

Chapter 2

Restoring a Measure of Faith in Locke

APPROACHING LOCKE

Cool, clear-headed, far from the ignoble strife or restless spirits of men such as those whom we met in the previous chapter, Locke plods dispassionately along his tranquil philosophical way. So it may seem to those who turn the pages of his principal philosophical text, and the one that principally occupies us, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Appearances are deceptive. Locke was deeply immersed in the political struggles of his day. In exile, he lived in the Netherlands for over five years. In England, before that, more than one biographer reproduces a report from the early 1680s that, in Oxford, 'John Locke lives a very cunning unintelligible life. . . . No one knows where he goes.'¹ Still, we shall not get drawn into the intrigues of Locke the man and duly adhere to Michael Polanyi's concerns. Although Polanyi's influence on theologians is not confined to it, his *Personal Knowledge* has apparently and understandably made the most impact on them. This is the volume containing the passages quoted at the beginning of the previous chapter.

-
1. So Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 221 and Roger Woolhouse, *Locke: a biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 177. For relevant detailed coverage, see too the magnificently thorough work by Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

In challenging Polanyi's reading of Locke, my ultimate aim is to put pressure on the position that highlights epistemological factors at the origins of modernity. In order to shake off Polanyi's legacy, we have to get straight on Locke's religious epistemology and do so against the background of his general epistemology.

Locke does not normally emerge from expository and philosophical commentary on his work as either wholly clear or wholly consistent in some key areas of his work and there is no need to quarrel with a judgement to the effect that he was willing at important junctures to sacrifice logical consistency to perceived common sense. Locke's religious epistemology, no more than his general epistemology, has relaxed the furrowed brow of every philosophical commentator who has sought to grasp its logic.² The account that follows will feature on this score neither charges of inconsistency against Locke nor pressure for acquittal on such charges. Definitive or comprehensive interpretation is not my ambition. It is possible to offer a defence of Locke as arraigned on the charges made by Polanyi and company without either a dogmatic interpretation of or a comprehensive verdict on his religious epistemology.

From the outset, we must set our faces firmly against any attempt to draw conclusions about Locke's religious epistemology from just one of his works, and most certainly not the one from which Polanyi quoted – Locke's *Third Letter on Toleration*. It looks as though Polanyi took Locke's words here to be representative of Locke's epistemological convictions, but it will not affect my argument if it turns out that Polanyi was not strictly committed to that supposition. As he neither disclaims nor defends this supposition in so many words, he could, in principle, claim that the problem of modernity that exercises him comes to light in words such as those cited from the *Third Letter*, which at least manifest an important strand in Locke's thinking, even if they are not entirely representative. Nonetheless, it is regrettable that Polanyi gives the impression that the words he cites well represent Locke's epistemology. Throughout his literary corpus, Locke sets up the relation of faith to knowledge in a variety of ways and the *Third Letter* cannot be singled out as characteristic. On the contrary, whatever we make of Locke's variations when it comes to interpreting him, Maurice Cranston long ago and quite rightly remarked in relation to the *Third Letter* that in it

2. Paul Helm's statement of the problem in 'Locke on Faith and Knowledge', *Philosophical Quarterly* (January, 1973) 52-66, remains useful. On the wider front, Nicholas Wolterstorff alludes to internal difficulties in Locke's work in terms of: 'Locke is to be counted among Locke's most acute critics', *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) xv.

‘Locke was forced . . . to acknowledge a more sceptical attitude towards religion as such than he had previously admitted’.³ We might add that it was more sceptical than anything he published later, too, unless we partially except the fragmentary *Fourth Letter on Toleration*.⁴

Even when we consider them on their own terms, in isolation from what Locke wrote elsewhere, Polanyi overestimated the scope of Locke’s remarks on faith in the *Third Letter*. If Polanyi was equating what he took to be Locke’s understanding of the ‘mere personal acceptability’ of faith with ‘subjectivity’, we must respond that ‘subjectivity’ in a political context and ‘subjectivity’ in a general epistemological context do not necessarily amount to the same thing. This must be kept firmly in mind if what is described in terms of Lockean ‘subjectivity’ is explicitly or implicitly equated with ‘mere personal acceptability’. When Locke distinguished faith from knowledge in the *Third Letter*, he was aiming to limit the scope of legitimate magisterial authority in matters where intellectual conviction does not amount to demonstrative knowledge. The authorities should not be allowed to legislate or adjudicate on matters about which we cannot actually *know* the truth. That is the context in which Locke distinguishes as he does between faith and knowledge in the *Third Letter*. What Locke was explicitly disowning when contrasting faith with knowledge here was not the potential for any sort of objectivity attaching to faith, but, rather, an objective demonstrability that would function as a legitimating ground for magisterial coercion.⁵ Correspondingly, if Torrance, when charging Locke with misguided epistemological privacy, was equating that privacy with what Locke claimed for faith in the *Third Letter*, he misunderstood. What counts politically as a private opinion need not lack legitimate pretension to publicly demonstrable *rational objectivity*, even when it is not demonstrable *knowledge*, when what is at stake are the rational grounds of religious belief and not the grounds on which magistrates can compel religious conformity.

Locke’s critical interlocutors can sometimes display extraordinary carelessness in reading his work, presumably because they concentrate their reading on his *Letters on Toleration* and, even here, they fail to take into account the context of Locke’s epistemological remarks. Thus Mark Mitchell thinks that Locke is allied with William of Ockham in holding that religious belief is immune from fact and in separating science from

3. Cranston, *John Locke*, 367.

4. *Works*, vol. v, 549–74.

5. Peter L.P. Simpson makes the same mistake in relation to Locke’s denial of objectivity in his *Political Liberalism: A Defence of Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ/London: Transaction Publishers, 2015) 111, fn. 11.

religion accordingly.⁶ The preliminary point to be made here is that the context as well as the content of Locke's epistemological observations in his writings on toleration has to be factored into any wider judgement on Locke. His claim to fame may have been to find a 'new way of ideas'; what he opposed in this Third Letter was a 'new way of persecution'.⁷ Locke says that once we get clear on what the issue really is – and he avers that his interlocutor has lurched about at this point – we should also get clear that nothing short of 'certainly knowing' the truth of one's religion can justify magisterial coercion (143).⁸ The question is not whether the Christian religion is 'true': it indubitably is.⁹ The question is not whether the earliest Christians were asked to believe it: they were. The question is not whether Christians ought to doubt the basic historical facts constituting or undergirding Christianity: they should not. 'Any who call themselves Christians' are in possession of a 'sure' and 'full' revelation' (157). The question hinges on whether we are dealing here with matters *demonstrably* known, yielding a strictly corresponding certainty.¹⁰ Believe, be assured, be confidently persuaded by all means; but realise that all this is 'short of true knowledge' (179).

These averments may or may not entail the kind of threat to faith that troubles Polanyi, but, at all events, Locke's studied and influential presentation of the relation of faith to knowledge came in the celebrated *Essay on Human Understanding*, where he set forth programmatically the philosophical principles of his religious epistemology. For that reason, I shall give an account of it. When Locke came to defend the *Essay* against the criticisms of Edward Stillingfleet, bishop of Worcester, it looked as though he had rather changed his epistemological tune from the *Essay* itself.¹¹ However, it was not changed to the tune he sang in the

6. *Michael Polanyi*, 178, n. 21.

7. *Works*, v, 142. From now on, where possible, page references to Locke's work are placed in the body of the text.

8. The argument about what the argument was about is still going on in the *Fourth Letter*, *Works* v, 554.

9. Very near the beginning of his *Second Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke had told his interlocutor that: '[t]rue religion and christian religion are, I suppose, to you and me, the same thing' (*Works* v, 67) and at the very end, he made clear that he had not demurred from his interlocutor's conviction that "bringing souls to salvation" was, in Locke's words, 'the best design any one can employ his pen in' (137). Both suppositions are re-stated in the Third Letter, *Works* v, 144; 335.

10. Locke is capable of using the word 'certainly' in what looks like a loose sense in relation to knowledge of Christian basics such as the birth of Christ in Bethlehem and his suffering under Pilate, 153.

11. See Helm, 'Locke'.

Third Letter. In his correspondence with Stillingfleet, Locke included a rough attempt to separate the spheres of faith and knowledge, assigning them to epistemically independent spheres, but not along the lines of the subordination that appears in the third and fourth letters on toleration. The *Essay* itself also differs from the toleration writings in a way we should not suspect from Polanyi's account. Locke varies his tune, whether or not this produces grating dissonance. It would be most unfortunate if all this conveyed the notion that Locke was so different in different places as to be all over the place overall. Still, it would be unjust to foreclose that possibility definitively. What I shall seek to show is that, even when not read *in meliorem partem*, Locke does not emerge at the place where Polanyi or his followers locate him.

Nothing in my argument particularly hangs on an interpretation, still less on the plausibility, of Locke's argument in the *Third Letter*, nor am I concerned with the philosophical plausibility of Locke's argument in the *Essay*. However, I am concerned with the correct interpretation of the *Essay*. While my argument is not optimally advanced by taking aim and firing away at all Locke's casual interpreters, it is in order to give preliminary notice that he has been very carelessly interpreted by an interpreter of interest to us, Thomas Torrance. In contrast to Colin Gunton in *Enlightenment and Alienation*, Torrance cited Locke directly as well as citing Polanyi's quotation from Locke. In 'The Framework of Belief', Torrance wanted to draw attention to the crisis in Western epistemology wherein Locke played a leading, perhaps *the* leading, part. He offered textual evidence from the *Essay on Human Understanding* to claim that, in Locke, rational, demonstrative knowledge is 'sharply contrasted with belief which is no more than an "ungrounded persuasion" of the mind, for it is only extraneously and not evidently related to the thing believed'.¹² In support of this claim, Torrance cited chapters xv. 1-3 and xix. 11ff. from book IV of the *Essay*.¹³ He straightforwardly misread the text. In chapter xix, it was not 'belief' but '*enthusiasm*' that Locke dubbed 'an ungrounded persuasion'. Directing his energies towards dismantling 'enthusiastic' epistemological principles, Locke studiously, pointedly, deliberately and programmatically distinguished enthusiasm from faith as well as from reason. 'Enthusiasm' constitutes a third ground of assent to a given proposition alongside grounds in faith and in reason and it is a ground that, unlike those two grounds, is categorically rejected.

12. *Belief in Science*, 7.

13. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975). Whenever possible, section references to this *Essay* are incorporated into the main text.

Further, Torrance unquestioningly identified the ‘faith’ of chapter xv with the ‘faith’ of chapter xix. From a commentator’s point of view, the terrain here gets a little bumpy, but what is clear is that ‘faith’ is not used uniformly in these two chapters, as I shall document below. Although, for myself, I believe that problems of interpretation have been exaggerated here, that does not matter; it may be granted that the way in which Locke’s usages of faith are to be related is open to debate.¹⁴ What is both necessary and sufficient to say at this stage is that, in chapter xv, Locke uses ‘faith’ as a term in general epistemology. It is what is maximally attainable when we fail to demonstrate a proposition delivered by reason. What Locke is describing is the exercise of deducing the rational probability of a proposition and the appropriate form of assent to it. Here, Locke is discussing what we might term ‘rational faith’. However, in chapters xviii and xix, we have moved onto religious epistemology and are now talking about ‘*religious* faith’, which is a different animal. In this latter context, ‘faith’ is the mode in which we grasp a proposition not deduced or delivered by reason at all, but proposed in the name of revelation. Religious and rational faith are not the same thing. When Locke is discussing *general* epistemology, faith is *not* contrasted with reason; it is contrasted with knowledge, faith and knowledge being alternative *products* of the operations of reason. On the other hand, when Locke is discussing *religious* epistemology, faith *is* contrasted with reason, for it furnishes here an alternative *method* to the general rational method of attaining cognitive grip on a proposition.

At risk of giving worthy and good-natured readers sleepless nights wondering whether they have wandered into Act 2, Scene 2, I have briefly indicated flaws in the interpretation of Locke so as to get polemics out of the way. Those flaws and polemics do matter. Turning, now, to Locke’s text in its own right, the stretch of land before us will appear a little colourless to some readers but it should not prove to be barren and should be traversed in the assurance, if not of Canaan beyond, at least of wider and perhaps more enticing pastures that will eventually come into view. The *Essay* contains the systematic summary attempt that Locke made to state the principles of religious epistemology and stands at the heart both of his philosophy and his contribution to the history of philosophy. The engine of his religious epistemology pounds away within it.

14. I make a limited attempt at interpretation in Stephen N. Williams, ‘Restoring “Faith” in Locke’, *Enlightenment and Dissent* No. 6 (1987) 95–113. I remain committed to this, as I do to my harmlessly general ‘John Locke and the Status of Faith’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* (40.4) 1987.

ESSAY ON HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

Locke treated the principles of religious epistemology in his *Essay* only as his opus drew faithfully to its close in Book IV. He specifically tackled the question of faith in relation to reason in chapters xviii and xix of that Book, the latter chapter having joined the work only at its fourth edition. We need to understand them against their wider background.

Generally speaking, Locke's examination of the way, nature and scope of knowledge in the *Essay* produced a coalition of what we may loosely term empiricist, idealist and sceptical elements in the outcome of his analysis. This outcome is a relatively attenuated sphere of knowledge. Such knowledge as we possess is rational and yields 'certainty'. In chapters xiv and xv of Book IV, Locke presents a heralded and superficially rigid distinction between what we know, admitting of certainty, and what we may judge to be the case, admitting of no more than probability. There are degrees both of knowledge and of probability (IV.ii). Probability is in principle capable of reaching such a high degree that it raises our assent to a given proposition practically to knowledge and we are in the vicinity of certainty. Yet, even at such high altitude the distinction between knowledge and judgement, between certainty and probability, is not supposed to lapse. In this context, what I have called rational faith – we have not yet got to religious faith – is aligned with judgement and probability. It belongs to the sphere of opinion and not of knowledge. If a proposition is judged, but not known, to be true, it is rightly entertained as a matter of opinion for it is at best highly probable. Assent to it is a matter of faith. Religious categories and concepts are not on the table at the moment.

When Locke introduces faith into his general epistemology, its alignment with opinion has no necessary connection at all with the *private* opinion we have heard about from his critical commentators. Nor is the faith in question a matter of ungrounded persuasion. Life, says Locke, is lived mostly 'in the twilight of probability' (IV.iv.2). Probabilities can be either objective or subjective. An objective probability obtains when it is impossible even in principle to attain anything higher. A subjective probability obtains when an individual has not in practice gone beyond probability. When it comes to deciding what is objectively probable, public grounds and accepted criteria for holding beliefs and adjudicating their tenability should be invoked. There may be cases when a person is justified in maintaining the truth of a proposition that formally can be no more than probable with all the confidence rightly placed in the truth of a proposition demonstratively established and, as such, known. These are

cases are of what Leibniz, for example, termed ‘moral certainty’.¹⁵ In the case of such high probability, assent is effectively *necessary* (xv.2; xvi.6). Yet, so long as we are talking about probabilities, we remain formally within the sphere of faith and opinion.

That is how Locke understands the relationship between faith and *knowledge*. Faith and *reason*, as we shall shortly see, is a different kettle of fish. Before he gets onto that discussion and after examining the degrees of assent that are involved when we gauge the probable truth of a proposition, Locke offers an extended treatment of reason, including an attack on the use of the Aristotelian syllogism in epistemology. He notes different significations of the word ‘reason’. In general epistemology, it refers to a faculty in humankind that elevates us above the beasts, enlarging our knowledge and regulating our assent as we try to interpret the data provided by our senses. In this context, Locke is willing to contrast ‘rational’ with ‘intuitive’ knowledge. That is not because he regards intuition as irrational, but because ‘rational knowledge’ is a phrase that can be used in the more restricted sense of ‘demonstrative knowledge’. There is thus a sense of ‘rational’ where we do, indeed, use it to mean ‘demonstrable’ and in such a case we contrast rational knowledge with judgement, judgement being an intellectual operation that pertains to the probable and not to the demonstrable. What Locke is most certainly not doing is overthrowing the more general rationality of non-demonstrative judgement. ‘Judgement’ kicks in when we cannot actually demonstrate the connections of ideas that are not intuitively known, but it can and certainly ought to be rational. We withhold the word ‘rational’ from such judgement only when we are quite deliberately using the word ‘rational’ in the sense of ‘demonstrable’. This is an equation we make only in specific contexts. Normally, in general epistemology, the rational is not confined to the demonstrable, as the most casual perusal of Locke’s talk of intuition and judgement will reveal. ‘To place the emphasis on demonstration as the source of rationality, or to identify it with criteria, misses some of the most fundamental aspects of Locke’s concept of reason.’¹⁶ For Locke, ‘[t]o be rational means a number of things’.¹⁷

The concept of rationality in Locke’s thought cannot be comfortably netted in the course of a brief expedition such as that on which we have embarked. We can just allow salient features of Locke’s general

15. G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, eds. J. Bennett and P. Remnant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 68.

16. See the whole piece from which this sentence is taken, John Yolton’s extended review of J. Dunn’s *Locke* in *The Locke Newsletter* (1985) 88–95, quotation from 86.

17. Yolton, *The Locke Newsletter*, 89.

epistemology to surface. So what happens when Locke moves onto religious epistemology? Now that he has contrasted faith with *knowledge*, both of these being the potential product of rational operations, he asks what we are to make of a contrast we familiarly encounter, namely, the contrast between faith and *reason*. Locke thinks that it is extremely important to understand that distinction correctly. If we are to uphold it in a way that is valid and useful, we must get rid of its usual invalid and dangerous deployment in much contemporary discourse. We may validly speak of faith as opposed to speaking of reason. We may not validly speak of faith as being opposed to reason. The proper distinction between faith and reason is not an antithesis. 'However faith be opposed to reason, faith is nothing but a firm assent of the mind; which if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything but upon good authority, and so cannot be opposite to it' (xvii.24).

In matters religious, we must have reason for believing. That is where the 'enthusiasts' go astray. They reject that principle. When reason cannot be made to serve their purposes, their cry ascends: 'It is a matter of faith and above reason' (xviii.2).¹⁸ For all they care, the enthusiasts' 'above reason' can be contrary to everybody else's reason. That, Locke says, will not do. If we have rightly concluded that some propositions are truly contrary to reason, we should have achieved that conclusion on good, objective grounds. Such propositions are 'inconsistent with or irreconcilable to our clear and distinct ideas' (xvii.23). Enthusiasts do not think that there is any objective test to be passed. As far as Locke is concerned, there is no valid sense of rationality whereby it would be rational to maintain a position such as that maintained by the enthusiasts.

However, as long as we do not understand it in the enthusiastic sense, there is a valid, legitimate religious appeal to propositions 'above reason'. Some propositions are not rationally *deduced*; that is, they are not established by the procedures deployed in general epistemology. A credible proposition that emerges absent that procedure may rightly be described as being 'above reason'. It is distinguished from propositions established 'according to reason', but it is also distinguished from propositions 'contrary to reason' (xvii.23). Even though such propositions are not rationally deduced in the standard procedural way of general epistemology, they may validly procure our assent on condition that they are not opposed to what is rationally known to be true. Take characteristic religious assent to propositions above reason. Here,

18. It has been wryly and justly observed that the only point at which Locke gets enthusiastic in his *Essay* is when he gets on to 'Enthusiasm', Richard Aaron, *John Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) 1.

assent is not the outcome of the kind of rational procedure applicable in general epistemology. In general epistemology, reason may pursue knowledge, fail to attain it and attain faith instead. Whether knowledge or faith is the product, rational deduction is the procedure. Not so when distinctively religious epistemology is in question. In this context, the faith/reason contrast properly applies where we are attending to the *method* of deducing the truth or probable truth of a proposition. That is, religious faith refers to the mode of accepting a proposition not made out by reason at all. It is thus trading in commodities 'above reason'.

Locke aims to make the rationality of religious belief in particular consistent with the rationality of belief in general, but the rationalities are not isomorphic. This is a key move in the fourth book of the *Essay*, but it is understandable if complaint is made that it results in a fairly complex picture, which threatens to play merry havoc with the good-willed interpreter innocently in conscientious search of an above or across the board consistency.¹⁹ It would take us too far afield here to chase up the scattered but sometimes significant remarks pertaining to religious epistemology that powder discussions in the *Essay* prior to the focussed treatment in Book IV. However, we should review at least one area covered in the chapter on 'Degrees of Assent' in which Locke is still orbiting around general epistemological matters (IV.xvi). Locke tells us here that probability obtains in the case of two sorts of propositions: (a) those relating to what is observable (to which there may be empirical human testimony) and (b) those relating to what is not observable (to which there is empirically none). Not only are there two *sorts* of propositions, there are also two *grounds* for taking propositions to be (probably) true. The first ground is 'the conformity of anything with our own knowledge, observation and experience'; the second is 'the testimony of others, vouching their observation and experience' (xv.4).

Now something interesting turns up in the discussion. Locke allows that there are cases where we may be rationally justified in suspending our usual grounds for judging a proposition to be true. There are cases where something *contrary* to common human experience and to the

19. In light of our subsequent discussion, what are we to make of Locke's claim that revelation advances us in our knowledge (IV.vii.11)? Nonetheless, we might smugly suggest that if we could integrate the germane claims made on behalf of general and religious epistemology in the *Essay*, it would probably take us even further away from Polanyi and those who follow his lead than we shall already be travelling; see Richard Ashcraft, 'Faith and Knowledge in Locke's Philosophy' in John Yolton, ed., *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 194-223.

ordinary course of things may vouch for a proposition, making assent to it reasonable. Locke does not tell us explicitly which type of proposition is in question here but he does tell us what the exceptional ground of assent is. It is miracle. A well-attested miracle gives us grounds for assenting to the proposition to which it putatively bears witness. God may use the very unusual nature of such an event to testify to a proposition that he wants us to receive as true (xvi.13). General epistemology includes space for religious appeal.

The plot thickens further. Now that he has specified an exceptional ground of assent, Locke proceeds to introduce what he describes as one more 'sort' of proposition. He does not spare his readers some hard work. Already, we may have wondered whether the sort of proposition to which miracles can in principle bear witness is one of the two sorts he has mentioned before getting onto miracles, or whether it is a new sort of proposition. Now a new sort of proposition is explicitly mentioned and we are not explicitly told how it should be related to those sorts of propositions that have gone before. Whatever we conclude from an investigation into this and however obvious such a conclusion may be after we have sifted the possibilities, Locke informs us that the salient feature of this new sort of proposition is that it is a proposition to which we may give wholehearted assent even if what is proposed does not agree with 'common experience or the ordinary course of things' (xvi.13). Assent in this case is unimpeachably warranted on the ground that it is a proposition to which God testifies. As such, it 'carries with it an assurance beyond doubt, evidence beyond exception' (xvi.14). It is a *revealed* proposition. Assent to it is called *faith*. If God has revealed something, we must assent to the content of his revelation with complete confidence and as necessarily as we ever assent when we *know* something to be the case.

Faith and revelation are worlds away from enthusiasm and although they do not take the epistemic form of rational knowledge, they do not lack its epistemic confidence. Well-informed and intellectually scrupulous religious believers have no less confidence in God than does the enthusiast. What the former have and what the enthusiast lacks is ground for confidence. We need to be properly intellectually satisfied – a need not felt by the enthusiast – that we are in actuality dealing with a revealed proposition before it procures our assent. Furthermore, we need to understand the said proposition aright before we assent to it. This is a point at which the reason that conducts us in life and in our general epistemology is brought to bear on putative revelation. Reason does three things in this respect. First, it can ascertain the intelligibility of

the proposition in question. Second, it can reject any claim to revelation that stands in contradiction to what is known. Third, it should produce evidence that the proposition in question is actually revealed. In all this, Locke is crystal clear about the fact that, in the cases now under discussion, reason is not the *source* of a revealed proposition. That is why we talk of a proposition being above reason and with impeccable propriety describe our assent to it in terms of faith and not of reason. Not only is the description proper, the assent may also be. For this to be the case, reason must be summoned to validate and legitimize the operation of a faith that assents to things above reason.

Balancing acts are involved here for which few commentators on Locke have been tempted to award maximum points. It is not difficult to see the general problem. Locke proposes utterly confident assent to *what* God has revealed while apparently remaining logically committed to the belief that we cannot rationally possess a kindred degree of confidence *that* God has revealed something. Whether or not some modification can get Locke over this hurdle without much philosophical injury is a question difficult to answer with any degree of satisfaction on the evidence of the *Essay* alone. At all events, Locke's programmatic statement is:

Reason I take to be the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths, which the mind arrives at by the deduction made from such ideas which it has got by the use of its natural faculties, viz., by sensation or reflection. Faith, on the other side, is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men we call *revelation* (xviii.2).

In sum, Locke maintains that, while reason is not the source of all valid beliefs, it must be involved in the validation of all beliefs. We should note that, with respect to revelation, Locke holds that while the scope of what God may in truth reveal is unrestricted, what we may intelligibly communicate to others is restricted. Nothing believed on the basis of revelation can command assent of firmer confidence than something known by reason. As we have noted, Locke insists that nothing can be rightly received as revelation if it contradicts rational knowledge, but unimpeachable epistemological principle must allow that rational assessment of the truth of propositions that relate to things outside the compass of ordinary human experience proceeds differently from the way that it proceeds in the case of ordinary experience.