



Believe for knowing? **About the *Belief* in Locke's Essay**

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In the *Introduction to An Essay on Human Understanding*, Locke clearly exposes the purpose of his huge writing project: «to inquire into the original, certainty and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent»,¹ and together with it there is also the will to think about «the bounds between opinion and knowledge; and examine by what measures, in things whereof we have no certain knowledge, we ought to regulate our assent and moderate our persuasion».²

Compared to this programmatic approach, my aim here is to offer an appropriate reconnaissance, and at the same time a philological and philosophical analysis, of the declinations of belief, following closely the articulation of the Lockian text, to understand the role it has in the gnoseological process, and to establish where it fits with respect to rational consciousness. The belief, as I will show, however much it has to do more with the dark *area* of the mental universe, is not isolated from certain knowledge, of sensitive derivation, nor is it totally devoid of *brightness*, it is indeed central and decisive, especially considering the controversial question of the need for pragmatic directionality for human action. I will therefore try to formulate answers to a series of questions that I think should be addressed to the very precise Lockian textuality: if this cruciality of belief in the hermeneutic tissue is true, what are the conditions for it to be carried out? What kind of notions (and therefore cognition) are derived from it? what role does habit play in it? And again: is it possible to talk about semantic stratification (or degrees, following the Lockian *Introduction*) in the domain of belief? And if so, in what terms? And, *last but not least*, what position the belief occupies between acting and thinking? Following these questions, my speech will be structured in three parts: the first part, dedicated to the analysis of the belief generically meant, in the sense of *giving one's consent* (the first tome of the Lockian *Essay* will be examined in particular); the second, will become more specific to the theme by analyzing the degrees of belief (in the second tome), as well as the essential role of habit and finally the third will be dedicated to the need of belief in the ethical field.

A careful reading of *the Essay* shows a substantial absence of the noun *belief* although there is a broad reference to the *activity* of belief. In Lockian empiricism, experience is the undisputed foundation of knowledge, since it provides matter to thought, and therefore sensation is the source of most of the ideas we have, but there is also another source that gives information to intelligence and that every man possesses by nature: «the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got»,³ that is *reflection*. It has for object the inner operations (which operate indirectly on sensitive material) and coincides with the knowledge acquired by the mind acquires not only of those operations and of its own mental processes, but also of the ideas of the operations themselves. This is what Locke (in assonance with primary sensitive-sensory activity) defines *internal sense*. Among

¹ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania, 1999, p. 21.

² *Ivi*, p. 22.

³ *Ivi*, p. 23.



perception, thinking, doubting, reasoning, knowing, willing, Locke therefore also adds believing: thanks to these mental activities «the mind furnishes the understanding with ideas of its own operations».⁴ This means that it isn't possible to separate totally *experience and intellectual activity*: without this mental action, also the material acquired through sensation could not be “considered” by the mind, to be used as an essential element of our knowledge.

On one hand, in short, there is the *impression or movement* «which is such an impression or motion made in some part of the body, as produces some perception in the understanding»,⁵ on the other, the mind works “around these impressions” through internal operations: the two sources co-involve each other. «Observable in children. He that attentively considers the state of a child, at his first coming into the world, will have little reason to think him stored with plenty of ideas, that are to be the matter of his future knowledge. It is by degrees he comes to be furnished with them».⁶ This means that at the beginning of their lives all men are in contact with the surrounding world from which they receive impressionistic material for their knowledge, but only later they manage to organize and *cum-prehendere* (in the literal sense of the term), thanks to mental elaboration, that varied and shapeless material. Gradually we have a clearer knowledge of the world outside but also an in-depth knowledge of what passes within them, in our interior world. This process does not take place as naturally as it may seem: in fact, for Locke it can happen that certain people «have not any very clear or perfect ideas of the greatest part of [operations in their minds] all their lives».⁷ To know ideas clearly it is always necessary to reflect on them, because the simple “flexion” of sensation alone is not enough: it is therefore essential that reason reflects in on *itself*, puts its look on them and makes it “object of contemplation”, otherwise they would appear only like “floating visions”, *faded silhouettes*. In this case (and throughout the first part of the *Essay*) the belief certainly has the role to *corroborate* its own reflexive action but also the idea apprehended through senses. We arrive, only gradually, at an ever greater awareness of oneself, of the surrounding world and of one's cognitive experience.

It is even better understood, at this point, what Locke means when he argues that «it is hard to imagine that the rational soul should think so much, and not reason at all»,⁸ and when he emphasizes that «we may observe how the mind, by degrees, improves in these; and advances to the exercise of those other faculties of enlarging, compounding, and abstracting its ideas, and of reasoning about them, and reflecting upon all these».⁹ In general it can be considered that the belief on one hand is linked (even if indirectly) to sensation – that is, an empirical stimulation which produces a certain type of ideas, not to be confused with purely mental ones – on the other, belief arises from the relationship a subject establishes with another subject with whom, from his/her birth, it enters into a relationship, thus establishing a *credential bond* with the other subject. This would be enough to assert with certainty that, according to Locke, knowledge and its growth are closely linked to the activity of believing. But it is now necessary to analyze the conditions of possibility of belief to understand what happens when man gives his consent (often unconditioned) to a principle and to the errors that derive from it.

Another essential coordinate that is part of the cognitive process, and which has direct connections with belief, is habit. In order to understand its internal dynamics, I will follow, as I have done so far, the

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 97.

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 100.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 89.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 90.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*



construction of the Lockian text. At the beginning of his *Essay*, in order to carry on the idea that there are no innate principles, Locke circumscribes the role and function of habit. Habit in a sense is useful – because it «come at last to produce actions in us, which often escape our observation»¹⁰ (think, for example, about walking) and thus make knowledge cumulative (in this case, in particular in chapter X, Locke configures it as “retention”) but, on the other hand, precisely because of its purely cumulative nature, it can prove damaging, as it reduces knowledge to a repetition without significant advancement. The philosopher writes, in this regard, that habit leads us to «take for the perception of our sensation [...] an idea formed by our judgment».¹¹ Locke expresses with great simplicity and lucidity what happens in every man's mind from the *infans stage*, a particular stage in which the mind is «yet unprejudiced, understanding, (for white paper receives any characters)»;¹² in this period of intellectual *fragility* and exposition to the *language of others* it is much easier to make children believe that certain principles are truths. The source in this case is not the sensation but the superstition of a nurse or the authority of an old woman, or, in any case, of a person to whom children *attribute* wisdom, science and piety. Locke considers such figures capable of instilling «in the unwary [intellect of children] those doctrines they would have them retain and profess».¹³ Time, most often, erases the sound of *the revered voice* and, thanks to habit, men, «having been always so educated, and having no remembrance of the beginning of this respect, they think it is natural»,¹⁴ so that through habit they come to consider those doctrines “*unquestionable, self-evident and innate*”. Unquestionability is the mark through which doctrine is proposed (exploiting the sensibility of the Other): to make disciples “easily governed” and slaves to blind *credulity*,¹⁵ and consequently less accustomed to the use of reason, their “masters” establish «as a principle of all principles that principles must not be questioned».¹⁶ From this also it follows the fact that self-evidence and innatism derives from the impossibility of identifying the exact moment in which those notions enter the mental horizon: thanks to the failed serious rational verification, those principles become indemonstrable, incontrovertible and axiomatic. Locke writes: «men so instructed [believe that] those propositions of whose knowledge they can find in themselves no original, were certainly the impress of God and nature upon their minds, and not taught them by anyone else».¹⁷

In this scenario, habit has the role of making belief rooted, inveterate, and also of spoiling intellectual operations: «by long poring on the same objects, so dim his sight as to take monsters lodged in his own brain for the images [or φαντάσματα] of the Deity, and the workmanship of his hands».¹⁸ This creates mental representations that 'obscure' the truth, making those ideas inculcated, often fearful and horrible, truthful ideas, infused into the mind by God himself.

But what relationship do these “obscurantist” representations have with the truth? Locke writes:

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,

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 130.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 129.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 64.

¹⁵ See *ivi*, p. 85.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 84.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 65-66.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 66.



everyone has so much as he really knows and comprehends. What [men] 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.¹⁹

In this passage, while highlighting a certain link, from the *semantic point of view*, between the field of belief and that of faith/trust placed in others, what matters to emphasize are the metaphors used by Locke, they do, in fact, bring out an essential feature of the inculcated principles, and that they have a greater meaning (or rather a value with respect to the *semblance* of truth they represent) for the person who professes them, being, instead, absolutely useless (and also losing “polish” and splendor) for those who come to believe it through the Other. The thread of belief gradually weakens the power of such notions as a story that loses intensity (and perhaps even credibility) the further away from those who conceived it. Later – as I will show – Locke will return with greater strength and significance to this issue, which is closely linked to the dimension of tradition.

In order to obtain a complete definition of belief, it is now necessary to analyze the second part of the Lockian Essay in which the author makes an examination of the other side of Knowledge, the one to which is afferent the belief, namely Judgment; a face certainly obscure but also necessary because it makes up for our natural gnoseological deficit. Judgment and Conscience are both faculties concerning truth and false, but while Knowledge perceives (and therefore can also demonstrate) with absolute certainty the concordance and discordance of two ideas, Judgment puts together or separates ideas from one another in the mind, when their certain agreement or disagreement is not perceived, but presumed to be so.²⁰ Precisely in the context of judgment, Locke inserts the probability «[it] is nothing but the appearance of such an agreement or disagreement by the intervention of proofs, whose connexion is not constant and immutable, or at least is not perceived to be so, but is, or appears for the most part to be so, and is enough to induce the mind to judge the proposition to be true or false, rather than the contrary».²¹ In this case, it is “*a question of likelihood*”. On the other hand, the belief is «the entertainment the mind gives this sort of propositions»²² and it is called also *assent*, or *opinion*, «which is the admitting or receiving any proposition for true, upon arguments or proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain knowledge that it is so».²³ But Locke adds that while in knowledge the connection between ideas is manifest, *visible* and *certain* and we talk about intuition, in belief what makes me believe is foreign to the thing I believe in, because it is based on two parameters:

First, the conformity of anything with our own knowledge, observation, and experience. Secondly, the testimony of others, vouching their observation and experience. In the testimony of others is to be considered: 1. The number. 2. The integrity. 3. The skill of the witnesses. 4. The design of the author, where it is a testimony out of a book cited. 5. The consistency of the parts, and circumstances of the relation. 6. Contrary testimonies.²⁴

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 84.

²⁰ See *ivi*, p. 648.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ivi*, p. 650.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*



So, to sum up, when we talk about the belief in Locke's Essay, in the foreground there is certainly the opinion of others but we must also take into account our experience. That is why in the event that (as in children) experience is lacking, the influence of the Other plays a decisive role because it is increasingly difficult to "balance" and compare a notion with experience.

The further away we are from the certainty and demonstrability of a concept, the more we arrive at the *improbable* and the *unlikely*: that is the various degrees and foundations of probability. First of all, it is interesting to point out the distinction that Locke makes on the type of probable propositions: in the first case these are "matters of fact" that are "beyond the evidence of our senses" and therefore have some connection with sensitive perception, while in the second case these are (*analog*) matters that go "beyond the discovery of our senses". Referring to the *first* questions of an observational nature there are (in order of *probability*): *assurance*, *confidence* and the *assent related by historians of credit*, then, as the evidence and testimonies are lost, Locke talks about *different forms of adherence to the real*, including *belief*, *conjecture*, *guess*, *doubt*, *wavering*, *distrust*, *disbelief*. In this case the "belief" is an internal degree to probability and is not a generally *attitude* or *assent* (in reflection). As far as analogue questions are concerned: they falling not *under the reach of our senses*, they are not capable of testimony, and a useful argumentative tool for establishing their veracity is precisely the analogy (step by step) between the world, of which one cannot have experience, and the sensitive world, of which we have experience. The last degree, what Locke calls the highest of our assent, for which testimony is of direct divine derivation, is Revelation and our assent to it is faith, which is "a settled and sure principle of assent and assurance, and leaves no manner of room for doubt or hesitation". However, in this case the author warns against a type of false Revelation which, pretending to do without reason, leads to enthusiasm (or fanaticism), and where there are "ungrounded fancies" that are assumed «as the foundation both of opinion and conduct».²⁵ In short, we find oneself in a *hallucinatory state* from an intellectual point of view, which «rising from the conceits of a warmed or overweening brain, works yet, where it once gets footing, more powerfully on the persuasions and actions of men than either of those two, or both together».²⁶

It is interesting to underline – as the Italian translator, of the edition I am referring to, does – that from a textual point of view, the presumption (*strong conceit*) is translated (in French) by Coste as "dominant thought" (*esprit de dominer*) and also with "imagination": this is because it is an imaginative state in which men "take fireflies for lanterns", and are so convinced that those fireflies (the result of a "*reason that unreasons*") are the true light (the divine one) that it is difficult to convince them otherwise. According to Locke, the truth of God has its own "strong, clear and pure" light that "carries with it its own demonstration" and does not obscure the light of the intellect, and «we may as naturally take a glow-worm to assist us to discover the sun, as to examine the celestial ray by our dim candle, reason».²⁷ These people are confident in themselves because of their persuasion: «This is the way of talking of these men: they are sure, because they are sure: and their persuasions are right, because they are strong in them».²⁸ They *err* and I use now the verb "to err" because in Italian "*errare*" is used in the dual sense of making mistakes and going the wrong way. In point of fact «wrong principle [...] misguide[s] them both in their belief and conduct».²⁹

²⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 649-650.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 696.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 670.

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 697.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 696.



Continuing the analysis of the second part of the Essay, about habit, which is always in the background when he writes about belief, Locke proposes and expands the following key concept: the *truthful* force of the notion weakens the further away from the primary source of testimony. We are here on the horizon that can be summed up by the term *tradition*. Locke writes:

in traditional truths, each remove weakens the force of the proof: and the more hands the tradition has successively passed through, the less strength and evidence does it receive from them. This I thought necessary to be taken notice of: because I find amongst some men the quite contrary commonly practised, who look on opinions to gain force by growing older.³⁰

This is what Locke calls “an inverted rule of probability” where certain principles are considered “venerable for age”,³¹ that is, the more they have survived, over the years, the higher their degree of truth. In fact, it is quite the opposite because, in any case «the copy of a copy, ever so well attested, and by ever so credible witnesses, will not be admitted as a proof in judicature».³² To clarify how a notion is perpetuated over time, to understand how belief acts in man, and how men get the consent of others to intimidate them and silence their opposition, Locke reports four sorts of arguments:

1) *argumentum ad verecundiam*: «The first is, to allege the opinions of men, whose parts, learning, eminency, power, or some other cause has gained a name, and settled their reputation in the common esteem with some kind of authority».³³ Then he adds: «When men are established in any kind of dignity, it is thought a breach of modesty for others to derogate any way from it. [...] This is apt to be censured, as carrying with it too much pride, when a man does not readily yield to the determination of approved authors, which is wont to be received with respect and submission by others».³⁴

2) *argumentum ad ignorantiam*: «is to require the adversary to admit what they allege as a proof, or to assign a better».³⁵

3) *argumentum ad hominem*: «is to press a man with consequences drawn from his own principles or concessions».³⁶ So he convinces the interlocutor by basing his conviction on the opinions that he himself has.

4) *argumentum ad iudicium*: «is the using of proofs drawn from any of the foundations of knowledge or probability».³⁷ In this case «knowledge must come from proofs and arguments, and light arising from the nature of things themselves, and not from my shamefacedness, ignorance, or error».³⁸

The Lockian discourse around the activity of belief seems to me to be based, at this textual stage, on a general and 'literal' distinction: «What I see, I know to be so, by the evidence of the thing itself: what I believe, I take to be so upon the testimony of another».³⁹ Therefore, the belief is certainly closely linked to society but also acts as a *medium-median* between acting and thinking: its operations are close to the

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 659.

³¹ *Cfr.*, *ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ivi*, p. 682.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 683.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 698.



formation of those 'random' and 'fascinating' images produced by a kaleidoscope that composes and recomposes *sine ratione and sine glossa* the “data” it uses.

We now have all means to clearly answering the question in the title of my essay: “believe *for* knowing?” And the surprising answer is that belief is not the *medium* of knowledge but knowledge must be the *purpose* of belief! The role of belief, in fact, is to make up for the lack of knowledge: it often happens that where knowledge is lacking you are still “forced to determine in one direction or another”, that is to say that it is necessary to 'force' direct (ethical) action and behavior and precisely in these moments belief comes into play. However, in order for the notions that are passed on by others as indisputable truths, to lead us to true and useful knowledge, it is always necessary for them to be analyzed by reason. In conclusion, each of us must «set upon the search of truth ought in the first place to prepare his mind with a love of it»,⁴⁰ to ensure that belief is no longer based only on the opinion of others and therefore accepted in an uncritical way, but it is based on our ability to examine opinion carefully. At a closer look, men who are employed to carry out this examination with honesty and diligence, are also less inclined to impose their opinions on others. In closing, I use a fine expression from Nicholas Wolterstorff's text, *Ethic of Belief*, which seems to me to sum up Locke's invitation: «Let reason be your guide of believing»!⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 693.

⁴¹ See N. Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the ethics of belief*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 1 and ff.