

ADAM GRZELIŃSKI<sup>1</sup>

## Locke's Reading of Herbert's *De Veritate* and His Critique of Common Notions<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The paper reconstructs John Locke's critique of Edward Herbert's conception of *common notions* presented in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Though aimed at the epistemological significance of the term, the critique seems to miss the point, since due to the Platonic character of Herbert's philosophy, the notions have also a metaphysical and religious significance overlooked by Locke. Thus the attack is justified only in part: for Herbert, the rationality of nature is understood as an ideal and not as a certain historic state of affairs, as Locke seems to suggest. It is an interesting feature of the discussion, that both the common notions and their critique is aimed at justification of religious rationality. The difference between both philosophers seems to have its roots in different understanding of knowledge. For Herbert it relates to an ideal, conceptual structure of reality, whereas for Locke it culminates in natural histories of cumulative character.

### Keywords:

Edward Herbert of Cherbury, John Locke, common notions, idealism, empiricism, 17th century British philosophy, religious rationalism

---

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland, grzelinski@wp.pl.

<sup>2</sup> Paper presented at the Conference on Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1582–1648) "Truth, Certainty and Toleration" (University of York, May 13–14, 2016).

the full title of Edward Herbert's most renowned work *On Truth, in Distinction from Revelation, Probability, Possibility, and Error* (1624) as in Meyrick Carré's translation<sup>3</sup>, suggests that its underlying purpose is convergent with that of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689/90), which was written in order to "inquire into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent" (*Essay*, I, 1, 2, vol. 1, p. 1).<sup>4</sup> What is more, reflections on knowledge, which should be characterised by both truthfulness and certainty, were not only purely theoretical in nature for both thinkers, but they also related to practical issues. Herbert states outright that "the final test of truth ... has never been so necessary as now ... for men are ... tormented in spite of the protests of conscience and the inner consciousness, by the belief that all who are outside their particular Church are condemned, whether through ignorance or error, to undergo ... eternal punishment after death" (*Truth*, p. 117). Also the metaphors of: the candle "set up in us [and] shining bright enough for all our purposes" (*Essay*, I, 1, 5, vol. 1, p. 4) and the sailor "fathoming all the depths of the ocean" (*ibid.*) used by Locke, point to practical purposes of epistemological investigations. Eventually, they provided background for the attempts to rationalise religion made by both philosophers as well as for subsequent works devoted to religious issues *sensu stricto*: Herbert's *De religione laici* (1645) and *De religione gentilium* (1663), and Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). With all the similarity of both philosophers' intentions and the significance of their works for the development of deism in the future, an over 50-year gap between Herbert's *De veritate* and Locke's *Essay* changed the approach to knowledge, and the latter's empiricism designed to justify knowledge-amassing natural histories, could not be reconciled with Herbert's conception, which directly related to Platonism and Stoicism. The significance of these transformations had an effect on later philosophers who were either very particular when drawing inspiration from Platonism (as shown in its aesthetic interpretation presented by Shaftesbury in his *Moralists*, 1711), or created conceptions that could not be reconciled with the development of natural sciences (as exemplified by George Berkeley's *Siris*, 1744).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> E. Herbert of Cherbury, *De veritate*, trans. M.H. Carré, Bristol: University of Bristol, 1937, all references to this edition (= *Truth*).

<sup>4</sup> J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, in: *The Works of John Locke*, London: C. & J. Rivington, 1834, vol. 1–2, all references to this edition (= *Essay*).

<sup>5</sup> For the summary of the intended Berkeley's chemical theory, see: L. Peterschmitt, *Berkeley and Chemistry in the 'Siris'*. *The Rebuilding of a Non-existent Theory*, in: *Religion and Science in the Age of Enlightenment*, S. Parigi (ed.), Dordrecht: Springer, 2010, pp. 73–85.

It is a well-known fact Locke mentions Herbert only in the discussion of the notion of innate practical principles. Locke evokes the common notions attributes, such as *prioritas* (priority), *independentia* (independence), *universalitas* (universality), *certitudo*, *necessitas* (necessity) and *modus confirmationis: assensus nulla interposita mora* (the way of conformity – immediate agreement) and demonstrates that Herbert’s Common Notions as regards religion (“There is one God”, etc.) do not fulfil these conditions, what we can learn when we look into the first encountered descriptions of customs of primitive peoples, which, as Locke put it, filled “the great ocean of knowledge” accumulating in his days.<sup>6</sup> However, there is no evidence of Herbert’s direct influence on Locke’s philosophy of religion. With all the results his *Essay* might have had for theology and with all his interests for this area of study (which was the subject of the largest portion of Locke’s library (870 of total 3641)<sup>7</sup>), Locke started elaborating his standpoint on this issue as late as in the early eighties. He explained his views stating that the book was written “chiefly for those who were not yet thoroughly or firmly Christians”, that is, “those who either wholly disbelieved or doubted of the truth of the Christian Religion” (*A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, 1696).<sup>8</sup> And although he later named them as *Deists*, it is not Herbert, whom he addressed, but Ariel Acosta, and perhaps John Toland, since the manuscripts of some parts of the *Christianity Not Mysterious* was known to him during his work on the *Reasonableness*. In his *Essay*, in turn, Locke refers to the conception of Common Notions, the problem of the innate character of knowledge, and to the vague meaning of moral and religious terms rather than to Herbert’s views on rational character of religion.

At first glance, it is easy to discern the essence of the argument. Drawing on the experience he has at hand, Locke challenges the rationalist standpoint according to which human intellect is the source of cognition, and its ability to create ideas is independent of experience, and to the claim that its constructs are *a priori* in essence and constitute the conditions of all knowledge. Therefore, Herbert’s conception, together with Descartes’ or Cambridge Platonists’ philosophies, would be targeted by Locke. Even Locke himself admits that: “When I had written this, being informed that my Lord Herbert had, in his book *De Veritate*, assigned these innate principles, I presently consulted him, hoping to find in a man of so great

---

<sup>6</sup> Locke uses the phrase “the great ocean of knowledge” while referring to facts gathered by natural histories in his *Of the Conduct of Understanding* (*The Works of John Locke*, vol. 2, p. 327).

<sup>7</sup> J. Harrison, P. Laslett, *The Library of John Locke*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> J. Locke, *A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity*, in: *The Works of John Locke*, vol. 6, p. 164.

parts, something that might satisfy me in this point, and put an end to my inquiry” (*Essay*, I, 3, 15, vol. 1, p. 45). Indeed, mentions of Herbert’s concept of the Common Nations are not to be found in the early *Essays on the Law of Nature* from the 1660s (although in the third essay titled *Is the Law of Nature Inscribed in the Minds of Men? No* Locke argues that the only manner of argumentation in favour of God’s existence is the natural order, and not innate religious notions).<sup>9</sup> However, his refutation of Herbert’s theory of Common Notions can be found in *Draft B* to the *Essay*, written a decade later (and almost 20 years before the publication of the work).<sup>10</sup> In particular, Locke places that Herbert’s argumentation under attack, in accordance with which the common notions exist, and the argument behind their innate nature is the fact that they are common to all people. The latter statement is easily disproved by Locke through a reference to several descriptions of the customs of peoples made during travels to the furthestmost geographical locations known in that time.

However, if we do not wish to stop at this point but to restore significance to this discussion, which is only briefly mentioned in modern textbooks on the history of philosophy, we should not only reconstruct the meaning of the term “Common Notions” in Herbert’s philosophy and present the reasons of Locke’s criticism, but also provide the context and purposes of that criticism. The manner in which Locke evokes Herbert’s conception binds two important elements – epistemology and the justification of religious beliefs. What gives rise to the dispute is both a dissimilar philosophical programmes as well as determining the possibility to discover the rational core of religious beliefs.

## 1. HERBERT’S COMMON NOTIONS

The starting point for Herbert is the acknowledgment of the diversity of the prevalent opinion, “it is extraordinary, he writes, ... how persistently weak mortals alternate between total acceptance of the theories of authorities and total rejection of them” (*Truth*, p. 117). Hence the first proposition which opens the essential part of the work, “Truth exists”, is to help establish a criterion owing to which people will no longer “immerse themselves in a naïve credulity” being “incapable of

<sup>9</sup> J. Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, W. von Leyden (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954, pp. 136–145.

<sup>10</sup> See: J. Locke, *Drafts for the 'Essay concerning Human Understanding, and Other Philosophical Writings*, P.H. Nidditch, G.A.J. Rogers (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 111, ff.

using their own faculties” (*Truth*, p. 117). Although the purpose of *De veritate* is to separate the truth from revelation, probability and error, it is not a work on the theory of cognition in the sense that can be encountered in the works of Locke, whose research on the possibility of cognition is carried out in isolation from the traditional 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics. The respective propositions “truth exists”, “truth is eternal”, “truth is everywhere” and “truth reveals itself” do not merely relate to a certain attribute of judgements on the world, but refer to the very rational structure of reality. This conviction particularly relates to the purposefulness of nature which constitutes one, uniform whole. Hence the thesis of microcosm (man) and macrocosm (world) parallelism may in fact assume *conformity* as the essence of the truth. Therefore, rational cognition of nature is by definition possible: human *logos* reflects the *logos* of nature, which is equivalent to the final rational structure of reality. The purposefulness in nature is manifested by the natural instinct which is reflected in the striving for the self-preservation of all forms of existence. The said purposefulness, which is a manifestation of man’s conscious actions also characterises inanimate nature, plants and animals. “The elements, minerals, and vegetables, which give no evidence of foresight or reason, possess knowledge peculiarly suited to their own preservation” (*Truth*, p. 120). The rational development of nature is effected on both the level of unawareness (“with no evidence of foresight or reason” – *ibid.*), as well as on the level of man – in a conscious and planned manner, so Herbert adds that “while God alone directs the wisdom of the fool, both God and himself govern the sage” (*Truth*, p. 140). The pursuit of self-preservation is not limited to worldly life, but it can be fulfilled in the vision of salvation, which can be proved by a nagging desire to transcend the finiteness of worldly life. “It is rather an immediate emanation of the mind, co-existent with the dictates of nature, so that it directly supports the doctrine of self-preservation; and it is so essential that even in death it cannot be destroyed. ... Why, then, should not man also be endowed with the ability to pursue his own preservation by the aid of this faculty after death?” (*Truth*, p. 123).

The notion of broad consensus, all people agreeing to concepts which delineate the structure of nature, as well as fundamental notions of religion, which will later become a bone of contention between him and Locke must be given special consideration. When Herbert writes “In my view ... Universal Consent must be taken to be the beginning and end of theology and philosophy” (*Truth*, p. 118), he considers the nature as a whole. In this sense it is *terminus a quo* which legitimates rationality of nature and whose general recognition is assumed only in a notion, but it is also *terminus ad quem* – a recognition by all people whose reason has been cleared of all errors. Herbert does not write about broad consensus as of something

that has occurred in history, quite the contrary, he emphasises on numerous occasions that it had never taken place. Also the discussion of each of the five common notions that relate to religion opens in the same manner, i.e. from stating that “no general agreement exists” concerning Gods, worship of Gods, “rites, ceremonies, traditions”, “rites or mysteries which the priests have devised for the expiation of sin”, or “eternal rewards” (Truth, p. 292–300). Oneness and universality of the principles constitute a rational ideal which is only manifested in history to a greater or lesser extent. Hence Herbert’s reservation that the consensus does not concern people who are embedded in a certain historical reality, but “normal” people who are the embodiment of human rationality. Human rationality, ergo natural rationality. On the opposite side are those, to whom the work is directed i.e. sceptics who deny the existence of the truth or imbeciles who associate the truth with religious revelation or cultivate superstitions. Therefore, Herbert’s admonishment “Let us trust Divine Providence above any tradition” has both a religious and generally philosophical dimension. Herbert defies religious distortions caused by denying religion rationality and boiling it down to partiality, superstition, empty rites, but he also differentiates a tradition understood broadly as a sphere of historical factuality, from the rational, purposeful structure which, in the language of religion, is equivalent to Divine Providence governing the world.

In this unifying vision of nature, which is crowned by the rational religious belief of people, the common notions are not merely “catholic, or universal church” (Truth, p. 303) propositions, or basic notions that condition the sheer possibility of knowledge, but they need to be considered in a broader sense. They might be discussed on three complementing planes:

- a) metaphysical plane – *common notions* are a manifestation of nature’s rationality, an expression of the *natural instinct* which shapes the world with active powers, hence Herbert argues that a common notion is “indeed every lawful natural impulse” which pursues the goal of self-preservation, and in the case of humans (who also are part of nature) – to eternal Blessedness.
- b) religious plane – common notions constitute a rational backbone of religion, other than individual revelation and tradition that is prone to falsehood. Herbert writes: “The only Catholic and uniform Church is the doctrine of Common Notions which comprehends all places and all men. This Church alone reveals Divine universal providence, or the wisdom of Nature” (Truth, p. 303).
- c) epistemological plane – common notions are basic definitions that are at the foundation of the possibility of human knowledge, and in particular they can be related to the types of conformity and to respective types of

cognition discussed in *De veritate*, such as *common notions*, internal and external senses, and discursive thought.

With regard to these three aspects of common notions, three types of purposefulness may be indicated:

- a) First of them is the objective, natural purposefulness which can be manifested by the phenomenon of life together with the pursuit of self-preservation; such a purposefulness takes shape in the whole of nature treated as a creation that is objectively purposeful, which is crowned by the rationality of man. “So natural instinct itself, which has its origin both within us and outside us in self-preservation, aims at Eternal Blessedness as its final end ... [being] man’s particular object and the general object of nature” (*Truth*, p. 143).
- b) Thus, the purposefulness of nature proves to be the purposefulness of the Divine intention which manifests itself both on the natural plane in relation to the purposefulness of nature, and in relation to man, and his fulfilment is the fulfilment of religious life – salvation offered to men. Purposefulness thus understood would be a complementation of natural purposefulness also in the moral dimension, as respecting of moral standards is a condition for salvation (in this aspect Herbert is opposed to the doctrine of predestination, which to him is equivalent to the renouncement of one’s own rationality).
- c) The third type of purposefulness is the unity of cognition – without assuming the adequacy of cognition any knowledge would be rendered impossible. In this sense Herbert expresses his admonishment on several occasions that “common notions ... are principles which it is not legitimable to dispute” (*Truth*, p. 121) or that must be “listened to unless we prefer uncertainty” (*Truth*, p. 116).

On numerous occasions historians pointed to a certain remote resemblance of Herbert’s idealistic vision of nature and Kant’s apriorism. However, it must be borne in mind that Herbert does not explicitly separate the types of purposefulness indicated above (objective purposefulness of life, rational purposefulness of human will, and formal purposefulness that relates to cognition). Nevertheless, if common notions also constitute *a priori* conditions for knowledge, they might be attributed such features as priority, independence, universality, certainty, necessity, and immediate conformity.

## 2. BETWEEN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY METAPHYSICS AND EMPIRICAL KNOWLEDGE. HERBERT AND LOCKE ON THE PROBLEM OF INSCRIPTION IN HUMAN SOUL

Locke formulates three major accusations against the common notions theory. Accusation one states that they represent a random collection of propositions, and if obviousness is the direct condition for their recognition, one might add other principles here, such as “Do as thou wouldst be done unto” “And perhaps – Locke adds – some hundreds of others, when well considered” (Essay, I, 3, 16, vol. 1, p. 46). Accusation two: the religious theses given do not meet the conditions set for the common notions, such as priority, independence, universality, certainty and immediate conformity. And finally accusation three, which concerns the inherent nature of *common notions* – Locke argues that they are not “inscribed in our mind by the finger of God”. I believe that as much as the first accusation is partially legitimate, then the other two are not. What is more, Locke interprets Herbert's theses in the context of a different philosophical programme, and the apparent dispute arises from a different understanding of knowledge. Let us have a closer look of the accusations.

When Herbert enumerates the common notions he mentions that his intention is not to provide the entire list. It was rather meant to confirm the fact that the common notions which guarantee the unity of knowledge exist. Herbert postulates the unity of the common notions system by writing that “arrangement of Common Notions into a system directly leads to the attainment of universal harmony” (*Truth*, p. 121); common notions also include knowledge and law, but also religion, and within each of these fields one may point to derivative concepts. They are the primary notions which constitute a base for a system of propositions in relation to respective fields of knowledge (cognition, religion or law). This is why Herbert writes about a systematic nature of notions which must not be contradictory, and that the common notions comprise a base for a deductive introduction of subsequent concepts. Herbert does not pursue that task, nor does he construct a system of knowledge, but merely points to conditions which must be fulfilled for it to be possible, and the notions theory constitutes a part of a more general purpose of determining the conditions of rational (real) cognition. Hence, Locke's accusation may only be partially legitimate. It arises from the fact that Herbert did not fully develop the system of propositions and he confined himself to make following statements: “common notions are universals, distilled as it were from the wisdom of Nature itself” (*Truth*, p. 140), which gives the impression that the list of common notions is fragmentary.



Accusation two, on the other hand, is a result of a certain misunderstanding and erroneous reading of Herbert's theses. The issue is that this reinterpretation is not only intended by Locke, but it is also essential to the understanding of the entire debate. By arguing that religious common notions may not be attributed such features as priority, independence or universality, Locke has a different understanding of these definitions than Herbert. For Herbert *priority* means primality of "notions of the first order" over subsequent notions (that is "of the second order") derived "with the aid of discursive thought". Logical previousness does not imply chronological psychological previousness, which is evidenced by the development of knowledge for both societies and individuals. As we have already seen, the accusation of the universality of the common notions based on the observation that there are "different opinions of several countries" is wide of the mark, as Herbert never claims that the disparity between the propositions currently expressed are non-existent. The author of *De veritate* would probably have deemed Locke's remark as trivial: it is clear that in the case of empirical judgements we are dealing with multitude and distinctness. However, it is also obvious that it is rationality with its a priori moments that is common, rather than empirical judgements.

Locke's peculiar manner of interpreting Herbert's statements is particularly revealed in relation to the notion of innate knowledge. Herbert writes "Let us have done with the theory which asserts that our mind is a clear sheet, as if we derived our capacity for dealing with objects from objects themselves" (*Truth*, p. 132), whereas Locke says: "mind [being], as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas" (*Essay*, II, 1, 2, vol. 1, p. 77), particularly defying the innateness of impressions, ideas and principles, but not capacities of cognition. However, the common notions are not "impressions", as Locke presents it to the reader. "Impressions" – in one of the meanings used by Locke – would mean simple and non-derivable parts of experience, whereas for Herbert, the common notions may be considered as the a priori conditions of knowledge, certain "capacities to deal with things".

Both philosophers are looking for grounds for two different concepts of knowledge. One of them is based on the deductive derivation of propositions on the basis of notions which, as we have seen, arose from the understanding of nature as a rational, organic whole; the other attempts to justify the possibility of empirical knowledge, which would be in isolation from the seventeenth-century metaphysics of substance. The abandonment of the previous paradigm of knowledge is visible in many of the propositions in *Essay*: on the inability to empirically verify the real essence of bodies, on the recognition of the inadequacy of the notion of thinking substance for the description of personal identity or in the functional (not

substantial) understanding of the notion of matter. Locke positions the discussed fragments of Herbert's work in an alienated context, which causes the dispute to be barren. He writes for instance "Though I allow these to be clear truths, and such as, if rightly explained, a rational creature can hardly avoid giving his assent to, yet I think he is far from proving them innate impressions in foro interiori descriptae" (*Essay*, I, 3, 15, vol. 1, p. 46). Herbert states almost exactly the same thing: "common notions are brought into conformity immediately provided that the meaning of the facts or words is grasped" (*Truth*, p. 140). Locke thus corroborates Herbert's words in the scope of the obviousness of the common notions. What is more, a closer insight into the accusations demonstrates that, as much Locke opposes to the primality of these notions, or their universality (although he understands them differently), he never opposes their necessity. What interests him, though, is the manner in which the conformity of empirical propositions is reached, not *the a priori* conditioning of knowledge. This turns our attention to accusation three, which relates to a different comprehension of innate knowledge.

The issues of the origin of knowledge and its innate character were broadly discussed in England all throughout the seventeenth century, with the plane of deliberations being practical philosophy: the necessity to guarantee rigid foundations for morality and religion. The fact that such truths would be irrefutable, and the consent to them would be prompt, as well as the fact that they concerned morality and religion inspired the metaphor of *stamping* them in the soul by God, or imprinting them in human reason (William Sclater, *A Key to the Key of Scripture*, 1611; John Bullokar, *An English Expositor*, 1616; Richard Carpenter, *The Conscionable Christian*, 1623 and others). The thesis sometimes took shape of a rather naive assertion that obvious truths have been present in human reason since birth. The most widely discussed, however, were inherent mind powers or ideas which, despite being an effect of experience, are "natural, necessary, and essential to the soul" (as Henry More writes about the idea of God in *An Antidote against Atheisme*, 1653).<sup>11</sup> The obviousness of existence of certain truths that makes us accept them without the process of reasoning, i.e. a thesis advocated by Lord Herbert, is also found in Matthew Hale's *The Primitive Origination of Mankind* (1677); he pointed to three origins of knowledge – sensual experience, ratiocination, and intuition, and thus wrote about the latter: "There are some truths so plain and evident, and open, that need not any process of ratiocination to evidence or evince them; they seem to be objected to the Intellective Nature

---

<sup>11</sup> See: J. Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956, p. 40.

when it is grown perfect and fit for intellectual operation, as the Objects of Light or Colour are objected to the Eye when it is open.”<sup>12</sup>

John Yolton in his study of Locke’s philosophy demonstrated that many authors who used this phraseology were aware of their mere metaphorical meaning.<sup>13</sup> For example, Samuel Parker in *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature* (1681) wrote: “As to the Sufficiency of the Publication of the Law of Nature, the plain Account of it has been obscured by nothing more, then that it has always been described and discoursed of in metaphorical and allusive Expressions, such as *Engravings*, and *Inscriptions*, and the tables of the Heart, &c. As if the Law of Nature consisted of a certain number of Propositions that were imprinted upon the Minds of Men, and concreated with their Understandings, by attending to and reflecting upon which they were instructed or bound to govern their moral Actions.”<sup>14</sup> This is the type of metaphor that Locke refers to both in the *Essays on the Law of Nature* and his *Essay*, by comparing the light of nature to sunlight and by writing about a lit candle which “by its flames reveals the reality, but itself is an unknown quality and its nature is concealed in darkness.”<sup>15</sup>

Locke’s surprisingly naive interpretation of the thesis on the innate character of knowledge is a source of his misinterpretation of Herbert’s concept. However, the reason for this is not only a discussion with a certain manner of its articulation, but also the assumptions of the concept of Locke’s philosophy. Locke is striving to develop philosophy as a natural history of human mind. By doing so, he draws on the principles of natural history created since Pliny and stressed anew in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Francis Bacon. The act of amassing and sorting out facts was to concern the phenomena of the human mind, not natural phenomena. Locke’s previous experience, his interest in nature and medicine, cooperation with Robert Boyle and Thomas Sydenham, participation in the works of the Royal Society, all contributed to the fact that natural philosophy yielded to natural history – the research was no longer concerned about the essence (the formal cause) of bodies identified with their final structure, but about facts. Strictly philosophical concepts, such as Boyle’s corpuscularianism, organicism of Galen’s or Paracelsus’ disciples, which were familiar to Locke, were nothing else but heuristic hypotheses to him which might be useful for planning experiments and observation. The notion of

---

<sup>12</sup> M. Hale, *The Primitive Origination of Mankind*, London: W. Godbid, W. Shrowsbery, 1677, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> J. Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas*, p. 30 ff.

<sup>14</sup> S. Parker, *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature*, London: M. Flesher, R. Royston, 1681, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> J. Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, p. 137.

truth was no longer related to rational structure of reality, which was postulated by Herbert, and became involved in experimental sciences. Hence Locke tries to point to the conditions of knowledge dissimilar to Herbert's, but without explicitly stating that they are not real; however, he does not ascribe them any particular significance as regards the natural history of human reason of his making. An assumption claiming that reason is to resemble a sheet of white paper which is recorded with experience, or as Herbert would prefer it, a book which treasures the most important content, would not allow the implementation of such a project, especially in the form suggested by Locke. Ultimately, it might be stated that the discussion that took place on the pages of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was not a discussion between Locke and Herbert, as each of them, in essence, wrote about something else. If we were to apply the term discussion at all, it would be a feud between philosophical assumptions of two different types of knowledge. What is more, the opponents would ultimately agree with each other, while at the same time admitting that the adversary is defending a standpoint that is rather worthless.

### 3. ONE RELIGION, TWO DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Lastly, two other issues should be broached – religion and different contexts for the discussion of the common notions. One of the most essential purposes of the common notions concept was obviously the indication of rational elements of religion which is free of revelation and independent of tradition that distorts it. This is why Herbert writes that “every religion which proclaims a revelation is not good, nor is every doctrine which is taught under its authority always essential or even valuable” (*Truth*, p. 289). Without denying revelation, Herbert regards it as a private aspect of faith which, when passed on to others, may become an element of tradition and hence may be distorted and is prone to being usurped by priests. Religion, which is to be much more than an expression of a personal, non-communicable experience of individuals, must be based on rational grounds. From here, it is not far from Locke's statement that “one man does not violate the right of another by his erroneous opinions and undue manner of worship, nor is his perdition any prejudice to another man's affairs, therefore, the care of each man's salvation belongs only to himself.”<sup>16</sup> However, the similarity of beliefs which culminated in Locke's banners of tolerance and paved the way to the criticism of

---

<sup>16</sup> J. Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration*, in: *The Works of John Locke*, vol. 5, p. 41.

revelation, was accompanied by Locke's conviction that the aim cannot be attained in the manner delineated by Herbert. That is why Locke accuses Herbert of using unclear terms and postulates that their meaning is yet to be defined. Contrary to Herbert, Locke defends the reasonableness not of religion as such, but of Christianity. He proclaims the need both of revelation and of the comprehensive reading of the Scriptures. Thus, although similar to the father of English deism he opposes the theological claims developed within various religious factions. He suggests a kind of biblical exegesis which would reach basic truths of Christianity "as delivered in the Scriptures" rather than seeks to establish religion on human reason alone. It is rather the aim of their criticism – superstition and intolerance – which is common, but not the ways both thinkers proposed to escape the trap of religious enthusiasm.

If Locke's remarks on Common Notions are put in their proper context, i.e. the emergence of a new scientific method based on experiments and scrupulous recording of facts, a new significance of the social context of knowledge will be revealed. Although Herbert argued on numerous occasions that the test of veracity for common notions was a common approval, this assertion, apart from being a rhetorical expression, is not grounded on empirical premises. In this sense Locke's criticism is obvious. At the same time, Herbert addresses his book not only against sceptics (who deny the existence of truth), but also imbeciles, people weak of understanding, who are seeking the truth in revelation. However, when he writes about the universality of consent as a criterion for the truth, he repeatedly makes reservation that all normal people would agree to it. Therefore, it is all about the notions of normality and rationality of people, and about the knowledge that would be shared and confirmed by everyone. This, for Locke, cannot be achieved in the way suggested by Herbert, for the propositions mentioned by him can be arbitrary.

Both philosophers are answering two different questions. Herbert is asking about the conditions of the formation of knowledge as a coherent system of propositions, whereas Locke, although he *de facto* concurs that people's ability of cognition is identical, points to the necessity of instigating a discussion on the meaning of the terms. To make this possible, it is important to establish a plane for such a discussion. A discussion that would be derived from common experiences, those of basic operations of the mind and sense data. The commonality of experiences is something that is presupposed but what enables the formation of knowledge or of most probable statements is social functioning of knowledge – scientific societies, the development of periodicals, exchange of experiences, and their mutual interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> The research was carried out as a part of the National Science Centre (NCN) grant in Poland

**References:**

- Hale, M. (1677). *The Primitive Origination of Mankind*, London: W. Godbid, W. Shrowsbery.
- Harrison, J, Laslett P. (1971). *The Library of John Locke*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Herbert of Cherbury, E. (1937). *De veritate*, transl. M.H. Carré, Bristol: University of Bristol.
- Locke, J. (1834). *A Letter concerning Toleration* [in:] *The Works of John Locke*, London: C. & J. Rivington, vol. 5.
- Locke, J. (1834). *A Vindication of the Reasonableness of Christianity* [in:] *The Works of John Locke*, London: C. & J. Rivington, vol. 6.
- Locke, J. (1834). *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* [in:] *The Works of John Locke*, London: C. & J. Rivington, vol. 1–2.
- Locke, J. (1954). *Essays on the Law of Nature*, W. von Leyden (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Locke, J. (1990). *Drafts for the 'Essay concerning Human Understanding, and Other Philosophical Writings*, P.H. Nidditch, G.A.J. Rogers (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parker, S. (1681). *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature*, London: M. Flesher, R. Royston.
- Peterschmitt, L. (2010). *Berkeley and Chemistry in the 'Siris'. The Rebuilding of a Non-existent Theory* [in:] *Religion and Science in the Age of Enlightenment*, S. Parigi (ed.), Dordrecht: Springer.
- Yolton, J. (1956). *John Locke and the Way of Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.