefore be expanded again to contexts in which the participants are not named and to a more disparate set of genres. In the work, Stillingfleet goes through with considerable care all the available examples of peoples cited as atheist, including the difficult instances employed by Locke. This is not a casual discussion, but a concerted alternative anthropology demonstrating his authority with the sources. In defending a viewpoint about consensus '*asserted by the Ancients, and is still by the defenders of Religion*', he reclaims evidence that had been appropriated by a modern.⁵⁹

Someone must always have the last word, and it looked as though Stillingfleet enjoyed the privilege from the grave. But Locke outlasted this attempt and made a final intervention in the fifth edition of the *Essay* (published in 1706 two years after his own death). He quoted at length from his finishing *Letter* to Stillingfleet in a footnote that occupied a page-and-a-half. In prefacing this interpolated rebuttal, he recognised that 'great blame' had been put on him for his critique of innateness, but he went through the answer to Stillingfleet verbatim on the issue of consensus, arguably conceding ground to him as we have seen by disclaiming that he had done any damage to the proof for God's existence from the unanimity of consent. He sought instead to rehabilitate his sources of travel testimony and to add to their number while shifting the ground to the question of what constituted a standard of mankind.⁶⁰ Hence the formal reply transmuted into a

⁵⁷ Mr. Locke's Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter, 448-50.

⁵⁸ For some discussion, see Ann Talbot, *'The Great Ocean of Knowledge': The Influence of Travel Literature on the Work of John Locke* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 173-7.

⁵⁹ Edward Stillingfleet, *Origines Sacrae*, 7th edition (London, 1702), 73-86.

⁶⁰ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 5th edn (London, 1706), 39-40n.

footnote of a masterwork joins the list of modes in which they sought ways to continue the dispute.

Locke had closed his argument with Stillingfleet in his final *Letter* by remarking: 'I know better to imploy the little Time my Business and Health afford me, than to trouble my self with little Cavillers, who may either be set on, or be forward (in hope to recommend themselves) to meddle in this Controversie.'⁶¹ He anticipated opportunists and small fry rushing to the fray. In the case of common consent, he clearly underestimated the matter. In fact, the quarrel over consensus continued, even if two of its leading lights had expired. In part with some intellectual support from Locke, Bayle's *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* (1705) undermined the argument from common consent at great length (noting Locke's judgement), which in turn instigated reviews and attacks on Bayle by Bernard and Le Clerc in major periodicals, followed later by the rejoinder of Vico and later still by the Jesuit answer to Bayle in 1773, *De generis humani consensus in agnoscenda divinitate ... in quo plures recentiorum incredulorum, praesertim Petri Baylii, confutantur errores, ac plurimi illustres vires, plurimaeque gentes cum veteres, tum recentiores ab atheismi nota vindicantur* (1773).⁶² These contributions testify to the scale of the dispute over consensus and its capacity to branch through the learned and religious world, taking in new disputants.

In staking out the various turns in the argument over consensus, I have suggested the benefits of an approach to interpreting this quarrel that not only attends to the genealogy of the dispute (originating in antiquity and resurfacing in modern conflicts over epistemology and morals) but also to the morphology of disputation as a practice which Locke and Stillingfleet participated in knowingly, with the attendant opportunities and constraints that such a form afforded. But we must also search for different modes in which argumentation occurred, ranging in this case from the letter addressed to an opponent, interrogating differences in forensic detail, as well as the footnote and discourse in which the antagonist remains unnamed but where the dispute is materially advanced. The cultural history of this particular encounter moves beyond the limits of microhistory by identifying the subtler politics of how opinion communities are formed and refused in the midst of a protracted dispute.

⁶¹ Mr. Locke's Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter, 452.

⁶² See Stefano Brogi, *Teologia senza verità: Bayle contro i 'rationaux'* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1998), 92-102, 116-22; Sergio Zoli, *Europa libertina tra controriforma e illuminismo: l'"Oriente" dei libertini e le origini dell'Illuminismo* (Bologna: Capelli editore, 1989), 206-24; Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 71-5.