Providential Deism, Divine Reason, and Locke's Educational Theory

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ABSTRACT: This essay uses Charles Taylor's recent description of secularity to rethink an important historical example of the relation among religion, reason, and education. Locating Locke's educational theory in the historical period that Taylor calls providential deism, the article suggests that Locke's idea of good education, namely, moving students to follow the dictates of reason alone, cannot proceed without two related features of reason, its infallibility and its inherent attractiveness. These two, but especially the latter give reason a transcendent if not divine status, akin to Providential grace. The article claims that this not only gives education a central role in society's improvement, but it challenges Taylor's claim that Providential deism is an eclipse of grace. It does so by arguing that in this transition Providential grace comes in the form of reason's inherent attractiveness and that good education is key to expose students to this inherent attractiveness of reason.

RESUME: A l'appui d'une description récente de Charles Taylor sur la laïcité, cette étude réexamine un exemple historique important qui traite du lien entre la religion, le raisonnement et l'enseignement. Situant la méthode pédagogique de Locke dans une période historique que Taylor appelle le Déisme providentiel, l'étude semble indiquer que l'idée de Locke sur la bonne méthode d'enseignement (à savoir que les étudiants suivent les préceptes du raisonnement seul en se basant sur leur propre expérience), ne peut s'appliquer sans tenir compte de deux éléments connexes au raisonnement, à savoir son infaillibilité et son intérêt intrinsèque. Ces deux éléments, et surtout le second, impliquent un état transcendantal voire, divin, semblable à la grâce providentielle. Cette étude montre que ce système éducatif ne joue non seulement, un rôle primordial dans l'amélioration de la société, mais qu'il déjoue l'affirmation de Taylor. Cette dernière, étant que; le Déisme providentiel est une éclipse de la grâce. Cette analyse indique ce fait en soutenant que dans cette transition providentielle, la grâce apparaît sous forme d'intérêt propre au raisonnement et que la clé d'un bon enseignement est de le montrer aux étudiants.

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Education has often been asked to play key roles in working towards the ideals of a good society within which it is embedded. Although not alone in this, this was also true of the Enlightenment and modernity. Although we might think that Enlightenment figures simply opposed religious tradition and rational thought, with good education employed by a march of secularism against the irrationality of religious institutions, the actual situation was not that simple. This essay examines one such example, John Locke's educational theory, to argue for a different understanding of the historical relation between education, reason, and religion.

In his recent book, *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor argues for an understanding of secularity that is more nuanced than either the reductive or the combative story in the academic and popular imaginary. His account of the change of our (Western) understanding of religion, from medieval enchantment to contemporary spirituality presents as a crucial transition what Taylor calls "providential deism." This is the idea of an impersonal, benevolent order established by the Creator, which we as humans not only can grasp but also obey. The key change, says Taylor, is that we "obey God in following the demands of this order" (2007, p. 221). This order is designed to have people act out of mutual benefit for each other. Achieving our collective and individual good through conformity to this order is achieving God's purpose for humans. According to Taylor, rather than merely excluding the divine, this is actually only a change in understanding the relation to transcendence.

Taylor argues that this shift entails "an eclipse of grace. The order God designed was there for reason to see. By reason and discipline, humans could rise to the challenge and realize it" (2007, p. 222). The shift in religiosity towards providential deism entails a demise in the perceived need for God's grace precisely because of reason. Providential deism is the position that God created humans endowed with reason, and this faculty will carry us the rest of the way to obedience to God, unassisted by God's grace. Indeed, "God is relying on our reason to grasp the laws of his universe, and hence carry out his plan" (p. 224). There is no need for work on God's part to carry out his purpose for human life. In fact, such intervention would circumvent the order of the plan.

In this paper I would like to complicate Taylor's reading of an early version of "providential deism" by focusing on John Locke's theory of education. Although Taylor is not incorrect about the providential order which situates Locke's ideas about human action based on reason (e.g., Yaffe, 2000, pp. 33, 68), I would like to complicate Taylor's take on

reason as merely an ordinary faculty of the human mind. I will argue that reason, although rightly under one description an inner mental faculty, is at the same time something extraordinary for Locke. It seems to need characteristics we might rightly call transcendent or divine, an analog to God's grace in its irresistibility with respect to lifting humans out of their ordinary influences and mundanely-caused behaviors. I will argue that in his educational theory Locke has a notion of reason that is not only infallible but also something sacred, endowed with an inherent attractiveness (Otto, 1958), which persuades students to switch to reason as their guide for action that will carry out God's providential and benevolent plan.

To show this, I will examine Locke's educational theory as developed in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Locke, 1989). If the key to understanding Locke's overall agenda is, in Locke's words, that "*Reason* must be our last judge and guide in everything" (1961, vol. 2, p. 295), then his educational theory is crucial for two reasons. On the one hand, precisely because of Locke's providential deism, he requires education as the central way that humans might make a transition to reason, itself the key to aligning human action to God's benevolent order. That is, education can be thought of as an ordinary means to understanding and obeying God's prescripts for society. On the other hand, a discussion of education also brings to light most clearly the transition to reason in a person, because it is in Locke's discussion about education that we see most clearly how young humans are to make the changes from other motivations for action to reason alone. If the proper educational program will help the student acquire reason (Wolterstorff, 1996, p. 153), then education's central role is getting students to rely on rationality alone. I am contending that Locke seems to require that reason have divine-like qualities in order to be persuasive for why humans would make the change to reason. Locke's educational theory uncovers most clearly how humans are persuaded to leave behind other motives and replace it with reason as the basis for proper human action that carries out God's providential plan.

Peter Schouls (1992) argues that central to Locke's theory of education is the notion of freedom: How can a person be the author of his or her own decisions instead of being a mere locus of external, causal forces? Being a locus of external influences is the opposite of being free. To be free means to be in charge of one's own life rather than being controlled by the confluence of external influences. Reason is the key to freedom. Humans can only be free when their conduct is guided by

reason alone. Thus it is important to unlock the potentials of reason. Humans are meant to be in charge of their own life and conduct, the opposite of being the locus of external influences. However, even though they are born to be free, according to Locke, people do not automatically achieve that. Instead, they often remain within the confines of the default position, namely, the locus of the sum total of external forces acting on them. This includes a set of natural passions (love, hate, joy, sorrow, fear, despair, envy, anger) as well as a web of cultural forces (social prejudices, unfounded beliefs, and cultural superstitions) to guide a person's conduct in the world. Without the means to transcend these external forces, a person's actions remain the sum total of his or her external influences. Locke's position is that people remain trapped in a web spun by natural passions, social fashion, common opinion, cultural custom, and ill habits unless they acquire reason as a guide for life. When a person's conduct is guided by natural passions and a net of social forces, they are not fulfilling what it means to be truly human. And it is good education that can lead to developing true human nature, enabling students to develop into autonomous, free individuals who exercise rational powers in a way that leads to long-term lives of mutual benefit. Good education can help students actualize their potential for freedom.

Good education does so by helping the student develop a questioning attitude towards social and cultural knowledge. This involves what Taylor (1989) calls disengagement, namely, deliberate stepping back from whatever in the past has been imposed upon the mind, consciously scrutinizing this content with the power of reason, and permanently rejecting anything that cannot withstand the scrutiny of reason. This of course requires something more basic of education, namely, a turn to the potential of reason within the mind.

Now, it is clear that part of Locke's story is a move to disengagement, encouraging reflection on the mind to know its own processes and appreciating how reason is the right method for building trustworthy knowledge from the materials of experience. But this is not yet an account of how students would be convinced that reason alone should authorize motives and actions. In sum, good education should not only activate reason in students, but must convince them to trust reason. In good education, students become convinced that when reason authorizes motives and its subsequent conduct, then a person will be free and will undertake actions that lead to long-term mutual benefit for all, and that such freedom is desirable. Good education then is integral for Locke in actualizing freedom and permanently following God's

providential good order. This makes education central to Locke's vision of setting reason to be our only guide. Locke's theory of education could be summarized: education is the ordinary social mechanism that is crucial not only to unlocking the potentials of reason in (young) humans, but doing so in such a way that they will be persuaded to use reason as their only guide to carry out the providential order.

Locke's emphasis on reason, however, uncovers a particular problem: why would a student be persuaded to live a life guided by reason rather than by natural passions and socio-cultural prejudices? According to Schouls, being rational for Locke is actually composed of two things: " 'rational' always designates the human power of reasoning and the human willingness to act in accordance with the dictates of one's reason" (Schouls, 1992, p. 43). The problem lies in the second meaning. To call an activity rational when it is sanctioned by reason makes sense but why would a student be willing to act in accordance with the dictates of reason, even if it is his or her own? What is it about reason per se that would convince someone of its trustworthiness? What power does reason have that would persuade a student to commit to the dictates of reason alone? The central problem is that it would seem the student would have to be committed to the trustworthiness of reason *before* using it for it to be effective *as* the only guide.

A possible answer might be the claim that for Locke the faculty of reason just is an integral part of being human. Because of this, it would just be natural for a person to adopt reason as a guide to life. On one level, this is certainly a defensible reading of Locke. But this is not an entirely satisfactory answer for three reasons. First, the *tabula rasa* gets in the way, for it is operative before reason has a chance to actualize. Therefore social prejudices and blind superstitions are written on the slate long before reason can judge their trustworthiness as guides for life. Furthermore, reason is not something that actualizes automatically, for it requires good education for it to become active in a person's life, and not all people have reason as their guide. Finally, the natural passions are also an integral part of persons and are always present as competing guides for conduct. So to appeal to the fact that reason is just an ordinary part of our human nature does not go far enough in answering our question, for it does not answer *why* humans would be willing to act according to its dictates.

I think that a more satisfactory answer to our question has to do with Locke's conception of the nature of reason itself. Central to Locke's notion of reason, argues Schouls, is its infallibility and perfect

trustworthiness (1992, p. 75). We might thus answer our question with Locke's idea that reason is infallible. A student certainly ought to accept something that can't be wrong or make mistakes, for that would indeed be accepting a reliable, fool-proof guide for conduct to realize the providential order. This clearly gets us somewhere. But this also uncovers a problematic feature of reason *qua* reason. As Schouls points out, Locke *dogmatically* asserts reason's infallibility (p. 80). If reason is the faculty that provides principles for judgment to make available truths that are non-dogmatic, a *dogmatic* assertion of reason's infallibility fails on rational grounds. And for education, a dogmatic assertion does not rationally persuade a student to accept reason as a guide for life. And, if Locke does not give the doctrine of infallibility a rational foundation, there literally would be no *reason* why students are compelled to accept the infallibility of reason as a ground for accepting reason itself. Here we see a deep problem in Locke's educational thought. Students have no real reason to accept reason and therefore would have to accept in dogmatically.

There is another side to this problem. Even if the dogmatic assertion of reason's infallibility were actually a fool-proof *reason*, those who have not yet accepted reason would not necessarily be compelled by that reason. This is because a person would need to be convinced of the persuasiveness of reasons precisely when reason is not yet the only guide or, more strongly, when he or she is still very much in the grip of natural passions and social prejudices. How can a reason convince in this setting? Locke has no compelling account for someone to be persuaded by reasons given by someone to get another person to accept reason, even if reason turned out to be infallible; someone not in the grip of reason will not yet be convinced by reasoning itself. Yet, the effectiveness of education for Locke requires a student, who has not yet accepted reason, be persuaded to accept reason as the only guide for life. An appeal to reason's infallibility, although perhaps part of the answer, doesn't go far enough, even if it were a reason for accepting reason. More specifically, although reason might be infallible, there is nothing here that might show *why* students would accept this as a reason for adopting reason.

I would argue that the notion of infallibility does point us to Locke's implicit answer to our question, albeit not as a reason given to students. I'd like to exploit Schouls' contention that Locke *dogmatically* asserts reason's infallibility. There appears to be a foreign element in reason which itself does not arise from reason itself. Since an appeal to reason's

infallibility does not give a student *reasons* to accept reason, and since students would not yet be persuaded by reasons for accepting reason even if they were given, there must be something else about infallibility that is persuasive. Whatever it is, it must have some unusual persuasive ability, something *extraordinary*. Infallibility's inherent attractiveness is its foreign element. If something is inherently attractive, then a dogmatic assertion would merely draw attention to its persuasive character. If the infallibility of reason makes it inherently fascinating and enthralling, this compelling force could do the work of persuading students to accept reason, even before that student has the rational equipment to make a reasonable judgment. The infallibility of reason would have an attractiveness that overcomes the natural passions and social prejudices that would otherwise control a student's behavior.

There is evidence in Locke's text that he takes reason to have such inherent attractiveness. For example, Locke suggests that:

> To make a good, a wise, and a vertuous Man, 'tis fit he should learn to cross his appetite, and deny his *Inclination* to *riches*, *finery*, or *pleasing his Palate*, *&c.* when ever Reason advises the contrary and his Duty requires it. (Locke, 1989, p. 114)

Locke is talking about adults here. However, this goal also holds for children, as Locke clearly states on the same page:

> For in this way, flattering those wrong Inclinations, which they [children] should restrain and suppress, they lay the Foundations of those future Vices, which cannot be avoided, but by curbing our Desires, and accustoming them early to submit to Reason. (1989, p. 114)

Later Locke suggests a process for how children should make the transition to submitting to reason:

> And being the Testimony and Applause that other People's Reason, as it were by common Consent, gives to vertuous and well-ordered Actions, it is the proper Guide and Encouragement of Children, till they grow able to judge for themselves, and to find what is right, by their own Reason. (1989, p. 119)

The evidence of reason's inherent attractiveness, I would suggest, shows itself mostly in Locke's silence about *why* a student or adult should accept reason. Locke seems to assert dogmatically that reason just will be accepted as the better alternative. This only works if he believes students just will be attracted to reason once they come in contact with it. Locke is clearly aware that a student merely imitating the rational example of others is not the same as gaining reason as an only guide.

Thus, the lack of discussion here can be interpreted as Locke dogmatically assuming that reason will be accepted because there is something *inherently* attractive about reason. Why else would Locke feel justified in *dogmatically* asserting it, without explicitly arguing why, and then find this assertion compelling himself, a rational person? In Locke's model, the process of accepting reason when reason is not yet in place only has a chance of working if reason is attractive in and of itself. Only if reason can, *of its own accord*, pull pre-rational students towards itself will it be possible for them to make the transition away from being motivated by adults' praise and towards listening to reason itself.

Locke actually needs reason's inherent attractiveness for this work. If there was nothing inherent in reason that was available directly to move students, then a version of Wittgenstein's private-language problem would arise. If it were not inherently attractive, how would teachers know that when they give reasons for why an action is well-ordered, the student does not think "immediate pleasure"? If the student does not yet accept reason, how will he or she be able to feel the pull of reason for that which the teacher knows is reasonable? Just observing others using reason is not enough for a student to make the transition to his or her own reason. The most plausible answer is that reason has to have its own inherent attractiveness, directly to each individual student, to make him or her willing to accept reason as a guide for life. Furthermore, that attractiveness would have to be identical in each student, for otherwise it would not fall under the rubric of the term *reason*. A non-coerced transition to reason would only be possible if reason is supported by the element of inherent attractiveness. Locke implicitly needs to assume that, once faced, reason just will have a compelling power to overcome the natural passions, social prejudices, and blind superstitions that otherwise dominate. Only with this element can Locke assume that, once a student comes into contact with reason, he or she will be automatically enthralled with reason and be attracted to it. Only with that implicit assumption about reason does it make sense for Locke to suggest that education is the process of reorienting the student so that he or she can willingly submit to the power of reason.

In effect, without the supporting assumption of reason's inherent pull, Locke's suggestion that education can enable reason to become a guide for one's life merely is a dogmatic exhortation, in a negative way. But Locke is very positive in his dogmatism:

> Yet it is of great moment, and worth our Endeavours, to teach the Mind to get Mastery over it self; and to be able, upon Choice, to

> take it self off from the hot Pursuit of one Thing, and set itself upon another with Facility and Delight; or at any time to shake off its Sluggishness, and vigorously employ it self about what Reason, or the Advice of another shall direct. (Locke, 1989, p. 136)

Without the implicit assumption in the background, that is, that reason has an inherent pull, it is clear that Locke is merely asserting that children *ought* to be taught to gain mastery over self. By itself this is no different formally from the "blind superstitions" of society that he wishes the students to overcome by accepting reason. This assertion cannot avoid the incriminating label of "bad social dogma" without the assistance of reason's inherent attractiveness. The educative process suggested by Locke includes *forcing* students to buckle down and do the thing the teacher wants when they do not want to do so (p. 136). In this way, he seems to say, done enough times the student will get a habitual domination over the self. However, since in habituation the student is not yet governed by reason (otherwise it would not need to be *forced* to do something but would do it on its own accord) there is a continuing gap here. From the perspective of force, there is no qualitative difference between a teacher's arbitrary request (or worse, an abusive demand) to do something contrary to the student's natural inclinations and one that is meant to work towards unlocking reason's habit of self mastery. Without reason's inherent attractiveness playing the determinative albeit implicit role, there seems to be no way to move beyond education's coercive character to one where reason becomes the only guide. Certainly the student who does not yet have reason would have no way of judging without having access to reason's own inherent attractiveness. But if the process of urging the student towards self mastery is really giving the student the opportunity to recognize the pull of reason, then there is plausibility in Locke's suggestion. That is, only if reason has its own power of attractiveness, accessible directly by the student, would Locke's theory of education work. Only then does it make sense to suggest that habituation (a social, determinative force) would lead to self mastery (freedom through listening to reason).

That the assumption of reason's inherent attractiveness plays a central role in Locke's educational thought can be seen when he says:

> For I bid you still remember, they [children] distinguish early between Passion and Reason: And they cannot but have a Reverence for what comes from the latter, so that they quickly grow in a contempt of the former; or if it [a passionate scolding] causes a present Terrour, yet it soon wears off; and natural inclination will

> easily learn to slight such Scarecrows, which make a noise, but are animated by Reason. (Locke, 1989, p. 138)

Locke is saying: when faced with the authority of reason, even young students will recognize its powerful force. Reason has an inherent power that begs for acknowledgment. And when a student recognizes that efficacy, then that student will grow to treat the natural passions as they should, that is, with *contempt*, as Locke puts it.

Here we can return to Taylor's insight about transcendence. Some might argue that what I am calling reason's inherent attractiveness is merely a function of a natural human faculty for Locke. But it is not so simple. Taylor argues that changes in religiosity often transformed the transcendent-immanent relation rather than eliminate the transcendent (cf. Yolton, 2004; Yaffe, 2000). I am suggesting that for this to work, such transcendence must be (an implicit) part of Locke's notion of reason. We can see this when, once a student accepts reason as guide based on its inherent attractiveness, he or she rejects the lower, less-than-adequate guides of natural passions and social prejudices. Then these lower, mundane ways of guiding conduct, if still followed, are now blameworthy. The attractive, higher light of reason leads to a condemnation of the lower guides to action. In light of the higher, the lower is recognized as wrong. But recognizing the inadequacy of the lower is created only when faced with the self-evident pull of the higher. In fact, the pull of reason simultaneously creates guilt for still being pulled by the lower as well. Although the lower would still exert a pull on the student, it now would be recognized as something to be controlled if not repulsed. After having accepted the pull of reason as one's only guide, a rationally-sanctioned contempt of those lower guides would ensue. Without reason functioning as something transcendent, it would make little sense to characterize the natural passions as contemptible or reason as demanding this sort of reverence.

The second part of the quote above reinforces this. The two forces, "Passions and Reason," are asymmetric (Schouls, 1992, p. 95). Given the light that reason sheds, the passions are shown to be counterfeit whereas reason is shown to be genuine. Scoldings about behavior animated by natural passions turn out to be fake, mere noise, where as scoldings animated by reason are genuinely authoritative. In the latter, it is not the scolding that does the work in motivating right belief and action, but reason, and the student will recognize that. But for that to be so, reason just has to be that sort of thing that when it sanctions right action it shows itself to be right. And when it reveals itself in this

manner, it just will be recognized as inherently attractive, even to a young student. And it does so from a location we must call higher, or transcendent.

A second reason why we can locate reason in the extraordinary space of the transcendent is the fact that reason's inherent attractiveness seems to be the sort of power that does not need an other ground. It is its own ground, self-justifying as it were. If that were indeed so, then Locke would not need to give an explicit rationale for accepting it, for it would provide its own ground self-evidently. More strongly, even if he wanted to, he would not be able to, for then it would not be self-grounded or self-evident.

Here we see reason's grace-like quality. To appeal implicitly to the self-groundedness of reason's inherent attractiveness is actually to appeal to a transcendent ground. I would like to suggest that the benevolence of the providential order manifests itself in reason's inherent attractiveness. The principle of inherent attractiveness is, as we noted earlier, not rational in character. To be rational is to have reasons for something, whereas reason's attractiveness is a ground with a curious lack of reasons. If that is so, then reason's ability to overpower the lower instincts and passions is something other than reason's merely being one natural faculty among many. There must be something irresistible about reason, something like an irresistible grace from a providential God, to have an irresistible pull for Locke that would compel a student to accept reason on grounds other than rational ones.

This is a strong indication that for Locke reason is not just any old, ordinary faculty. Instead, its authority has a higher, transcendent status. What that status involves is clearer in his *Reasonableness of Christianity* where Locke describes human nature as containing a "spark of the divine nature" (Schouls, 1992, p. 43). If we take that spark to be reason or rationality, then its inherent attractiveness makes sense. The conclusion we can then draw is that reason's inherent attractiveness stems from its being a transcendent spark of the divine existing in all human beings, perhaps the *imago dei*. Divinity and inherent attractiveness are closely linked, as Rudolf Otto suggests. Of course, explicating the attractiveness of reason in this way would explain why the property of inherent attractiveness would be self-grounding and self justifying. Reason is a form of divine grace that can effect transcending the causal web of forces in which humans are otherwise caught.

That this notion of reason, as divine, is what Locke means when he believes that a student is inherently attracted to reason can be seen

indirectly from the text. Accepting reason alone as your guide, according to Locke, leads to a distinctive transformation:

> A Mind free, and Master of it self and all its actions, not low and narrow, not haughty and insolent, not blemished with any great Defect, is what every one is taken with. The Actions, which naturally flow from such a well-formed Mind, please us also, as the genuine Marks of it. (Locke, 1989, p. 123)

These actions, Locke seems to conclude, are consequences of the transcendent that lives within. The turning towards reason, the adoption of this new authority, is in essence being overtaken by something transcendent, quite different from the ordinary self dominated by the natural passions and social prejudices. Perhaps it is in this way that, as Yolton describes it, for Locke we may realize "the potential for each human to join the ranks of angels and separate spirits in the second intellectual world, the Kingdom of Heaven" (Yolton, 2004, p. 152). You can tell a person's rational orientation to "the Kingdom" by the well-formedness of his actions. It is a person set free from the inertia of the everyday, ordinary ways of doing things precisely by becoming a master over the latter. But for Locke this requires the idea of succumbing to the inherent attractiveness of reason as a divine, infallible guide to life.

In conclusion, my overall point has been to argue that Locke's educational theory, construed as having students acquire letting reason be their only guide, is plausible only if reason is construed as something akin to transcendence. Only when reason has divine elements that include infallibility, an inherent attractiveness, and an ultimately irresistible call to conversion, is it plausible to think that as yet unreasonable students will adopt reason as their only guide to life. This illustrates Taylor's idea about providential deism, with Locke as the example. Although I agree with Taylor that this is the position that God created humans endowed with reason, and this faculty will carry us the rest of the way to obedience to God, my argument is that reason in Locke must be understood as that which embodies something like God's grace, rightly irresistible in its attractiveness. On that reading, providential deism is the position that God not only relies on *our* reason to grasp the laws of the cosmos, but also that we are *given* reason sufficient to carry out God's providential order.

Because of that, God's providential grace and human action are perhaps more entwined than Taylor suggests during this early transition period to providential deism in the European Enlightenment. And good education is key to expose students to the inherent attractiveness of reason.

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