

JOHN LOCKE, CLIPPED COINS, AND THE UNSTABLE CURRENCY OF PUBLIC REASON

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ABSTRACT

John Locke's concern with the collapse of a common economic currency mirrors his concern with the collapse of a common, public vocabulary. For Locke coins and words facilitate exchange, yet they also reflect and perhaps even constitute a people. They serve as a type of precommitment necessary for the creation and maintenance of a constitutional regime. A prior consent to language and money makes possible the type of consent that establishes political society. A stable, constitutional regime requires a unifying, public language through which norms of law and justice can be articulated. Just as his economic writings led to the Great Recoinage of sterling crowns, his philosophical and political writings can be understood as a defense of a Great Recoinage of public reason. However Locke's persistent concern with linguistic and economic infidelity, subjectivity, and fraud reveals a deep anxiety about the viability of this project.

KEYWORDS

John Locke, public Reason, social contract, constitutionalism, money.

On the fifteenth of October 1690, Thomas and Anne Rogers were tried in London for clipping off the edges of forty silver coins. According to court records, they denied "their horrid crime" yet were unable to explain the files and clippers in their possession. They were quickly found guilty. Thomas Rogers and two other male coin clippers were "ordered to be

drawn from a sledge to the place of execution, to be hanged by the neck, cut down alive, their bowels burnt, their bodies quartered, and to be disposed of at their Majesty's pleasure."¹ Due to a general reluctance to allow women's bodies to be mutilated in public, Anne Rogers was simply burned alive. The grisly fate of Thomas and Anne Rogers was by no means unique. From 1674 (when the first proceedings of the Old Bailey were published) to 1700, 525 people were tried in London's central criminal court for "coining offenses," 182 were found guilty, and 120 were sentenced to death, burning, and disfigurement.

Why should a seemingly petty crime of theft and fraud elicit such a terrifying punishment? Why should the court react with such swiftness and brutality? One answer could be that this type of deception was damaging to the newly expanding economy. By clipping the edges of sterling crowns, half-crowns, and shillings, smuggling the bullion out of the country and then passing the coins off for their original value, unscrupulous bankers and tradesmen were, in a sense, siphoning off silver bullion from the national treasury. Yet the mere act of pilfering silver would not seem to warrant the intense severity of the response.

A deeper anxiety was at work. To the judges of Old Bailey (and to those who legitimized these judges), clipping and counterfeiting coins was not simply theft, but treachery and sedition. It was considered high treason, a betrayal of king and country, and as such was punished more forcefully and dramatically than any other crime. The problem was not simply that these individuals were stealing from the crown. The problem was that their theft threatened the coherence of the regime. They were unsettling the settled and established meaning of money, and thus jeopardizing the very existence of the commonwealth.

This is certainly what John Locke thought. He wrote several pamphlets in the 1690s in response to what he saw to be a looming monetary crisis that he believed would cripple the economy of England and destabilize its political institutions.² Due to widespread coin clipping, the English currency

¹ *Old Bailey Proceedings*, 15 October 1690, trial of Thomas and Anne Rogers (t16901015-36) and *Ordinary of Newgate's Account*, 24 October 1690 (OA16901024), www.oldbaileyonline.org (accessed April 21, 2016).

² Patrick Kelly has collected Locke's policy proposals concerning money in a two-volume work. For a thorough discussion of the debates that took place during the currency crisis of 1695 and the Great Recoinage of 1696 as well as an account of Locke's important role in

was “light,” possessing less silver than the value stamped on its face indicated. In fact, William Lowndes, the Secretary of the Treasury, estimated that the currency in circulation contained only half of the value by weight of its declared precious metal content. The circulating currency was anything but uniform. Badly clipped, unmilled silver coins produced before the 1660s circulated alongside newly minted and milled coins of full weight. Due to a general scarcity of specie, buyers and sellers also made use of a variety of foreign coins. Sometimes these coins were accepted at face value and sometimes valued at weight. Wealthy merchants often hoarded good coins for long-distance trade and used clipped coins to pay wages and conduct other daily transactions. Stephen Quinn has shown that the instability of this currency was exacerbated by William III’s military ventures which strained international money markets. The English military were forced to convert sterling coins into bills of exchange to trade on the Continent, lowering the value of the coins and increasing the incentive to export silver clippings.³ The result was that the value of the sterling crown plummeted and many worried that it could no longer serve as a stable and trustworthy medium of exchange. Craig Muldrew writes, “What was supposed to be *the* standard measure of the value of all things in exchange remained itself an extremely variable commodity.”⁴

For Locke this situation constituted an epistemological crisis. The coin clippers were weakening the commonly held currency by breeding uncertainty and confusion. They were undermining the very instrument needed to maintain trust between subjects. Without a trustworthy currency, Locke feared, individuals would have difficulty conducting trade or entering into contracts. They would not know whether others were

shaping policy during these years, see Kelly’s excellent introduction in John Locke, *Locke on Money*, ed. P. H Kelly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). The two texts that are most applicable to my argument are *Some Considerations concerning the Lowering of Interest, and Raising the Value of Money* (1691), hereafter *SC*, and *Further Considerations Concerning Raising the Value of Money* (1695), hereafter *FC*.

³ Stephen Quinn, “Gold, Silver, and the Glorious Revolution: Arbitrage between Bills of Exchange and Bullion,” *Economic History Review* 49 (1996) 373-490.

⁴ Craig Muldrew, “Hard Food for Midas’: Cash and Its Social Value in Early Modern England,” *Past & Present* no. 170 (February 2001) 170. See also Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation : The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England*, Early Modern History (New York: St. Martin’s press, 1998).

assenting to the same terms of exchange. By undermining the common currency, coin clippers were threatening the very possibility of stable interaction between individuals within society.⁵

It is not hard to imagine the anxiety that surrounded such a volatile economic situation. In recent years we have also experienced the volatility of what Locke called the “phantastical imaginary value of money.”⁶ While the things we own or the hours we work might seem real to us, the conventions that sustain our economic transactions seem fleeting and illusory. The evaporation of \$12.9 trillion dollars in the United States economy since 2007 and the \$787 billion dollar response seem detached from any natural or tangible standard of value. Without a clear standard of measurement, it is difficult to see how the conventions we have accepted – the currency and credit that connects us to each other – promote our private interests or advance the public good. Our concern with the volatility of the economy seems crucially linked to a deeper concern with securing a stable political community.

In the 1690s Locke and his contemporaries found themselves in a similarly disorienting economic crisis. For them, coins represented something more than a mere mechanism of economic transaction. The violation of coinage was consequently more serious than any mere economic violation. Money had a symbolic and unifying meaning. It was not just a medium of exchange, but also a token of trust. The potential collapse of the silver crown was thus closely tied to the collapse of social

⁵ As Macaulay tells it, the loss of trust in a common currency had pervasive political consequences. “It may well be doubted,” he writes, “whether all the misery which had been inflicted on the English nation in a quarter of a century by bad Kings, bad Ministers, bad Parliaments and bad Judges, was equal to the misery caused in a single year by bad crowns and bad shillings.” The misgovernment of Charles and James, even the partisan factions of Parliament did not threaten the industrious families who worked to protect their modest levels of security and comfort. “But when the great instrument of exchange became thoroughly deranged,” Macaulay writes, “all trade, all industry, were smitten as with a palsy. The evil was felt daily and hourly in almost every place and by almost every class, in the dairy and on the threshing floor, by the anvil and by the loom, on the billows of the ocean and in the depths of the mine. Nothing could be purchased without a dispute.” Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second*, 5th ed. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849) 625-626.

⁶ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 2T §184. Subsequently cited as 2T for the *Second Treatise* followed by paragraph number.

trust generally. For this reason, Locke's response of the currency crisis mirrors his diagnosis of a more profound and far-reaching political predicament. His condemnation of those who would undermine the common currency and his work to stabilize that currency at the end of his life reflect in small scope his political project as a whole.

Locke's economic writings were animated by a deep anxiety concerning the establishment and maintenance of social trust. When the Secretary of the Treasury proposed to stabilize the currency by lowering its silver content (or debasing) coins, Locke rejected this idea. He argued instead that coins should not represent anything other than the "intrinsic value" of their silver content. If the government abandons the "natural" worth of coins, they would further undermine the trust that people have in their currency. Locke's dogged insistence that Parliament ensure the worth or trustworthiness of the currency by maintaining its weight eventually led to the Great Recoinage of 1696. Although Locke did not directly support recoinage, his writings during the crisis helped bring it about without debasement.⁷

Although Locke might have won the debate, his position has often puzzled contemporary readers. If Locke is viewed as a philosopher who recognizes that money is simply a sign and signs have conventional rather than natural values, his defense of the "intrinsic value" of silver is an inexplicable turn toward essentialism. By claiming that there must be an exact correspondence between the sign and its referent, Locke seems to contradict both the linguistic conventionalism that he advances in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and the immediate evidence of history, since underweight coins had been circulating in England for decades. Faced with this inconsistency, Joseph Schumpeter laments, "It is a sorry picture that unfolds itself before the eyes of Locke's reader" as the great

⁷ The Great Recoinage, however, was expensive, chaotic, and generally unhelpful. Although Macaulay praised Locke for the "restoration of the currency," most contemporary economists believe that England would have done much better had Locke lost the argument and allowed the treasury to debase the coin. See Thomas J. Sargent and François R. Velde, *The Big Problem of Small Change* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002) 271-290.

philosopher fails to understand the implications of his own arguments.⁸ For Schumpeter Locke's economic writings "stand in no relation to either his philosophy or his political theory" because Locke remains confined to traditional banalities when he addresses the currency crisis.⁹ Similarly Joyce Oldham Appleby describes the victory of Locke's position in 1696 as 'the ironic triumph of mind over matter by one of the major architects of empiricism.'¹⁰ Blinded by a commitment to a mechanistic natural world, Locke was unable to recognize the conventionality of money. His position of recoinage was the result of an outmoded belief in the natural worth of silver. Summing up the consensus view, John F. Chown describes Locke as "the greatest philosopher of his age but perhaps a rather muddled economist."¹¹

Yet Locke's participation in the recoinage debates should not be dismissed as an obscure and perhaps even embarrassing case of intellectual overreaching. The position that Locke took in the midst of the currency crisis is crucially linked to his other, more celebrated, inquiries. The concerns that animate his economic writings run through his philosophical and political writings as well. By uncovering the underlying connection between Locke's treatment of economic currencies and linguistic ones, we can better understand the aspirations as well as the anxieties that shape his entire project.

Locke is very aware that coins and words are conventional tools of exchange. It is their artificiality that makes them so important (and unsettling). Money is similar to speech insofar as it facilitates social interaction by serving as a common set of symbols, symbols that engender trust and help guide individuals in making judgments in contexts of contingency and uncertainty. Yet coins and words do more than facilitate exchange, they also reflect and perhaps even constitute a people. They serve as a type of precommitment necessary for the creation and maintenance of a constitutional regime. Consent to language and money makes possible the type of consent that establishes political society. Locke

⁸ Joseph Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 285.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁰ Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth Century England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978) 236.

¹¹ John F. Chown, *A History of Money* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994) 63.

believes that a stable, constitutional *regime* requires a stable, constitutional *language* within which matters of public importance can be debated and public actions can be evaluated. In a sense, Locke's commitment to ensuring a stable, public vocabulary led him to advocate a Great Recoinage of Public Reason. Yet his persistent concern with linguistic and economic infidelity, subjectivity, and fraud reveals his own anxieties about the viability of this project. Here we discover an anxiety that continues to unsettle the liberal tradition that followed in Locke's wake.

THE PROBLEM OF JUDGMENT

Locke's worries over the debasement of coinage parallel his worries over the collapse of a common language of public judgment. Locke himself draws this connection in his writings on money as well as in his treatment of language and politics. He recognizes that the tools and institutions that human beings use to bind themselves to one another and improve their lives, whether they are coins or words, are uniquely vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. Those capacities that make us capable of living together in a peaceful and mutually beneficial manner are the same capacities that enable us to perform acts of unsettling deception and shortsighted cruelty. Both coins and words are fundamentally *imaginary* or *socially constituted* tools of exchange and thus peculiarly susceptible to social instabilities. By utilizing monetary and linguistic currencies, we facilitate social interaction. Yet at the same time, we open ourselves up to a whole range of social dangers.

The matter of coins and words makes visible the problem of judgment that lurks at the very center of the tradition of liberal theory. Here we find a seemingly contradictory view of human reasonableness. The plausibility of consensual government rests on faith in human judgment, a trust that those around us will make more or less reasonable judgments concerning the common good. Yet it also relies on widespread suspicion of the ways people arrive at and defend their judgments. On one hand, human beings are regarded as naturally free, equal, and rational. We are capable of forming sensible judgments that ensure our peaceful and prosperous coexistence.

On the other hand, human beings are identified as slavish, domineering, and irrational. We are partial in our judgments, clinging to indefensible opinions, and pursuing reckless desires even when our actions lead to misery and conflict. Human beings, it would seem, experience a dual nature: although capable of recognizing the prudence of mutual preservation, we have a troubling tendency to maim, kill, and enslave one another.

This tension – between the potential dignity and potential barbarism of human judgment – animates Locke’s familiar defense of constitutional government, rule of law, and individual rights. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke argues that it is the failure of individuals to make predictable and accurate judgments in their natural condition that necessitates civil society and the establishment of a public, authoritative judge. “The inconveniences of the state of nature,” he writes in the *Second Treatise*, “must certainly be great, where men be judges in their own case” (2T §13). The volatility of our judgment makes unregulated interactions not only inconvenient but ultimately unbearable. One of the most difficult problems of human association is the potential transgressiveness of private judgment.

Yet Locke appeals to this same faculty in order to establish a practical standard of political authority. As naturally free, equal, and rational individuals, Lockean agents are called on to remain vigilant judges of whether existing institutions are worthy of continued allegiance. The judgment of individuals serves not only as a practical check but also an ethical benchmark for any political regime. Legitimate political authority rests on the consent, that is, the considered judgment, of those who are being governed. The answer to his oft-repeated question, “Who shall be judge?” is unmistakable: the Lockean agents themselves are to discern whether a regime should be obeyed or resisted. It is by exercising their judgment that individuals experience self-government and dignify themselves as free, equal and rational beings.

Thus for Locke, as well as for the tradition of consensual government that he inspired, the faculty of judgment plays an ambiguous role. It is celebrated as a sign of our individual freedom and equality and appealed to as a guarantor of legitimacy. Yet it is also viewed with suspicion as a source of disorder and conflict, an unpredictable faculty that must be tutored and constrained if it is to resist its own tendency toward excess. Locke does not

resolve this tension. Instead, his political thought is best understood as an attempt to respond to its political consequences. It is the determined effort to provide a political solution to the problem of judgment that unifies his various writings into a single, comprehensive project. Locke's response to the problem of judgment involves an attempt to nurture a common understanding of what well-regulated judgment or practical reasoning entails. He sought to provide a public vocabulary within which matters of public importance can be debated and discussed. He attempted to recoin a language of political judgment that could serve as a common currency for a stable commonwealth.

Locke was not the first to discover the link between coins and words. Many writers before him noticed the ways in which both language and money bind a society together while leaving it vulnerable. Both coinage and words can seem *natural* yet are disconcertingly *artificial*. This ambiguous relationship between nature and convention is potentially pernicious. Coins and words serve as useful storehouses and transmitters of value, yet can be easily manipulated to deceive and control. Herodotus, for example, links coinage and tyranny, telling us that they both came from the same source, the Lydian monarchs.¹² Gyges and his descendents were able to gain wealth and power by manipulating appearances and giving "worth" to commonly held objects. They learned to dominate their subjects as they learned to coin money and control value. Yet if the Lydians first minted coins, it was the Greeks who first circulated them widely. Their coinage as well as their language facilitated interactions throughout the ancient world. Yet they were uncomfortable with these instruments of exchange. The speed by which Greek coins and words came to be held in common throughout the region seemed to emphasize their conventionality and impermanence.¹³ Leslie Kurke argues that in Athens coins represented an "ongoing struggle over the constitution of value" and the history of that struggle is "a history

¹² Herodotus, *Histories*, I.98-9. Mark Shell offers a fascinating interpretation of Herodotus and money, arguing that the Greeks saw the coining of words and currency as a process of making the visible invisible and the invisible visible. Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore) 14-21.

¹³ The word "common" in Greek is *koinos/koine* – a word that came to denote a trans-regional dialect of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East

of resistance to merely symbolic or conventional value.”¹⁴ Faced with an unprecedented network of symbolic exchange, Athenians worried about those who would try to subvert it – those cunning individuals who would attempt to gain power through the manipulation of these new symbols and conventions. This worry is most clearly seen in Plato's depiction of the sophist as a type of merchant of the soul. In Plato's view, sophists are salesmen who produce nothing but appearances; they sell the appearance of wisdom without possessing it. Not only do they exchange their words for coins, they also embrace the conventionality of both, unsettling their customers and undermining the worth of their commodity.¹⁵ Since language and money seemed to be humanly generated yet socially necessary, pernicious manipulation is always a possibility.

In spite of this anxiety (or perhaps because of it), the link between coins and words became a common trope in works of rhetoric and literature. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian, embraces the connection between language and money (as well as the conventionality of both) when he advises his readers that “usage [...] is the surest pilot in speaking, and we should treat language as currency minted with a public stamp.”¹⁶ Even Francis Bacon – who sought to expel the idols of exchange through the advancement of learning – conceded, “Words are the tokens current and accepted for conceits, as money are for values.”¹⁷ Hannah Dawson points out how this widespread trope highlights the arbitrariness of both language and currency. The satisfying and tangible signs (coins and words) contrast with their unsettling and insubstantial significations (worth and meaning).¹⁸ The trope works so well because the similarity of coins and words lies in the way that their social utility is inseparable from their epistemological instability.

¹⁴ Leslie Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold : The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) 12, 302. See also Richard Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind : Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 199-232.

¹⁵ Plato, *The Sophist*, 224c-d, 268b-c, 231d.

¹⁶ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. By H.E. Butler (London, William Heinemann, 1920-22) I.vi.3, p. 113.

¹⁷ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* in *Bacon: Selections*, Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: The Oxford Authors*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 231.

¹⁸ Hannah Dawson, *Locke, Language, and Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 156-158.

Locke certainly took the economic possibilities and the dangers of money to be analogous to the political possibilities and dangers of language generally. Coins and words are uniquely human tools of social unity and interaction; they can both assist us in forming lasting bonds with one another. Yet they can also undermine the very conditions for the formation of such bonds. For Locke, the money used to enable commerce is akin to the language used to form and sustain communities. They both emerge from a prepolitical act of “mutual consent” (2T §47). In circumstances now erased by history, the “tacit agreement of men” made certain sounds represent certain ideas and certain types of metal represent perishable goods (2T §36).¹⁹ Just as coins serve as a durable measure of physical labor, words serve as a common standard of intellectual labor that can be accumulated, stored, and traded. Our acquired capacity to use coins allows us to prosper beyond mere subsistence because it provides us with an authoritative standard that facilitates a nonviolent exchange of goods and fosters cohesive communities. Our acquired capacity to use words sets us apart from other animals because it enables us to speak and reason and form lasting attachments with one another. It enables us to enter into political contracts. Just as a recognized unit of currency makes it possible for individuals to bind themselves to each other over time through financial agreements, an accepted and stable vocabulary serves as “the great instrument and common tie of society” (ECHU III.i.1, see also III.x.13).

The durability of this arrangement relies on trust.²⁰ Individuals are able to use coins to signify worth and words to signify ideas in so far as they trust that others will use those coins and words in the same way. In the early lectures on natural law, Locke articulates a principle that he will embrace his entire life: *societatis vinculum fides* (faith is the bond of society).²¹

¹⁹ See also John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) III.ii.8. Subsequently cited as ECHU followed by book, chapter, and paragraph number.

²⁰ John Dunn has famously explored Locke’s focus on trust and his closely related anxiety about its betrayal. See John Dunn, “‘Trust’ in the Politics of John Locke,” in *Rethinking Modern Political Theory: Essays 1979-83*, ed. Annabel Brett and James Tully (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), John Dunn, “Trust and Political Agency,” in *Political Responsibility: Essay 1981-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

²¹ John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954) 212, folio 115.

Economic and linguistic agreements, reinforced by “long and familiar use,” make civil society possible. Naturally equal individuals must entrust their natural political rights to society as a whole, and then subsequently to a government, on the condition that government will protect their property – the term Locke uses to encompass life, liberties, and estates. The people give up their powers with “this express or tacit trust, that it shall be employed for their good, and the preservation of their property” (2T §171). As Howard Schweber has recently pointed out, “binding precommitments” such as the tacit consent to language and the acceptance of money are necessary conditions for the establishment of Locke’s constitutional regime. “In other words, moments of political consent are necessarily preceded by moments of linguistic consent, consent to the generation of complex juridical concepts.”²² Subjects must agree on the terms of their relationship, and that agreement requires some sort of prior agreement over language. Trust in a set of predetermined social practices, especially language, is necessary if individuals are expected to consent to government and hold it accountable when it “acts contrary to their trust” (2T §149).

Locke was keenly aware that this trust could be broken. The uniquely human capacity to use coins and words carries with it significant dangers. The very conventions that draw us together can also tear us apart. This is because individuals not only *use* these tools to craft stable and prosperous societies, but they also *abuse* them. And the abuse of words unsettles society in the same way that the abuse of coins does. “It is no wonder,” Locke writes in *Further Considerations on Money*, “if the price and value of things be confounded and uncertain, when the measure itself is lost. For we have now no lawful silver money current amongst us; and therefore cannot talk nor judge temporality right, by our present, uncertain, clipped money, of the value and price of things” (FC 158). If we are to “talk and judge right,” we need to maintain a common understanding of the value of money and a stable consensus surrounding the meaning of words. It is for this reason that Locke inveighs against the “shameful and horrible debasing” of coins that “disorders trade and puzzles accounts” (SC 127, FC 189) and also derides scholastic philosophers as “mint-masters” and ridicules religious fanatics for “coining” their own private languages

²² Howard H. Schweber, *The Language of Liberal Constitutionalism* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 327, 79.

(ECHU III.x.2, and II.xiii.27, IV.xix). Counterfeiters, scholastics, and religious sectarians all destabilize the conventions that are necessary for peaceful coexistence.

In the same way that it is an abuse of the common trust to debase the currency, “’tis plain cheat and abuse” to make words “stand sometimes for one thing, and sometimes for another; the willful doing whereof, can be imputed to nothing but great folly, or greater dishonesty” (ECHU III.x.5). “For words,” Locke writes, “especially of languages already framed, being no man’s private possession, but the common measure of commerce and communication, ’tis not for any one, at pleasure, to change the stamp they are current in” (ECHU III.xi.11). For Locke the clipping and counterfeiting of words is worse than the abuse of money: “to me it appears a greater dishonesty, than the misplacing of counters, in the casting up a debt; and the cheat the greater, by how much truth is of greater concernment and value, than money” (ECHU III.x.5 see also I.vi.23). The clipping of coins was certainly devastating to the economy, but it was nothing compared with the abuse of language, an abuse that threatens to impede the free and dependable exchange of ideas that provides the “comfort and advantage of society” (ECHU III.i.1). For Locke the possibility that individuals might manipulate language for their own gain unleashed the specter of radical subjectivity. If language cannot be trusted as a reliable vehicle for the communication of ideas – if words are simply sounds shaped by interest, dogma, and error – then this “great instrument, and common tie of society” is of little social use.

RECOINING PUBLIC REASON

Locke viewed the monetary crisis of the 1690s as a symptom of a deeper social and political crisis. He believed that a stable and reliable mode of discourse constitutes a unifying authoritative language through which norms of law and justice can be articulated. It does not guarantee universal agreement on every particular, but it does allow for the possibility of a makeshift consensus within which political deliberation can take place. It is for this reason that he insists in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that “the discourses of religion, law and morality” are of the

“highest concernment” (ECHU III.ix.22). When a shared vocabulary deteriorates or is undermined, common experiences are suddenly susceptible to systematically different interpretations. Public judgment collapses into private opinion. Formulas that had once served as unambiguous explanations and unquestionable justifications suddenly appear controversial. Distinctions suddenly seem spurious. When matters of public importance can no longer be publicly evaluated, mutually beneficial communal practices fracture and fall apart.

In many ways Locke’s experience of cultural fracturing and cognitive instability is similar to our own. Like us Locke found himself in a world of religious conflict and social upheaval. Yet the brutality that he experienced was much closer to home. He was ten when Civil War broke out in England, sixteen when the king was beheaded near his school, and twenty-six when Oliver Cromwell’s death brought about two years of political chaos that eventually led to the Restoration of Charles II.²³ As a student at Oxford, Locke described England as a “great Bedlam” of “hot-headed” sectarians and “mad” zealots. He observed men and women, especially religious men and women, asserting their moral and political claims without bothering to articulate them in terms that might be discernible to others. They justified the most preposterous statements and rationalized the most vicious and violent actions by appealing to the subjective guidance of their own divine inner light, a light only comprehensible to those who were similarly illumined. For Locke, such appeals were not only perplexing; they were insane.²⁴ He believed that the widespread rejection of a stable and

²³ John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994) 8. J.G.A. Pocock writes that “seventeenth-century men were still pre-modern creatures for whom authority and magistracy were part of a natural cosmic order, and . . . the starting point of much of their most radical thinking was the unimaginable fact that, between 1642 and 1649, authority in England had simply collapsed.” *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 55.

²⁴ One of the most conspicuous features of Locke’s early correspondence is the way he repeatedly employs medical or psychological terms such as distempered, mad, and hot-headed to describe the political and religious actors of his day. See John Locke, *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E.S De Beer, 8 vols. (Oxford, 1978-) I:30, 43, 59, 82, 91. For a provocative account of the role that madness plays in Locke’s thought, see Uday Singh Mehta, *The Anxiety of Freedom: Imagination and Individuality in Locke’s Political Thought* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1992). For a general discussion of the

common language of justification represented an epidemic of madness. The violence and turmoil in the years prior to the Restoration only confirmed his view. Invocations of reason or reasonableness seemed to have no meaning. In 1659 he wrote to a friend in exasperation, “Where is that Great Diana of the world, Reason? Everyone thinks he alone embraces this Juno, whilst others grasp nothing but clouds. We are all Quakers here, and there is not a man but thinks he alone hath this light within and all besides stumble in the dark.”²⁵

These are the words of an eyewitness to an epistemological crisis. Appeals to reason, which had once appeared to hold a generally accepted and assessable meaning, suddenly seem like nothing but smoke and mirrors. The common language that had once served to sustain rational deliberation in matters of public importance was breaking down. This cognitive instability was intensified by the discovery of new worlds – some suspended in the heavens, others across vast oceans, and still others within the body itself. Assumptions that had once served as a stable framework within which individuals understood themselves and their relation to others no longer seemed plausible. The collapse of a common mode of discourse left people feeling profoundly isolated from one another. The absence of a shared understanding of the individual’s place within a unified whole endangered the stability and coherence of civil society.

This anxiety about the political consequences of a deteriorating common language was certainly not unique to Locke and his contemporaries. Long before him, Thucydides agonized about the way in which words lost their meaning in the chaos that arose between cities in Greece during the Peloponnesian War.²⁶ And long after him, George Orwell argued passionately that the abuse of language is the first step toward totalitarian

relationship between madness and religious fanaticism among Locke’s contemporaries, see Michael Heyd, *“Be Sober and Reasonable”: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

²⁵ Locke, *Correspondence*, I.81. For a brief overview of Locke’s views of the political unrest in the years before the Restoration, see Roger Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 35-38, Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (London: Longman’s, Green and Co., 1966) 40-46, and John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility*, 25-32.

²⁶ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Modern Library, 1982) III.82, 198-200.

government.²⁷ The importance of a common political vocabulary among those who aspire to self-rule has long been recognized. Many have also noted that these vocabularies are among the most fragile and least durable of human innovations. The loss of a shared moral language represents the loss of community and the collapse of a common world. Locke not only diagnosed the problem, however. He also went to great lengths to remedy it. Locke's solution to the deterioration of a common vocabulary of rational appraisal parallels his solution to the monetary crisis. He wanted to establish and defend a stable mode of public judgment that could serve as an authoritative and communal standard for judging the legitimacy of political claims. Undoubtedly, Locke shared this project with many of his contemporaries who also recognized the political implications of the collapse of a common vocabulary.

To a great extent Locke's view of the importance of a stable political language and the many threats to such a language echoes Hobbes. The "tongue of men" Hobbes wrote, "is a trumpet of war and sedition."²⁸ As a careful reader of Thucydides, Hobbes worried about the way unmoored terminology, especially religious terminology, was both a cause and a symptom of violence. He argued that a stable and peaceful regime could only be established if the power of the sovereign would be extended to the meaning of the terms of moral evaluation. True surrender to a sovereign involves surrender of authority over language in matters of public importance. Members of the commonwealth must submit their private judgments to what he called in chapter 37 of *Leviathan* "publique reason." This attempt – to supplant the diversity of private reasonings in the public sphere with a single, shared understanding – echoes throughout Locke's writings.

²⁷ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), and, of course, his haunting depiction of "doublespeak" in the novel *1984* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984). Similarly Hannah Arendt worried that "we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness, so that short of being condemned to live verbally in an altogether meaningless world, we grant each other the right to retreat into our own worlds of meaning, and demand only that each of us remain consistent within his own private terminology." Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968) 95-96.

²⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen: De Homine and De Cive*, ed. Charles T. Wood (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991) 168-69.

The solution that Hobbes proposes, however, differs from the one that Locke offers. Hobbes insists that the purification of language can only be achieved through the declaration of an all-powerful sovereign. Locke's approach is much more pragmatic and indirect. He seeks to help his readers adopt a common language of judgment so that they can come to an agreement over political authority in the absence of a single, unlimited sovereign power. Locke recognized that a Great Recoinage of language could not simply be imposed by an absolute monarch or powerful political regime; he knew that a shared vernacular must emerge into general use from the bottom up. A common language of judgment would have to be renewed and maintained by the people themselves. For this reason, Locke's primary political task could only be accomplished in a somewhat indirect way. He sought to convince his readers to accept a new vocabulary within which they could govern their political opinions and regulate their political judgments.

A shared anxiety concerning the pernicious effects of a deteriorating or discredited language of public justification links Locke with contemporary Kantian and Rawlsian theorists who defend the notion of public reason. For these theorists a common political vocabulary is a prerequisite to self-rule. It enables citizens to agree on the terms of their relationship with government and to hold that government accountable when it fails to live up to those terms. Howard Schweber writes, "Consent to the creation of a juridical language is what calls a sovereign 'people' into being in the first place. . . . A group of people constitutes itself as a self-sovereign People by an act of political will exercised over the field of discourse."²⁹ The possibility of legitimate constitutional rule, for Schweber, relies on the willingness of citizens "to translate private thoughts and opinions into an appropriate artificial language of constitutional discourse."³⁰ The point of public reason is not to eradicate disagreement from political discourse, but to ensure a common vocabulary within which disagreement can take place. Public reason (or a common language of justification) serves as a homogenizing agent that allows for heterogeneity to arise without disaster.

²⁹ Howard H. Schweber, *The Language of Liberal Constitutionalism* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 78.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

For Locke recoinning public reason involves establishing the limits of the understanding. If we learn to recognize the boundaries of our knowledge, we will be less likely to make pompous and self-deluded speeches and will instead “sit down in quiet ignorance of those things, which, upon examination, are bound to be beyond the reach of our capacities.” We will have no reason “to raise questions, and perplex ourselves and others with disputes about things, to which our understandings are not suited” (ECHU I.i.4). Since the essential nature of things remains hidden from us, Locke teaches, there is no need to debate with trinitarians and unitarians about “substance” or anyone else about the “immateriality of the soul” (ECHU IV.iii.6). In a crucial chapter entitled “Of the Extent of Human Knowledge,” Locke offers this guiding rule: “I think that it becomes the modesty of philosophy not to pronounce magisterially, where we want evidence that can produce knowledge” (ECHU IV.iii.6).

In spite of this explicit appeal to modesty, however, Locke often appears supremely confident that divisive questions concerning morality and divine command can be answered with absolute certainty. He seems to think he can resolve disagreements concerning religion, law, and morality by appealing to an independent source or reasonableness that lies beyond the empirical divisions and competing claims present in society. He is especially captivated by the possibility of arriving at a type of mathematical demonstration of moral law (ECHU III.xi.16, IV.iii.18). James Boyd White describes Locke’s voice as “a voice of certainty, telling his readers how things are . . . This is the mind that will tell you its first principles, then show you what flows from them, all as though this were an automatic process.”³¹ Locke seems to compel the reader to submit to his arguments – not only in substance, but also in tone and style. We encounter a thinker who is breathtakingly optimistic about the political possibilities of rational inquiry, confident that he will be able to replace the diversity and disagreement that he encounters in the political sphere with the universally acceptable deliverances of reason.³²

³¹ James Boyd White, *Acts of Hope: Creating Authority in Literature, Law and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 149.

³² This view of Locke is most clearly developed in Peter A. Schouls, *The Imposition of Method: A Study of Descartes and Locke* (1980) and *Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1992). Yet many influential commentators have focused on Locke’s failure to provide the type of unassailable

Regardless of how we interpret these extravagant claims, Locke seems to recognize that the success of his political project stands apart from his ability to provide a logically compelling demonstration of the content and obligation of natural law. It is worth remembering that Locke was aware that he had not supplied his readers with the comprehensive and demonstrative account that he said was possible.³³ Yet he seemed genuinely unconcerned with this fact. It is telling that modern commentators have fretted far more about this supposed failure than the author himself.

It turns out that Locke's political project does not depend on a particular abstract demonstration, but on the success of a pedagogical effort to instill in readers a vocabulary of public judgment. Judgment, as Locke tells us in the *Essay*, is required in matters in which absolute certainty cannot be attained (ECHU IV.1.3). These are the matters of contingency and disagreement that make up our political lives. "Man would be at a great loss," Locke writes, "if he had nothing to direct him, but what has certainty of true knowledge. For that being very short and scanty . . . he would be often utterly in the dark, and in most of the actions of his life, perfectly at a stand, had he nothing to guide him in the absence of clear and certain knowledge" (ECHU IV.14.1). Since most of the matters that we face in our

philosophical system that he promises. John Dunn depicts Locke as a sincere yet somewhat befuddled thinker who retreats to scripture when his demonstrative proof fails to materialize. Leo Strauss portrays Locke as a cunning philosopher who artfully offers his readers inadequate demonstrations in order to usher in a new age of egoism and acquisition. Both of these readings begin with a view of Locke as an unsuccessful system builder. John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) chaps. 8-9. See also Dunn's article "Measuring Locke's Shadow" in John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. by Ian Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 257-85; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 202-251. For a recent example of this approach, see Michael S. Rabieh, "The Reasonableness of Locke, or the Questionableness of Christianity," *Journal of Politics* 53 (1991): 933-57.

³³ When Locke's contemporary, Thomas Burnet, criticized him for failing to provide a mathematical demonstration of morality or the natural law, Locke shot back that "I have said indeed in my book that I thought morality capable of demonstration as well as mathematics. But I do not remember where I promised this gentleman to demonstrate it to him." Thomas Burnet and John Locke, *Remarks Upon an Essay Concerning Humane Understanding in a Letter Address'd to the Author* (London: Printed for M. Wotton, 1697) 34.

lives cannot be resolved in any final and absolute sense, it is of great importance that we learn to govern our judgments in ways that are conducive to rational deliberation. Locke recognizes the ambiguous relationship between abstract reason and public life. He saw that it is *reasonableness* and not *reason* that ultimately binds civil society together.

By appealing to reasonableness, Locke was attempting to craft a language of judgment that sits somewhere between dogmatism and skepticism (although he was less convinced of the threat of skepticism than of dogmatism). Following the lead of mitigated skeptics such as Gassendi and Boyle, Locke sought to discredit the philosophical and religious warriors who fueled intellectual battles. He attacked dogmatists of all sorts – Scholastics, Cartesians, and religious zealots – in order to quiet their supercilious declarations and deluded speeches. By arguing that human knowledge is narrowly circumscribed by our subjective ideas or mixed modes, he worked to undermine the claims of those who sought to gain power and justify brutality through groundless appeals to certainty. Locke set out to teach his readers to regulate their thoughts and actions according to a new, self-reflective language of public judgment.

In this sense Locke is very much a theorist of “public reason.” Yet he does not simply appeal to an abstract conception of public reason in the way that contemporary theorists following Rawls tend to do. Instead, Locke actively strives to generate and shape public reason by persuading his readers to internalize a particular notion of reasonableness. His political project can thus be seen as a type of political pedagogy. Locke recognizes that the widespread acceptance of a common language of justification is a precondition for the acceptance and preservation of social contracts. It is only by teaching his readers to accept a more or less common notion of reasonable judgment that he will be able to foster the conditions which would enable constitutional self-rule. Locke is not simply defending an abstract theory of legitimate political institutions; he is promoting and encouraging the rational development and intellectual discipline of those who would inhabit such institutions. He is recoinng and redistributing a new currency, a new language of justification.

TRUSTING THE UNTRUSTWORTHY

Yet is Locke's appeal to reasonableness itself reasonable? Is it reasonable to believe that citizens will internalize his vocabulary of judgment and resist the spurious claims of religious authoritarians and tyrannical monarchs? Is it reasonable to believe that citizens will take up the hard labor of judgment in the way that he proposes? Locke provides us with plenty of reason to be skeptical. Although the consensual framework of civil society seems to rely on a shared vocabulary and mutual trust, Locke suggests that the individuals who constitute society ought not be trusted. Throughout his writings he points out that men are most often guided by their immediate interest, their petty habits, and their unexamined loyalty to their party or faction. In intellectual affairs, men are lazy and proud. Locke's writings reveal a deep anxiety about his fellow citizens – they are smug scholastics, religious fanatics, power hungry sycophants, intolerant zealots, and treacherous coin-clippers. Locke seems to despair at the extent of human ignorance and brutality. He challenges those who hold a more hopeful opinion of human morality and individual conscience to “view but an army at the sacking of a town and see what observation, or sense of moral principles, or what touch of conscience, for all the outrages they do” (ECHU I.iii.9). Locke is unable to overlook the ways in which human beings tend toward corruption and wickedness.³⁴

Far more unsettling than the human tendency toward vice, however, is the human capacity to manipulate social conventions – such as money and language – to disguise vice. These imaginary instruments of exchange are especially useful for this type of deceit. Just as they can be used to express private ideas or personal attribution of value, they can also be used to hide or misrepresent subjective interests. Locke recognizes that a common currency is necessary for the maintenance of long-term economic relationships just as a shared language is as necessary for the maintenance of long-term social bonds. Yet both words and coins seem to exacerbate the problem of individual judgment and endanger the stability of consensual government.

³⁴ For a persuasive account of Locke's view of human corruption and how it shapes his political thought, see W. M. Spellman, *John Locke and the Problem of Depravity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

The difficulty with money stems from the fact that it is the product of imagination, the result of “fancy or agreement. . . more than real use, and the necessary support of life” (2T §46). Money has no direct relationship to the visible and tangible needs of human beings. “For as to money, and such riches and treasure,” Locke writes, “these are none of nature’s goods, they have but a phantastical imaginary value” (2T §184). Money breeds a new type of ambition that cannot be confined by the concrete limitations of the natural world. Before the invention of money the basis of property rights and the limits of the provisos were relatively easy to discern. Human agents in the state of nature could observe their rights and the rights of others and arrive at a proper judgment concerning the boundaries of propriety. Yet the invention of money brings about ambiguity and uncertainty. When an individual is no longer limited by his immediate needs, he can begin to entertain less tangible desires and indulge in less publicly visible excesses. The obvious and recognizable correspondence between what one does and what one has is concealed. The invention of money removes the laborer from a direct relationship to and responsibility for the product of his exertions. It makes it harder for him or his neighbors to see what is rightfully his. Money makes it easier for him to act in violation of natural limits of acquisition and to hide this violation behind a curtain of social valuation.

Locke's treatment of language parallels his treatment of money. Just as an original natural condition is described as a condition in which “no such thing as money was anywhere known” (2T §49), it is also a condition in which immediate sense perception and the simple ideas that such perception generates suffices. Individuals need only receive immediate data through experience in order to recognize objects around them and navigate through the world. It is a place where individuals have direct experience of nature and nature’s law. At several points in the *Second Treatise*, Locke expresses nostalgia for this “golden age” before “vain ambition” and the “desire of having more than men needed” (2T §111, 37). This earlier era of moral clarity was a “poor but virtuous age” (2T §110). Yet as individuals began to interact more extensively, a more complex language emerges. Simple ideas are combined to form what Locke calls “mixed modes” or “relations.” This process of language generation did not only involve consent over the way to refer to particular objects, but consent to a new way

of living in and through conventional or artificial language. A social vocabulary developed. The terms of this vocabulary, such as “love,” “justice,” “obligation,” and “truth,” have no direct referents in the natural world. They are created spontaneously and are thus especially susceptible to manipulation and abuse (ECHU III.v.16). In the same way that money facilitates trade yet obscures natural law, the creation of mixed modes makes moral and social deliberation possible yet also threatens to undermine deliberation.

Since the publication of Paul de Man’s influential essay, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” it has been common to deride Locke as naively ignorant of the metaphors and slippages that take place in his famous attack on rhetoric and defense of clear and distinct terms.³⁵ Yet, as Hannah Dawson shows, Locke is well aware of the slippery character of language.³⁶ He recognizes that words, especially moral terms, might not correspond to things as they are. Words have public meanings, yet those meanings are unstable. Different people mean different things when they use the same word. Sometimes a word might not correspond to anything at all. Oftentimes words are used to disguise or mislead the listener. According to Locke, this type of deceit occurs most often with words that emerge from “controversial debate, or familiar discourse, concerning honour, faith, grace, religion, church, etc.” (III.xi.9). “A specious show of deceitful words” can disguise an attack on the “civil right of the community” (LCT 49). Duplicitous speakers can “colour their spirit of persecution and unchristian cruelty with a pretence of care of the publick weal, and observation of the laws” (LCT 25). The problem with this type of linguistic deception is that it can deceive the speaker as well as the listener. The words themselves can dupe vain and long-winded men into earnestly believing their own groundless declarations. Deceit often involves self-deception. “So few are apt to think, they deceive, or are deceived in the use of words; or that the language of the sect they are of, has any faults in it, which ought to be examined or corrected” (ECHU *Epistle to the Reader*). By using words of “uncertain or mistaken signification,” men put “fallacies . . . upon

³⁵ Paul de Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978).

³⁶ See Hannah Dawson, “Locke on Language in (Civil) Society,” *History of Political Thought* xxvi, 3 (Autumn 2005) 397-425.

themselves, as well as others.” Locke believes that language itself is “no small obstacle in the way of knowledge” (ECHUIII.ix.21). Words, which promise to serve as the “bond of society,” can thus also weaken the connection individuals. Without a trustworthy medium for intellectual exchange, individuals remain isolated from each other; they would seem to be unable to form the types of communities that could sustain self-government.

For Locke constitutional government seems to require a common language, a currency, through which differing judgments can be adjudicated and consent can be articulated. In fact, a shared language of political judgment seems to be a necessary mechanism for creating and sustaining political society. Yet this shared language, this currency, is an especially unstable one. It is fragile, contingent, and ultimately provisional. Locke teaches that human beings are proud, self-delusional, and insular. Yet he also insists that a legitimate polity requires that they judge, trust, and interact.

Given this deep tension, it is not surprising that Locke and his contemporaries were anxious about coin-clippers and rhetoricians. Those who sought to gain by manipulating money or language seem to threaten the very possibility of civil society. At times this anxiety leads Locke to make desperate appeals for linguistic and moral purity. He seems to want to eradicate those practices and habits that threaten consensual government. Yet in his more sober moments, he realizes that he cannot ultimately eliminate economic fraud and linguistic deceit. In his “Propositions Sent to the Lords Justices,” Locke concedes that coin-clipping has become “so gainful and so secret a robbery that penalties can not restrain it. . . it is grown so universal and men so skillful at it: (2.377).” Similarly the manipulation of language for individual gain cannot be eradicated through legal or social punishments. Words and coins are imperfect and corrupt, yet Locke has no alternative but to trust the untrustworthy. He must build his polity out of imaginary and unstable conventions.

This is the consequence of Locke’s claim that government ultimately rests on the agency of individuals. “Every man is judge for himself” (2T §241). Every man has to decide when his king has broken the law of nature and betrayed the trust of the people. The confused judgment that made the state of nature unbearable turns out to be the ultimate earthly standard of

political legitimacy. The difficulties of judgment might be mitigated by society, but they are not eradicated. At the center of Locke's "vision of the human predicament," writes John Dunn, is the "precariousness and onerousness, but also the endless revitalization, of human judgment."³⁷ Locke seeks to shape his readers into the type of people who will be able to sustain stable and just institutions. To that end, he offers them a language of judgment that is able to sidestep corrosive skepticism that ends in political acquiescence and avoid dogmatic fanaticism that leads to irresolvable conflict. Ultimately the people themselves must employ their judgment. It is only through the activity of judging – as uncertain as it may be – that Lockean agents can hope to establish and sustain a stable polity.

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³⁷ John Dunn, "Measuring Locke's Shadow" in John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. by Ian Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 277-8.

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