

JOHN LOCKE'S STOICISM: GRIEF, APATHY AND SYMPATHY

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ABSTRACT

Locke's conception of passions was more representative of the Christian doctrine than of Stoicism, though surely the latter deeply influenced his moral thought: the "extreme" happiness he referred to in the *Essay* as the supreme end of human life contrasted with Stoical moderation, and the important role he attributed to passions in the economy of salvation was irreconcilable with the Stoic notion of passion as *perturbationes animi*. In the *Essay*, Locke rejected Stoical insensibility manifesting his adherence to the Christian tradition, which considered *apátheia* as incompatible with Christian views on emotions. However, Locke's correspondence shows the powerful attraction which Stoic apathy exerted on his thought with reference to one particular passion, grief, whose unhealthy consequences were strongly emphasised in the medical literature of his time. The irrationality of indulging in grief is a topic to which Locke appealed in almost all the letters of condolence he wrote to his friends; he clearly conceived Stoic insensibility as recommendable when experiencing bereavement. The scarce empathy which he manifested towards the bereaved suggests that he might have feared the contagion of grief: this explains why Christian sympathy has no place in Locke's morals, and why he did not conceive of compassion as a Christian duty.

KEYWORD

Locke, stoicism, medicine, grief, apathy, sympathy.

INTRODUCTION

The powerful influence of Stoicism in early modern English thought has been investigated meticulously by several scholars¹; this influence is somewhat counterbalanced by many attacks upon the Stoic notion of

¹See, for instance, Monsarrat, *Light from the Porch*; Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics*; Shifflett, *Stoicism, Politics, and Literature in the Age of Milton*.

apátheia, the strict discipline of suppressing emotions. Of the three recurrent Stoic themes which became key concepts in many sixteenth and seventeenth-century literary and non literary works - peace of mind, the law of nature and the wise or happy man²- the first is that from which the necessity of apathy stems: peace of mind requires adapting to adverse circumstances and making a virtue of necessity by means of a technique of resignation, which includes internalising the belief that all fortune is good fortune and that only virtue makes man free. Passions render man unable to act in accordance with his own reason, therefore they need to be controlled; early Stoics (especially Chrysippus) advocated that passions had to be extirpated, whereas later Stoics (especially Seneca) thought they had to be regulated so as to adapt to the Aristotelian “golden mean”³. Early Church Fathers sympathising with Stoicism such as Clement of Alexandria⁴ tried to make apathy compatible with the Christian doctrine, but Augustine’s severe attack on it in *De civitate Dei* rendered this reconciliation arduous. Although Aquinas’ criticism of Stoic apathy was milder than that of Augustine, nonetheless it implied a rejection of the position he attributed to the Stoics (“all passions are evil”), and the acceptance of the Peripatetic position (“moderate passions are good”)⁶. Calvin passionately attacked Stoic *apátheia*: “We must reject that insane philosophy- he insisted - that requires men to be utterly without feeling if they are deemed wise”⁷. The Anglican Richard Hooker was no less severe

² See Chew, *Stoicism in Renaissance English Literature*, 44-53, 72.

³ Despite the description of the sage as being in a state of *apátheia*, the Stoics granted that he could experience *eupátheia* or good feelings. These were affective states, but supposedly different in kind from genuine passions and without their cognitive, moral, and metaphysical failings. Instead of over-evaluations of, and reactions to, indifferent or alien features of the external world, *eupátheia* were cognitively appropriate and active judgments directed at the things truly important to the good life, particularly at other rational beings. See Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 4, 10-14; Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, 23,4-6.

⁴ See Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogue*, 2, 2,4. According to Clement, Christ was passionless, in the sense that his great love for humanity was never carried away by irrational storms of emotion swaying his perfect judgment.

⁵ In *The City of God*, 9,5, Augustine declared that the status of emotion was what differentiated Stoicism from Christianity: “In our discipline it is not asked whether the pious spirit will be angry, but why it is angry; nor whether it is sad, but for what cause it is sad; nor whether it fears, but why it fears”.

⁶ See Aquinas, *Summa*, 1a 2ae, 24, 2 co.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, 8,2.

about Stoic “stupidity”⁸, which he thought of as irreconcilable with Christianity.

Echoing Augustine’s famous critique of Stoicism, numerous seventeenth-century religious writers argued that apathy was inconsistent with Christian teachings. Both the Jesuit Thomas Wright and the protestant divine Edward Reynolds⁹ drew their criticism of Stoic *apátheia* from Augustine, and claimed that only our corruption set passions against reason. Similarly, following the Augustinianism of Malebranche, John Norris and Mary Astell¹⁰ rejected apathy and insisted that it was original sin which had diverted human love from its proper object, mixing it with desire. In a similar vein, but looking to Descartes’ theory of passions¹¹, Henry More appealed to the “Intendiments of Divine Providence” in order to maintain, “against the Stoicks”, that passions are good in their nature¹².

Other English writers opposed Aristotelian “mediocrity” to Stoicism with reference to particular passions: Richard Brathwaite, for instance, criticised too strict a Stoical moderation regarding mirth and the enjoyment of one’s honest possessions, considering it an extreme as vicious as its opposite (libertine immoderation)¹³, whereas Jean Gailhard censured Stoic insensibility with reference to a justified resentment¹⁴. Similarly, in his essay *Christian Moderation* the Anglican Bishop Joseph Hall praised the middle way and criticised the Stoic position on anger, not only citing St. Paul’s injunction “Be angry and sin not” (a quotation which also Bacon had opposed to Stoic “bravery” with reference to anger)¹⁵, but also warning that, in certain circumstances, a deficiency of this emotion might be regarded as

⁸ Hooker, *Of The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 6,6,6, in *Works*, 333.

⁹ Wright, *The Passions of the mind*, 15-17; Reynolds, *A Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soul of Man*, 48-50.

¹⁰ Astell and Norris, *Letters concerning the Love of God*, 130.

¹¹ Descartes criticized “those cruel philosophers who want their sage to be insensible”: see Descartes to Elizabeth, 18 May 1645.

¹² More, *An account of Virtue*, 34.

¹³ Brathwaite, *The English Gentleman*, 194.

¹⁴ Gailhard, *The Compleat Gentleman*, 127.

¹⁵ Bacon, *Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral*, in *Works*, 12, 271.

a sin¹⁶. Though a great admirer of Stoicism, Hall declared: “I will not be a Stoic, to have no passions, [...] but a Christian, to order those I have”¹⁷.

Several English physicians criticized Stoic *apátheia*. Robert Burton quoted approvingly Plutarch’s criticism of the impassible *sapiens stoicus* as a man “not worth a groat”¹⁸, and Thomas Browne noted ironically that “the Stoicks that condemn passion, and command a man to laugh in Phalaris’s Bull, could not endure without a groan a fit of the Stone or Colick”¹⁹. Thomas Sydenham claimed that Stoical insensibility could alleviate the pains caused by hysteria as much as “a tootache is relieved by a resolution forbidding one’s jaws to give pain”²⁰; Robert Boyle equally criticized the Stoics, “who would have us deal with our Passions, as *Pharoah* did with the Jewish Males”, and insisted that passions, when moderate, were to be considered as “Instruments of Piety, which God hath bestowed upon us”²¹. The physician and philosopher John Locke was probably of this same opinion, for he criticized insensibility in the *Essay* and recommended Christian moderation; however, his recommendations became particularly strong concerning vehement passions, to which the majority of seventeenth-century physicians attributed unhealthy effects. Locke had surely learned much from his influential teachers Thomas Willis and Thomas Sydenham regarding the dangerous consequences of violent or sudden passions²², and he probably agreed with his friend Robert Boyle that “when Anger is blown up into Rage, or Cholera turns to habitual Fury, it does more Mischief than Beasts and Inundations”²³. The remedy Locke considered as appropriate against vehement passions placed more trust in an early training to

¹⁶ Hall, *Christian Moderation*, in *Works*, 6, 437.

¹⁷ Hall, *Meditations*, in *Works*, 7, 457.

¹⁸ Burton, *The anatomy of melancholy*, 75.

¹⁹ Browne, *Religio medici*, 123.

²⁰ Sydenham, *Epistolary Dissertation (Letter to Dr. Cole, 1681/2)*, in *Works*, 2, 96.

²¹ Boyle, *Occasional Reflections upon Several Subjects: with a Discourse about such Kind of Thoughts*, in *Theological Works*, 2, 377-378.

²²“The antecedent causes of this fermentation or boiling- Locke wrote in some notes to Willis’s lectures concerning the origin of nervous fits are anything tending to agitate that matter; the most fertile agent being an error or excess [...] for example, anger, sudden passions, terror, joy, intemperance, drunkenness”. See Dewhurst, *Thomas Willis’s Oxford Lectures*, 81. Sydenham claimed that violent perturbations of the mind bring on fits; women in particular, when affected by hysteria (one of the nervous distempers), would experience “Fear, anger, jealousy, suspicion, and the worst passions of the mind” for no apparent reason (*Epistolary Dissertation*, 2, 89).

²³ Boyle, *Occasional Reflections*, 378.

suppress them than in the power of reason to prevail over them; with reference to one particular passion, grief, he recommended Stoical insensibility. The severity with which Locke admonished his friends not to indulge in grief is symptomatic of a pathologization of this passion, in line with the medical thought of his time; the scarce sympathy which he manifested in condoling those experiencing bereavement, which was viewed as the main cause of grief, might be due to his fear of contagion. This might also explain why Christian sympathy, or compassion, had scarcely any place in Locke's morals: he seems not to have considered it as a Christian duty. On the following pages, I will endeavour to analyze Locke's attitude towards grief in detail, in order to show that Stoic apathy was the remedy he considered as appropriate against it.

LOCKE ON PASSIONS: VEHEMENT PASSIONS AND GRIEF

As Victor Nuovo remarked some years ago²⁴, the role and significance which Locke attributed to passions were shaped by the Christian doctrine much more than by Stoical philosophy. "Complete happiness", Locke wrote in the *Essay*²⁵, could only be found in the enjoyment of God; misery²⁶ was the consequence of sin. How to be happy in this and the other life was the great teaching of religion and prudence, he insisted in "Study"²⁷; hope, a pleasurable passion, should be considered as men's lot on earth, he

²⁴Victor Nuovo, *Aspects of Stoicism in Locke's Philosophy*, in Hutton and Schuurman eds., *Studies on Locke*, 1. Nuovo claims that "Locke was not a Stoic philosopher, at least not a self-conscious one"; my claim, however, is that he was a Stoic philosopher, and probably also a self-conscious one, with reference to one particular passion, grief, regarding which he recommended *apatheia*.

²⁵See Locke, *Essay*, II, vii, 5, 130. A virtuous life, the supreme end of the Stoic sage, was to be intended not as a good in itself in Locke's view but rather as a means to obtain eternal happiness: it was to be preferred to vice because accompanied by "the certain expectation of everlasting Bliss, which may come" (*Essay* II, xxi, 70, 281-82).

²⁶Probably Locke did not refer to eternal misery: see Locke, "Of God's Justice" (1680), in *Political Essays*, 277-78, where he seems to consider mortalism as more consistent with God's benevolence. See also *The Reasonableness*, 6-11, where his adhesion to mortalism is apparent.

²⁷See Locke, "Study", in *The Life of John Locke*, 1, 180-181.

declared in the *Essay*²⁸. The business of man, Locke affirmed in a journal note of 8 February 1677, was “to be happy in this world by the enjoyment of the things of nature subservient to life health ease and pleasure and by the comfortable hopes of another life”²⁹; the pleasure and delight which accompanied knowledge, work³⁰ and friendship³¹ were to be interpreted as evidence of God’s benevolence towards men.

The Christian perspective from which Locke viewed passions prevented him from considering painful emotions as something intrinsically negative: even sorrow and repentance, he affirmed, could bring something beneficial as a “means and way to our happiness”³². All passions should be viewed as having an important role in the economy of salvation, Locke insisted in a journal note of 16 July 1676: God had “so framed the constitutions of our minds and bodies that several things are apt to produce in both of them pleasure and pain, delight and trouble [...] for ends suitable to His goodness and wisdom”³³. Pleasure and pain in their various degrees (respectively mirth, delight, joy, comfort and happiness, with reference to the first; weariness, vexation, sorrow, grief, torment, melancholy, anxiety, anguish and misery, with reference to the latter) should be seen as functional to the attainment of the *bonum jucundum*, the perfect good incorporating the *boni utile* and *honestum*. The pleasures afforded by “spiritual objects” were those more proportioned to the nature of the human mind, because of their being “more capable to touch and move it with lovely and ravishing delights”: therefore, it was “the greatest folly” not to endeavour to obtain them³⁴. *Anaesthesia* or insensibility was to be considered as something good (*i.e.* a pleasurable state, not the middle state between pain and pleasure), but only if it were not perpetual and if it assured man’s relief from a previous painful state³⁵.

²⁸Locke, *Essay II*, xxi, 55, 269.

²⁹Locke, “Knowledg its extent and measure”, in *An Early Draft*, 88; see also “Thus I think”, in *Political Essays*, 296-97.

³⁰ See Locke, *Essay I*, i, 5, 45: “Men may find Matter sufficient to busy their Heads, and employ their Hands with Variety, Delight and Satisfaction”.

³¹Locke, “Study”, 192-93; “Pleasure and Pain. The Passions”, in *Essays on the Law of Nature*, 266; *Essay II*, xx, 5, 230.

³² Locke, “Pleasure and Pain”, 269.

³³ *Ibi*, 265.

³⁴*Ibi*, 268-269.

³⁵*Ibi*, 267. See also *Essay II*, xx, 16, 232.

In the *Essay*, Locke insisted on passions having being so framed by God as to represent the fundamental incitement to action³⁶; unlike Descartes, he referred to Aquinas's taxonomy³⁷, though the predominant role he attributed to desire or uneasiness as the fundamental "spur to humane Industry and Action"³⁸, as well as the claim that pleasure and pain were the sole motivating psychological factors³⁹, seemed to be incompatible with Aquinas. However, Locke might have thought otherwise: Aquinas himself had affirmed that, in the order of intention (though not of execution), pleasure was the cause of desire (*concupiscentia*)⁴⁰, and that in both concupiscible and irascible passions there was something relating to, or presupposing movement⁴¹. This something corresponded to Locke's idea of desire as a basic ingredient in any passion.

Stoical moderation was somehow obscured in the *Essay* by Christian moderation: the "extreme" happiness Locke referred to as the supreme end of human life was the "immoderate" state St. Paul spoke of, "what *Eye hath not seen, Ear hath not heard, nor hath it entered into the Heart of Man to conceive*".⁴² Locke reproached those who contented themselves with the "moderate mean Pleasures" of this life, without thinking of the joys of

³⁶Locke, *Essay*, II, vii , 3, 129: " It has therefore pleased our Wise Creator, to annex to several Objects, and to the Ideas which we receive from them, as also to several of our Thoughts, a concomitant pleasure, and that in several Objects, to several degrees; that those Faculties which he had endowed us with, might not remain wholly idle, and unemploy'd by us".

³⁷ Aquinas produced a taxonomy of eleven basic kinds of passion, six of which being concupiscible (love and hate, desire and aversion, joy and sorrow), five being irascible (hope and despair, confidence and fear, anger): see *Summa* 1a 2ae, q.24 co. The concupiscible passions had sensible good or evil taken absolutely as a common object, the irascible passions sensible good or evil taken as difficult or arduous: see *Summa*, 1a 2ae, q. 23 1co. In his taxonomy, Locke did not consider aversion and confidence but added envy; he assigned a special status to anger and envy as passions presupposing "some mixed Consideration of our selves and others" (*Essay*,II, xx, 230-31).

³⁸ Locke, *Essay*, II,xx 6, 230.

³⁹Ibi, II, xx, 3, 229-30.

⁴⁰Aquinas, *Summa*, 1a 2ae, q.25 a.2co.

⁴¹ Ibi, 1a 2ae, q.25, a.1 co.

⁴²Locke, *Essay* II, xxi, 41, 258.

heaven⁴³; the absence of these was the ultimate motor of desire in his view. Uneasiness was the basic characteristic of man's earthly imperfect state⁴⁴.

Stoic insensibility seemed to be expressly rejected in a passage in the *Essay* where Locke affirmed that

He must be of a strange, and unusual Constitution, who can content himself, to live in constant Disgrace and Disrepute with his own particular Society. Solitude many Men have sought, and been reconciled to: But no Body, that has the least Thought, or Sense of a Man about him, can live in Society, under the constant Dislike, and ill Opinion of his Familiars, and those he converses with. This is a Burthen too heavy for humane Sufferance: And he must be made up of irreconcilable Contradictions, who can take Pleasure in Company, and yet be insensible of Contempt and Disgrace from his Companions⁴⁵.

The passage might be interpreted as a reply to the Stoic Epictetus, according to whom the only true injury which the "apathetic" sage could suffer was the willful abandonment of his moral purpose, not the evil which others could inflict on him. Locke considered the insensibility of the sage as illusory: the expectation of enjoying a good reputation was a powerful incentive to act virtuously in his opinion⁴⁶.

Much more Stoical were Locke's remarks concerning vehement passions, which he insisted should be moderated in order to recover freedom of mind (a Stoical theme): a "boisterous Passion hurries our Thoughts, as a Hurricane does our Bodies - he declared in the *Essay*,- without leaving us the liberty of thinking on other things"⁴⁷. Turbulent passions disturb the memory⁴⁸ and mislead our judgment⁴⁹, he continued, therefore they need to be strictly controlled.

Amongst vehement passions, in the *Essay* Locke mentioned violent bodily pain, love and anger⁵⁰; in *Of the Conduct of Understanding*, he

⁴³Ibi, II, xxi, 44, 261.

⁴⁴Ibi, II, xxi, 39, 257.

⁴⁵Ibi, II, xxviii, 12, 357.

⁴⁶See Locke, Reputation (1678), in *Political Essays*, 271-72; *Some Thoughts*, § 61, 119.

⁴⁷Locke, *Essay*, II xxi, 12, 239-40.

⁴⁸Ibi, II, x, 7, 152-53.

⁴⁹Ibi II, xxi, 67, 278. See also ibi, IV, xx, 7, 711, where "predominant passions" are characterized as one of the causes of men's wrongly suspending their assent to propositions supported by "real Probabilities".

⁵⁰Ibidem; see also ibi, II, xxi, 38, 256, where Locke mentions the "impatient desire of revenge".

added fear and grief⁵¹. In the afore-mentioned journal note of 1677, grief was characterized as the pain of the mind which arises “from the loss of a friend”⁵²; in the *Essay*, grief received peculiar treatment, being described as one of those obstinate passions against which reason cannot prevail. In Locke’s view, grief had its source in an irrational mechanism of the mind, the association of ideas due to a lively impression in which they had been once perceived together; in the memory of a mother who had lost her offspring, this was the example included in the *Essay*, the idea of her child would always be linked to that of the enjoyment it procured for her and of its loss, a link which only time could weaken:

The Death of a Child, that was the daily delight of his Mother's Eyes, and joy of her Soul, rends from her Heart the whole comfort of her Life, and gives her all the torment imaginable; use the Consolations of Reason in this case, and you were as good preach Ease to one on the Rack, and hope to allay, by rational Discourses, the pain of his Joints tearing asunder. Till time has by disuse separated the sense of that Enjoyment and its loss from the *Idea* of the Child returning to her Memory, all Representations, though never so reasonable, are in vain; and therefore some in whom the union between these *Ideas* is never dissolved, spend their Lives in Mourning, and carry an incurable Sorrow to their Graves⁵³.

The same example was quoted in the *Conduct*, though without introducing the comparison between grief and strong bodily pain: “a kind mother drooping under the loss of a child is not able to bear a part as she was wont in the discourse of the company or conversation of her friends”⁵⁴. Locke did not insist here, as he had done in the *Essay*, on the intractability of grief by reasonable arguments; rather, great emphasis was placed on the loss of freedom which this passion implied. Vehement passions lay the mind under “the power of an enchantment”, he declared, so that men “see not what passess before their eyes”; the Stoical theme of freedom of the mind was much insisted on in the *Conduct*. As for remedies, Locke did not

⁵¹Locke, *Conduct*, 238.

⁵²Locke, “Pleasure and Pain”, 268. In another journal note written on July 13, 1676, Locke characterized grief in more general terms: “In our English language we call that which is an uneasiness in the minde trouble or greife” (Locke, *An Early Draft*, 81).

⁵³ Locke, *Essay*, II,xxxiii, 13, 398-99.

⁵⁴ Locke, *Conduct*, 239.

suggest a specific one for grief as he had done in the *Essay* (*i. e.* time, though it could be sometimes inefficacious). Rather, he seemed to encourage a unique, severe discipline against all the various impediments depriving the intellect of its freedom:

Striveing and strugling will prevail if we constantly in all such occasions make use of it. We must never indulge these trivial attentions of thought. As soon as we find the mind makes it self a business of noe thing, we should immediately disturb and check it, introduce new and more serious considerations and not leave till we have beaten it off from the pursuit it was upon⁵⁵.

Training oneself to contrast powerful passions, Locke affirmed in the *Conduct*, would lead man to become “fully master of his own thoughts”; the relevance of this training was insisted on also in *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, where moderating desire and appetites was characterized as one of the fundamental goals of education. Locke recommended parents and tutors should enforce their children’s minds and bodies, so as to render them “vigorous, easy, and strong, by the custom of having their Inclinations in Subjection, and their Bodies exercised with Hardships”⁵⁶. Particular care, he insisted, should be devoted to making children able to suffer the many accidents of life in a manly way:

brawniness and insensibility of Mind is the best Armour we can have, against the common Evils and Accidents of Life; and being a Temper that is to be got by Exercise and Custom, more than any other way, the practice of it should be begun betimes, and happy is he that is taught it early⁵⁷.

The Stoical insensibility which Locke commended in *Some Thoughts* was conceived of as the fundamental safeguard against the many sufferings of life: as his correspondence reveals, this was a permanent conviction of his. Locke recommended insensibility to his friend James Tyrrell when his wife was seriously ill: a letter from Tyrrell of 29 August 1687, which answered to a lost one from Locke, confirmed this. The latter had intended to prepare Tyrrell for the possible loss of his wife (who in fact died) through Stoical arguments, which Tyrrell however considered not apt to his circumstances:

⁵⁵Ibi, 242.

⁵⁶Locke, *Some Thoughts*, § 107, 167.

⁵⁷Ibi, § 113, 173.

I must now thank you for those philosophic hints you give me: and hope I shall be able to make use of them, tho that callousnesse of soul you mention, if it be not naturall, is scarce attaineable, but by often fretting and gauling of it in its tenderest parts by the losse of those Friends and relations wee most value; which not being my case till now no wonder if I find my soul, too tender and unprovided to bear them; as I ought. [...] had wee bin so happy I believe we might have enjoyed her longer: but as it is, she is infinitely much happier then in the continueall trouble, and uneasynesse she was in for want of health. So that her death in respect of her self, was the greatest gaine that could come to her, and it was onely a losse to her poor Children; and my self⁵⁸.

The “callousnesse of soul” to which Tyrrell referred, and which he considered as both unnatural and impossible to obtain without prolonged training, was Stoical imperturbability or *apatheia*: to this, Tyrrell opposed a Christian approach to bereavement. The death of his wife, he affirmed, had deprived him and his children of a great good; the only consolation was knowing her in a better state, not philosophical arguments.

Probably the content of Locke’s letter to Tyrrell was not very dissimilar to that of another he sent to Damaris Cudworth in 1687, on the occasion of her mother’s illness; Locke’s letter is lost, but we may guess something of its content from Damaris’ answer. “All that you say - she wrote- I must owne is very Reasonable; and would not have beene I hope without some efficacie”, she continued, alluding to the eventuality of her mother’s death. However, Damaris added, “should that loss ever befall me, I must believe for several Reasons that few Can be Capable to judge of the Greatness of it”⁵⁹. Damaris might have not considered Locke as one of these few, because of his “very reasonable” way of approaching grief⁶⁰.

One year before, Locke had written to his friend Edward Clarke in order to express his concern for his son’s illness; he had shown sincere participation in his sufferings (“I [shall] add the same earnestness of prayers and wishes that I would for my own”, he had affirmed), yet he had also cautioned Clarke against the power of grief:

⁵⁸ J. Tyrrell to Locke, Correspondence 3, 255.

⁵⁹ Lady Masham to Locke, 7 Nov. 1687, Correspondence 3, 293.

⁶⁰ Lady Masham to Locke, 3 Oct. 1687, Correspondence 3, 277.

But whatever be the event, and how well soever the object deserves it, yet have a care it prevail not too powerfully upon you. Consider what reason was given you for, and that that, and religion, are of [value only if] they are to be consulted and hearkened to at such times as this when we have need of their counsels⁶¹.

The marked concern Locke demonstrated for the overwhelming power of grief, and his preference for Stoical rather than Christian argumentations in this regard, were surely motivated by his medical competence: grief was viewed as a potentially fatal passion in the seventeenth century, as was attested by bills of mortality which often mentioned it among the causes of death⁶². Several physicians warned against the unhealthy effects of this passion: in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton made grief one of the causes of melancholy and claimed that it “overthrows the natural heat, perverts the good estate of body and mind, and makes them [those afflicted by it] weary of their lives”⁶³, and in his *Κλινική* James Hart⁶⁴ declared that excessive grief would “to some procure irrecoverable Consumptions”, dry the brain and bone marrow⁶⁵, hinder digestion, interrupt rest, and “prove a cause of many dangerous diseases”. “Galen himselfe - he continued - maketh answer that one may dye of these passions, and to this doe all Physitians assent; and experience maketh it so appeare”. Similarly, the academic Robert Bolton insisted that of “all other passions of the Soule, sadnesse, and grief graves most upon the vitall spirits; dries up soonest the freshest marrow in the bones; and most sensibly suckes out the purest, and refinedst bloud in the heart”⁶⁶. Sydenham considered grief as one of the

⁶¹ Locke to E. Clarke, 17 Dec. 1686, Correspondence 3, 79.

⁶²Cf. A. Lawrence, *Godly Grief: Individual Responses to Death in Seventeenth Century Britain*, in Houlbrooke ed., *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, 75. See also Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 393; MacDonald, *The Mystical Bedlam*, 181-82.

⁶³ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 163.

⁶⁴ J. Hart, *Κλινική, or the Diet of the Diseased*, London 1633, 393–95. As a remedy against grief, Hart recommended vigilance and circumspection, accommodation and distraction.

⁶⁵ This characterization of grief, which was also in Burton’s *Anatomy*, was taken from Proverbs, 17, 22: “a broken spirit drieth the bones”.

⁶⁶Bolton, *Instructions*, 21. Regarding remedies, Bolton suggested avoiding idleness and solitude and reading the Scriptures (*ibi*, 582). Bolton insisted that divines sometimes held even “godly sorrow” unseasonable, “when it unfitteth the body or minde to good duties” (*ibi*, 587). Like many other physicians of their time, both Hart and Bolton differentiated

causes of bilious colic⁶⁷; William Salmon's annotations to Sydenham's *Processus Integri* confirmed that grief was considered as potentially conducive to death⁶⁸, and that it was viewed as the cause of serious illness by several physicians. "Grief alone - he wrote -, as Helmont has observed, is able to cause a Dropsie"⁶⁹. The unanimous consensus regarding the unhealthiness of grief to which Salmon alluded clarified Locke's apprehension for his friends experiencing bereavement, the main cause of grief; it also clarified the severe attitude toward mourning which he manifested in his letters of condolence, on which I will dwell in the following paragraph.

LOCKE ON CONDOLENCE

Locke's letters of condolence expressed an elevated degree of intolerance towards mourning, as the severe warnings against the overwhelming power of grief he addressed to those experiencing bereavement reveal. This intolerance contrasted with the more indulgent attitude prevailing in his time. Attitudes towards mourning were changing already at the end of the sixteenth century, when its total condemnation, typical of many theological and moral tracts of the century (such as Thomas Becon's *The Sicke mannes Salve*, one of the most popular religious tracts of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century), was gradually giving way to more tolerant conceptions, as those instantiated in the works of Robert Rollock, William Sclater, Zacharie Boyd and William Cole⁷⁰. Grieving was no longer seen

grief occasioned by humoral imbalance from sorrow originating from a repentant conscience, and considered "phantasie" as crucial in physical and moral therapy.

⁶⁷Sydenham, *On Acute and Chronic Diseases*, in *Works II*, p. 199.

⁶⁸Salmon, *Praxis Medica*, 457.

⁶⁹ *Ibi*, 328. See also *ibi*, 469: "Grief, Anger, and all other Passions of the Mind are to be avoided, because they make a violent Commotion in the Bile, and bilious Diarrhoea's have often been observed. Platerus found a Looseness to follow upon extream Grief. And Wallaeus has observed Diarrhoea's to follow upon Fright and Fears. I also once found Diarrhoea to follow upon Grief for the death of a Child".

⁷⁰Regarding these authors and their attitude towards grief, see Pigman, *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy*, 27-51. In his *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 5, 75, 2 (*Works*, 269), Hooker showed a sympathetic attitude towards moderate mourning: "For signification of love towards them that are departed mourning is not denied to be a thing convenient. As

either as subversive of the rule of reason and domestic or social order, nor as evidence of a lack of faith, as it was in the early Church Fathers⁷¹, but as conforming to the teaching of the Scriptures, if moderate; in the letters, condolences ceased to be an opening gambit (a ploy to secure the bereaved attention before marshalling reasons to overcome grief) and became an integral part, occasionally their main purpose⁷². Preachers' funeral sermons encouraged pious grieving supported by the hope in an afterlife and by the persuasion that sorrow renders God's comforts accessible⁷³; one of the most respected and imitated preachers of his day, Jeremy Taylor, in one of his sermons prayed that "the heap of sorrow" which afflicted the bereaved might "swell [his] piety till it breaks into the greatest joyes of God and of religion", and insisted on grieving as an occasion "to shear tears of repentance" for one's own sins⁷⁴.

Nothing of this genre was to be found in Locke's letters of condolence, which attested both a high degree of Stoical severity with reference to grief, and a pathologization of mourning, intended as an unhealthy condition. Traditional Christian consolatory argumentation was absent; grief appeared to be something of which one should be rid as soon as possible.

The first letter of condolence in Locke's epistolary is the work of a twenty-one year old student steeped in the reading of the classics; it was addressed to a certain "T.A.E."⁷⁵, who had lost her husband recently. "I would not willingly renew in your memory- so the letter began- the sad thoughts of your late losse and instead of drying your eyes draw fresh tears into them when time and reason hath wiped them away". The conventional

in truth the Scripture every where doth approve lamentation made unto this end. The Jews by our Saviour's tears therefore, gathered in this case that his love towards Lazarus was great".

⁷¹Tertullian, Cyprian and the pseudo-Augustinian *Sermones de consolatione mortuorum* based their position on 1 Thess. 4,13-14 ("But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him"). They took this as a prohibition of all mourning and as evidence of the sin of despair, not just as a prohibition of moderate mourning.

⁷² See Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family*, 245-47.

⁷³ See Lange, *Telling Tears in the English Renaissance*, 122-124.

⁷⁴ Taylor, *Countess of Carbery's Funeral Sermon* (1650), in *Discourses*, 3, 265.

⁷⁵ Locke to T.A.E., 1653, *Correspondence* 1, 14-15.

incipit bespoke the influence of Seneca's *consolationes*⁷⁶; also the various arguments in the rest of the letter (the appeal to "time and reason" as the best remedies against grief; the conception of death as bringing release from the miseries of this life; the definition of natural love as limited and the appeal to death as a common fate) were drawn from the inventory of traditional Stoic consolatory *topoi*. These arguments were quite usual in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century consolatory writings on death⁷⁷, yet the emphasis which Locke placed on the irrationality of mourning was more marked. Christian consolatory arguments were absent; no sympathy was shown towards the bereaved, no mention was made of the good qualities of the deceased in order to console the bereaved for his loss.

Several years later, in a letter addressed to his friend Benjamin Furly on the loss of his wife⁷⁸, Locke resorted to another conventional consolatory *topos* which Christian literature had inherited from the Stoics: dead people should be considered as only being "lent" to those who loved them, who therefore had no reason to complain about their loss. However, greater emphasis was placed on the necessity to remove grief as soon as possible, in order to be able to comply with one's domestic duties and to avoid its dangerous consequences, *in primis* the loss of health:

Though I am very much concerned and troubled for your great losse, yet your sorrow being of that kinde which time and not arguments is wont to cure, I know not whether I should say any thing to you to abate your grief, but that, it serveing to no purpose at all but making you thereby the more unfit to supply the losse of their mother to your remaining children, (who now more need your care, help, and comfort,) the sooner you get rid of it, the better it will be both for them and you. If you are convinced this is fit to be don, I need not make use to you of the common though yet reasonable topicks of consolation. [...] I wonder not at the greatness of your grief, but I shall wonder if you let it prevaile on you; your thinking of retireing some whither from

⁷⁶See Seneca, *Consolatio ad matrem Helviam*, 1, 2 : "dolori tuo, dum recens saeviret, sciebat occurrendum non esse ne illum ipsa solacia inritarent et accenderent".

⁷⁷In *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying* (1651), one of the most influential books of this genre, Jeremy Taylor insisted on the shortness and miseries of human life as well as on the irrationality of complaining about them.

⁷⁸Locke to B. Furly, 28 April 1691, *Correspondence* 4, 253-255.

businessse was very naturall upon the first stroake of it, but here I must interpose to advise you the contrary. It is to give yourself up to all the ills that grief and melancholy can produce, which are some of the worst we suffer in this life: want of health, want of spirit, want of usefull thought, is the state of those who abandon themselves to griefs, whereof businessse is the best, the safest, and the quickest cure.

Probably another of Locke's friends, Martha Lockart, knew full well how much he disapproved of indulging in grief and mourning, given what she wrote to him on occasion of the loss of her brother: "tho I kno' you will not allowe it reasonable, to spend many thought's on what is not at all in ones power to help; yet it is not possible to avoide it, in some occasions"⁷⁹. Like Tyrrell, Martha considered Locke's rational approach to grief as impracticable; by contrast, another of Locke's female acquaintances, Frances St. John, seemed to much appreciate the rational recommendations he had addressed to her on the loss of her sister:

Reason and Religion being arguments always usefull and nesenary upon such occations, be they never so often repeated there being so great a duty in considering how to make a right use of the Affliction sent, and which our nature requires many helps and assistances for the performance of ⁸⁰.

Frances however noted there was something missing in Locke's epistle, a "part of your letter which you seemingly designed to avoide": she was probably referring to the fact that no sympathy had been shown towards her suffering. Locke had not manifested any participation in her great sorrow: he had rather reminded Frances of her Christian duties, which prescribed not to indulge in grief.

Locke's rationalistic, apathetic attitude towards mourning seems to have had a single exception in his correspondence, a letter he wrote to Doctor Thomas Molyneux⁸¹ in order to condole him for the loss of his brother William. The latter was Locke's intimate friend; here is the text of the letter:

DEATH has, with a violent hand, hastily snatched from you a dear brother. I doubt not but, on this occasion, you need all the consolation can be given to one unexpectedly bereft of so worthy and near a relation. Whatever inclination I may have to alleviate your sorrow, I bear too great a share in the loss, and am too sensibly touched with it

⁷⁹ Martha Lockhart to Locke, 11 Febr. 1696, Correspondence, 5, 532.

⁸⁰ Francis St. John to Locke, 16 Feb. 1700, Correspondence 7, 12.

⁸¹ Locke to Dr. Th. Molyneux, 27 Oct. 1698, Correspondence 6, 498.

myself, to be in a condition to discourse you on this subject, or do anything but mingle my tears with yours. I have lost, in your brother, not only an ingenious and learned acquaintance, that all the world esteemed; but an intimate and sincere friend, whom I truly loved, and by whom I was truly loved: and what a loss that is, those only can be sensible who know how valuable, and how scarce, a true friend is, and how far to be preferred to all other sorts of treasure. He has left a son, who I know was dear to him, and deserved to be so as much as was possible, for one of his age. I cannot think myself wholly incapacitated from paying some of the affection and service that was due from me to my dear friend, as long as he has a child, or a brother, in the world. If, therefore, there be any thing, at this distance, wherein I, in my little sphere, may be able to serve your nephew or you, I beg you, by the memory of our deceased friend, to let me know it, that you may see that one who loved him so well, cannot but be tenderly concerned for his son.

The tone of the letter is clearly different from that of those Locke had addressed to his other acquaintances; however, though he appeared much more sympathetic with reference to the bereaved's suffering, what he did was not, properly speaking, to console him. Neither the comfort of reason nor that of religion were mentioned; rather, Locke offered his services to Thomas, in order to attest his great affection for his late brother.

Another, extremely cursory letter of condolence written by Locke to his friend Anthony Collins in 1703, on the occasion of the latter's loss of his wife, confirmed his apathetic attitude towards mourning:

None of your concerns are of Indifference to me. You may from thence conclude I take part in your late great loss. But I consider you as a Philosopher and a Christian: and so spare you the trouble of reading from me what your thoughts will much better suggest to you⁸².

As in the letters to Frances St. John and Edward Clarke, Locke suggested Anthony should recur to reason and religion in order to deal with his loss; religion came after philosophy because it could not command man something contrasting with his own reason, as grieving surely was for Locke. The consolation that religion could offer to the bereaved was not

⁸²Locke to A. Collins, 4 May 1703, Correspondence 7, 776.

something he thought necessary to remind Anthony of; the extreme brevity of the letter highlighted Locke's reluctance to sympathize with the suffering of the bereaved, an attitude more in tune with Stoical rather than with Christian teaching.

In the *Essay*, Locke had insisted on the ineffectuality of any appeal to reason in the case of grief; however, in his correspondence he approached grief essentially through rational argumentation. This strategy might have appeared to him as the safest one, because it avoided feeding the mind of the bereaved with painful remembrances but also because it did not require any personal involvement. Locke's somewhat apathetic attitude towards bereaved people suggests he might have regarded empathizing with their afflictions as a dangerous form of indulgence, favouring the spread of an unhealthy condition: this seems to be confirmed by the correspondence he entertained in 1669 with one of his female acquaintances, Margaret Beavis. Locke was particularly concerned for Margaret's tenderness towards others' sufferings⁸³, an attitude he severely disapproved of:

he that goes about to comfort another with tears in his owne eys - he wrote to Margaret -, is a professed dissembler with an ill looke, and at the same time by his owne example confuteing his discourse does but confirme the malady he pretends to cure, and is as ridiculously busy as a drunken preaching up temperance. the afflictions of others are but multiplied not lessened by the share we take in them and he that would remove the greif from an others minde by placing it in his owne does as much good as he that to save his neighbours when it is in a flame sets fire on his owne house, where by the mischeif is only made the greater and more uncapable of remedy⁸⁴

Locke was probably aware that his arguments might sound somehow rude, for he added: "I would not be thought by this to perswade you to any indecency or ill nature, but to be wise and carefull of your quiet. Every ones

⁸³Writing to his friend Dr. John Mapletoft on 10 July 1670 (Correspondence 1,340), Locke expressed his concern for Margaret's melancholic temperament: "You know how soft she is in this part of her soule, too apt to receive and retain such uneasy impressions, toward the defacing whereof time has hitherto don but litle". A similar concern was expressed in the correspondence which Locke entertained with some of his other female acquaintances: see Locke to Mary Clarke, 19 Sept. 1696, Correspondence 5, 701; Anna Grigg to Locke, 12 Dec. 1680, Correspondence 2, 312; Damaris Cudworth to Locke, 15 Jan. 1685, Correspondence, 2, 678, and 10 June 1682, Correspondence, 2, 521.

⁸⁴ Locke to M. Beavis, December 1669, Correspondence 1, 327.

share of misfortunes is heavy enough for his owne shoulders without borrowing load of his neighbour". This latter recommendation recalled a passage in the Gospel, "every day has its own sorrow". However, Locke continued: "he is very fond of discontents that hunts abroad for them in the concernments of other: and rather than want troubles will adopt those of others". Was Locke insinuating that there might be something intrinsically wrong in sympathizing with others' sorrow, a sort of unnatural, sadomasochistic love for suffering? Surely Freud would have approved. However, he did not insist on this point, preferring to invoke the Stoical necessity of being armed against the many accidents of life and the unhealthy consequences of sorrow, two arguments which, in his opinion, should have convinced Margaret to dismiss her over-indulgent attitude towards others' sufferings.

Margaret had clearly noted that Locke's argumentation could scarcely be reconciled with Christian teaching; in answer to him⁸⁵, she appealed to the Golden Rule ("I presently lay before mee the just rule of doing as I would be done by"), and protested the impracticability of his apathetic discipline: "I know that even you my Deare brother with all your philosophy are as little able to defend your selfe against such defeates as you are Liable to as the verryest woman of us all". Locke's answer was somehow disarming⁸⁶: he desired that Margaret should always be "good natured" and "civil" towards others, yet he continued to forbid her "sympathy, and a tender sense of others sorrows". "I confesse ingeniously- he remarked- I know not how in my owne thoughts, to reconcile these difficulties, and can hope only to finde it donne in your actions"; however, he insisted that "to a rationall creature one should not need to make use of arguments to persuade her to be happy, the first degree whereof is to be rid of trouble and vexation". To sympathize with others' sorrow meant looking for vexation in Locke's opinion, and was therefore inconsistent with man's rational desire for happiness⁸⁷: this conviction might explain his reluctance to admit sympathy among the moral duties recommended by Christianity⁸⁸, confirmed by his writings. The insensibility which Locke commended in

⁸⁵ M. Beavis to Locke, 24 Jan. 1670, Correspondence 1, 329.

⁸⁶ Locke to M. Beavis, 27 January 1670, Correspondence 1, 333.

⁸⁷ Locke considered man's desire for happiness as innate: see *Essay I*, iii,3, 67.

⁸⁸ Regarding this, see the conclusion.

his letters of condolence and in *Some Thoughts* suggests however that his medical concern for the contagion of grief might have been the main cause of his perplexities concerning sympathy: compassion could be an unhealthy indulgence, in his opinion, potentially conducive to death. Clearly, Locke had somehow to face the inconsistency which Margaret had noticed: how to harmonize Stoical apathy with Christian teaching, which considered moral sympathy as a fundamental duty? His solution to this problem consisted in reinterpreting the Christian command, as I shall argue in the conclusion.

CONCLUSION

The Greek etymon *sympatheia* literally means “feeling or suffering with”; it was rendered by the Latin word *compassio*, which can be traced back to Tertullian. Variants of *sympatheia*, applied in the sense of fellow feeling between and among human beings, appear in the New Testament⁸⁹; Locke was surely well acquainted with those passages containing them. The *consolatio afflicti vicini* he spoke of in his *Essays of the Law of Nature* was to be intended as a commandment of natural law, albeit a circumstantial one: with reference to the Christian duties of consoling the distressed, outward worshipping, bringing relief to one in trouble and feeding the hungry, Locke affirmed that “we are not obliged to provide with shelter and to refresh with food any and every man, or at any time whatever, but only when a poor man’s misfortune calls for our alms and our property supplies means for charity”⁹⁰. To console grieving people was therefore to be intended as acting generously towards them; sympathy intended as feeling others’ sorrow seems to have had no role in Locke’s works. In the *Second Treatise of Government*, sympathy was identified with that natural sociability which drives men to gather together and trust each other in the state of nature⁹¹; the “Sympathies and Antipathies observable in Men” to which Locke referred in the *Essay*⁹² had nothing to do with the

⁸⁹See for instance 1 Pet. 3,8: “be ye all of one mind, having compassion of one another [sumpatheis], love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous”; see also 1 Cor. 12, 25-26: “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it”.

⁹⁰ Locke, *Essays*, 193-4.

⁹¹ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 404.

⁹² Locke, *Essay*, II, xxxiii, 7, 396.

Christian commandment of consoling the afflicted, for they introduced a natural phenomenon (a certain affinity between different natures, which Descartes had promised to explain in mechanistic terms)⁹³. In *Some Thoughts* Locke recommended compassion, but the meaning he assigned to the term (parental indulgence towards children)⁹⁴ had little to do with Christian sympathy.

In *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, Locke similarly proposed a reinterpretation of Christian sympathy: paraphrasing *Romans* 12,15, “Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep” (a sentence which was intended by many seventeenth-century writers as the biblical justification of mourning), Locke modified the punctuation, so that the verse was joined by a colon to the subsequent one, “Be of the same mind one towards the other”⁹⁵. Verse 16 was therefore intended as explicative of the preceding one: sharing others’ feelings became synonymous with looking for a convergence of opinions. Besides, when exposing the content of *2 Corinthians* 1, 4, “[God] Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble”, Locke commented that “to comfort” was to be intended as giving the example of bearing afflictions with patience⁹⁶; as in the *Essays*, the duty of comforting the afflicted was reinterpreted in terms of acting well in their regards.

Empathizing with others’ sorrow could not be, for Locke, the true sense of the teaching of the Gospel. The disruptive power which medical literature attributed to grief prevented him from considering sympathy as a Christian duty. God could not have commanded man to do something unhealthy: this rational conviction was probably the main reason for Locke’s reluctance to include compassion amongst the Christian duties. Stoic apathy, as well as Stoical consideration of emotions as *perturbationes animi*, appeared to him to be much more recommendable with reference to

⁹³Over the course of the seventeenth century, natural sympathy was increasingly called into question; Descartes, Bacon, Boyle, Charleton and others attempted to reinterpret it in physical terms. See Lobis, *The Virtue of Sympathy*, 12-18.

⁹⁴Locke, *Some Thoughts*, 146, 173, 179. Sometimes Locke refers to compassion as the opposite of cruelty (*ibi*, 163, 180-81).

⁹⁵Locke, *A Paraphrase*, 2, 583-585.

⁹⁶*Ibi*, 1, 264-65.

grief; the Stoical severity which Locke manifested in the *Conduct* with reference to this passion, which was no longer entrusted to the cure of time as in the *Essay* but rather to the discipline of a severe training, reflected an increasing concern for its dangerous effects, confirmed by his letters of condolence.

The difficulty which Locke encountered in reconciling Christian sympathy with his medical beliefs might explain his extremely cursory appeals to religion in his letters of condolence. He might have found in the works of Ben Jonson, or in those by Erasmus or Tertullian, which were in his library⁹⁷, an example of the severe Christian attitude which he considered as appropriate with reference to grief and mourning. Like these authors, Locke probably considered grieving for the loss of someone as irreconcilable with the Christian hope in an afterlife: Christ had not left his apostles “filled with grief”, he affirmed in *The Reasonableness*⁹⁸. However, the main reason for Locke’s apathetic attitude towards grief seems to have been medical: the therapeutic paradigm of the “sick” mourner exerted a certain power over him, as it would do on other physicians in subsequent centuries, because of its guaranteeing a defence against the contagion of grief. Sympathizing with others’ sorrow was not, for Locke, a Christian imperative, but rather an unhealthy and therefore sinful indulgence.

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⁹⁷ Locke possessed all the works by Jonson: see Harrison and Laslett, *The Library*, no. 1583. In his famous epitaph for the death of his seven years old child, Jonson wrote: “For why/Will man lament the state he should envy?/ To have so soon scap'd World's and flesh's rage,/ And, if no other misery, yet age?”. Regarding Erasmus and Tertullian, see *The Library*, respectively nos. 1063-1064b and 2859-2859a.

⁹⁸Locke, *Reasonableness*, 99.

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