



The Problem Of Enthusiasm

By:

John Locke (1632-1704)

Modernization, format corrections, additions and footnotes by Barry Vaughan¹

1. *The love of truth is necessary.* Anyone who would seriously go searching for the truth should first prepare his mind with a love of it. Because, if he does not love it, he will not go to much trouble to find it; nor will he be bothered if he misses it.

There is nobody in the educated community who does not claim to love the truth; neither is there a rational being who would not be offended to be thought otherwise of. And yet, for all this, one may truly say, that there are very few people who love the truth for its own sake, even among those who persuade themselves that they do. How we know if a person loves the truth for its own sake is worth understanding, and I believe there is one undeniable sign of it, namely, that she will *not entertain any belief with more assurance than the evidence it is built upon will warrant*. It is plain that whoever goes beyond this degree of acceptance believes something, not because it is true, but for some other reason (perhaps because it is beneficial for some other purpose). The *evidence* that any proposition is true (except for self-evident propositions) lies *only* in the proofs we have for it, and any degree of acceptance given it beyond what the evidence supports, is because of some desire other than the love of truth. This is obvious because it is just as impossible that the love of truth should carry our assent *beyond* the available evidence, as that the love of truth should make us accept any proposition for the sake of evidence which it *lacks*—which is in effect to love something as a truth, because it is always possible, or probable, that it may *not* be true. Any proposition that does not gain entrance into our minds by the irresistible light of self-evidence, or by the force of logical demonstration, must be made *probable* by inductive arguments that make it reasonable for us to accept. And, we should never accept any belief unless it is sufficiently supported by such arguments. Any degree of reliability or authority we give to a proposition beyond what it receives from its arguments, is nothing more than our *desire* for it to be true, and this is evidence that one does not love the truth for its own sake: because the truth is neither more or less true because of our desire that it be true, and thus, how we *feel* about a proposition is *never* evidence that it *is* true.

2. *The origin of authority-based belief.* Assuming the authority to dictate to others, and having the boldness to tell others what to believe, is obvious evidence of biasness, and a corruption of our judgment. For it is almost unimaginable that those who impose their beliefs on others, have not already imposed on their own mind. Who can expect rational arguments and logical conviction from someone whose mind is not accustomed to thinking rationally when he deals

¹ “Of Enthusiasm” is Chapter 19 of Book 4 of John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, second edition, published in 1694. The full text is now available as an open source text. This translation/moderization is my own and is based on the Project Gutenberg edition (www.gutenberg.org). The best source for those interested in Locke is the critical edition edited and introduced by Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford University Press, 1975.

with himself or others? Anyone who violates her own rational faculties tyrannizes her own mind, and usurps the prerogative that belongs to truth alone: that prerogative is to command acceptance *solely by its own authority*, i.e. by and in proportion to the *evidence* that it presents.

3. The force of enthusiasm which takes away reason. I shall now take the opportunity to consider a third possible justification of belief, which among some people has the same authority, and is relied upon as much as faith or reason; I mean *enthusiasm*: which, while setting aside reason, proposes to justify divine revelation without it. Thus, it sets aside *both* reason and revelation, and puts in their place the unwarranted desires of a person's own brain, and assumes them as a foundation for both belief *and* action.

4. The relationship between reason and revelation. *Reason* is natural revelation, whereby the eternal Father of light and fountain of all knowledge [i.e., God], communicates to rational beings that part of the universe that He has made available to the five senses. *Divine revelation* is natural reason *enlarged* by a set of beliefs communicated by God *directly* into the mind; which reason justifies—by the testimony and evidence it gives—that they come from God.² Thus, if a person sets aside reason to make way for revelation, she puts out the light of both. This is analogous to persuading someone to blind themselves in order to more clearly see the distant light of a star through a telescope.

5. The origin of enthusiasm. Since it is easier to justify beliefs and control behavior through immediate “revelation” than by using the laborious, and sometimes unsuccessful, method of reason, it should not be surprising that some people are prone to *assume* they have a divine revelation and thus persuade themselves that their beliefs and actions are directed by God, *especially* when they cannot provide rational evidence or logical justification for them. Throughout time we see people in whom melancholy (i.e., depression)³ is mixed with piety, and who believe they are more familiar with God, or who have special access to God's mind than others, and who persuade themselves that they have immediate and frequent communication with God and directly receive commands from the Divine Spirit. It cannot be denied that God is *able* to enlighten our minds with beliefs he communicates directly to us like a beam of light from the sun: and they believe He has promised to do this. Who, then, should have a more firm expectation of special revelation since they are “His” people, specially chosen, and who depend entirely on Him?

6. The enthusiastic impulse. Their minds being thus prepared, they believe whatever groundless opinion which settles itself strongly upon their fancy is an illumination of the Spirit of God, and therefore of divine authority. And, any action they strongly desire to perform, no matter how odd, they believe is a call or command from heaven, and therefore it must be obeyed—it is a divine commission, and they cannot be wrong in doing what they *feel* they should do.

² For Locke, the problem is not whether divinely revealed beliefs are true, but rather whether a particular belief is, in fact, revealed by God. If a belief were revealed by God, it would have to be true because God is a perfect being and therefore incapable of deception. So, the role of reason is not to justify or give evidence *that* the revealed belief is true, but rather to verify that the revelation is genuinely *from* God.

³ From the Greek – μελαγχολία (*melancholia*) meaning “black bile”. Derived from Humorism; the proto-medical theory of disease that held health and disease were caused by a balance/imbalance between the four “humors” or fluids: yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, and blood. Melancholy, or what is known today as depression, was supposed to be caused by an excess of black bile.

7. What is meant by ‘enthusiasm’. This is how I understand the term ‘enthusiasm’, which, though founded neither on reason nor divine revelation, but arising from an excited or presumptuous brain, is more powerful in generating beliefs and motivating peoples’ actions than either reason or divine revelation (*or even both together*), once it gets established. This is because humans are most obedient to their own desires; and the whole person is likely to act more vigorously when they are directed by their own inclinations. Freed from the constraint of logic and reason, our subjective desires take on the force of divine authority when they operate outside the limitations of common sense.

8. Enthusiasm accepts its supposed illumination without search and proof. The strange opinions and exaggerated behaviors caused by enthusiasm should, in themselves, be a sufficient warning against it as a principle of belief and action—since it is so likely to misguide us. However, because we love extraordinary things, the feeling of being special and above the ordinary and natural way of knowing flatters many people’s vanity and satisfies their laziness and ignorance. And once they become accustomed to this immediate “revelation”, of “illumination” without effort, and “certainty” without proof and examination, it is difficult to get them out of it. Reasoning is lost upon them; they believe they are above it. They “see the light” within themselves and believe it is impossible to be mistaken about what they believe. The “truth” of their beliefs is clear and obvious like the light of the noon-day sun; it demonstrates itself, and needs no other proof beyond the fact that they believe it. They “feel” the hand of God guiding them, and they “hear” the voice of the Holy Spirit, and cannot be mistaken in what they “feel”. This is how they defend their beliefs; they are convinced that reason has nothing to do with what they “know” to be true in their hearts. This kind of belief does not allow the possibility of doubt and it needs no investigation. To them it would be like asking for evidence that a light is shining if one sees it. The *feeling* of certainty that a belief is true is taken as proof *that* it is true, and therefore it does not need further proof. When the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds, it dispels doubt. We “see” it as clearly as the noon-day sun, and we do not need shadowy reason to make it clear. This “light from heaven” is strong, clear, and pure. It carries its own proof with it, and one might just as easily use a firefly to illuminate the sun as to use the dim candle of reason to examine this “internal light”.

9. How to detect Enthusiasm. What these people claim amounts to no more than this: *they are sure, because they are sure*, and their beliefs are true, because they strongly believe them. When we strip away the metaphor of “seeing” and “feeling”, this is all it is. And yet, these similes so impress them, that they are used as evidence for certainty in themselves, and they provide them as arguments to others.

10. The supposed internal light examined. Let us more closely examine this “internal light”, and this “feeling” on which they build so many beliefs. These people claim to have clear “light” which makes them “see”; they have enhanced senses and they “feel” something. They are sure this cannot be doubted because when one sees or feels, no one can dispute that they sense and feel. But at this point I would like to ask: “This ‘seeing’, is it the perception of the truth of the proposition, or that it is a revelation from God?” “Is this ‘feeling’ the awareness of a desire to do something, or is it of the Spirit of God causing an inclination in me?” These are two very different *perceptions*, and they must be carefully distinguished from one another if we are not to

deceive ourselves. I can perceive the truth of a proposition and at the same time not perceive that it is an immediate revelation from God. I can perceive the truth of a Euclidian proposition without it being—or indeed my thinking—it is a revelation. I can even perceive that I did not arrive at the proposition using ordinary reasoning, and so may *believe* it to be revealed, and still not perceive that it comes from God. There are other spirits that could cause these ideas and set them before my mind so that I perceive a connection between them, without their being caused by God.⁴ Thus, recognizing that a belief has come into my mind from an unknown source is *not* evidence that it is from God. Further, that fact that I strongly believe something is neither evidence that it is true, *nor* that it came from God. And regardless of whether it is labeled ‘light’ and ‘seeing’, it is clearly nothing more than *opinion* and *self-assurance*. And the proposition supposed to be a divine revelation is not *known* by them, but merely *believed* or *assumed* to be true. This is clear because if a proposition is *known* to be true, revelation is redundant: it is difficult to conceive how something could be revealed if it is already known. Therefore, if someone is persuaded that a belief is true, but they do not *know* that it is true, whatever they call it, it is not *seeing*, but *believing*. This is true because seeing and believing are two wholly different avenues for true beliefs to enter the mind—they are not the same. What is seen is *known* to be true by the evidence of the thing itself, but what is believed is *supposed* to be true based on some other evidence. But in order to be reliable, I must know that testimony has been given, otherwise what justification do I have for accepting the belief? I must see *that* it is God that gives the revelation, or I do not “see” anything. So, the question here is, “How do I know that God revealed this belief to me, that this impression is caused in my mind by his Holy Spirit, and therefore I ought to believe or obey?” If I do not know the answer to this question, it does not matter how much confidence I have, it is *groundless*. Whatever “light” I appeal to is nothing more than *enthusiasm*. Regardless of whether the supposedly revealed proposition is self-evident, visibly probable, or by ordinary knowledge uncertain, the proposition that must be grounded and justified is this: God is the revealer of the proposition; what I take to be a revealed belief is *certainly* put into my mind by Him, and it is not an illusion caused by some other spirit or created by my own imagination. If I am right, these people believe something is true because they *presume* that God revealed it. Is it not the case that the burden of proof that it is a genuine revelation lies with them? Otherwise all their confidence is nothing but presumption, and this “light” they are so dazzled by is nothing but an *ignis fatuus*⁵, that leads them around in a circle: it is a “revelation”, because they firmly believe it; and they firmly believe it, because it is a “revelation”.

11. *Enthusiasm fails to provide evidence that the proposition is from God.* Divine revelation requires no evidence except that it is indeed *from* God, because He can neither deceive, nor be deceived. But *how do we know* that any particular belief was put in our mind by God and is therefore genuinely revealed to us by Him and declared to us by Him (*and which we therefore ought to believe*)? This is where enthusiasm fails to provide sufficient evidence. Those possessed by enthusiasm claim to have an internal “light” by which they are “enlightened”, and given knowledge of this or that subject. But, if they know something is true they must see that it is self-evidently true or justified by rational argument. If it is true in either of these ways, it is ridiculous to suppose it is a revelation. This is because they know it is true using the same

⁴ Here he is referring to being deceived by demons or fallen angels. Such a revelation would be “supra-natural” but still not be Divine Revelation; i.e., a revelation from God.

⁵ Latin, “fool’s fire”. Meaning a false light, or optical illusion.

natural faculties as everyone else (without having to appeal to revelation). This is how all the truths, of whatever kind, come into, and are established in, our minds if we are not under inspiration. If someone says a belief is true because it is a divine revelation, they reason well. *But*, we must then demand evidence that it is a revelation from God. If they claim they cannot resist the belief because of the light it carries with it that illuminates their mind, I ask them to consider if this is anything more than what we have already considered, namely, that it must be a genuine revelation because they strongly believe it is true. All the “light” they speak of is nothing but a strong, though unwarranted, persuasion that it is true. As for rational grounds, or proofs that it is true, they must admit that they *have none*. For if they did, it would not be a revelation but rather an ordinary belief resting on the same ordinary grounds as other beliefs. And, if they believe it is true because it is a revelation, but have no evidence that it is a revelation—other than they are persuaded that it is—then they believe it is a revelation solely because they strongly believe it. But this is very shaky ground upon which to base either beliefs or actions. Can you imagine an easier way to run into the most ridiculous errors and disasters than to set up desire as the supreme and sole guide for determining which beliefs are true and which actions are right? The *strength of our belief* is no evidence that we are correct: something crooked can be just as stiff and inflexible as something straight. Men may *feel* just as positive about true beliefs as false ones. How else could we explain the intransigence we see in the zealots of opposing political parties? If the “light” which everyone thinks they have in their own mind—which in this case is nothing more than the strength of their persuasion—counts as evidence that a belief is from God, then contrary opinions have an equal claim to be inspirations. Thus, God will not only be the Father of lights, but of opposing and contradictory lights, giving people contradictory commands. If ungrounded strength of belief is evidence that a proposition is a divine revelation, then contradictory propositions will be divine truths.

12. Firmness of persuasion is no proof that a proposition is from God. This conclusion is unavoidable so long as we allow personal conviction and confidence that one is right to act as evidence for the truth. St. Paul believed himself to be doing good and on a mission from God as he persecuted the Christians whom he thought were heretics.⁶ And yet, *he* was the one that was mistaken, not them. Even good people make mistakes, and sometimes eagerly entertain erroneous beliefs which they mistake for divine truth shining in their minds with the clearest “light”.

13. What is light in the mind? Light in the mind, *true* light, is and can be nothing other than *the evidence* of the truth of a proposition. If a belief is not self-evident, all the light it has, or can have, is from the strength and validity of the arguments that support it. To speak about any other light in the mind is to put one’s self in the dark—or in the power of the Prince of Darkness—and to freely give one’s self over to a delusion, to believe a lie. If strength of persuasion is the light that guides us, I would ask, “How can anyone distinguish between the delusions of Satan and the inspirations of the Holy Ghost?” After all, he can transform himself into an angel of light. And, those who are led by the Son of the Morning⁷ are just as convinced of their “illumination”, i.e., are just as strongly persuaded that they are enlightened by the Spirit of God, as anyone who truly is. They celebrate as they give in to belief and are motivated to action; no one can be more

⁶ Acts 8:1-3.

⁷ Isaiah 14:12 – “How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, you who have weakened the nations!”

certain, no one can be more right than they are.

14. Revelation must be judged by reason. Therefore, anyone who does not wish to give in to delusion and error must submit this internal light to investigation. When God makes the prophet He does not *unmake* the man. God leaves all the natural faculties in place so that she may evaluate her inspirations, to know if they are divinely inspired or not. When God illuminates the mind with supernatural light, He does not extinguish the *natural light of reason*. If He wants us to accept a belief as true He either demonstrates it through natural reason, or makes it known to be true by evidence one cannot mistake—that it comes from Him, and can be accepted on his authority. **Reason** must be our final judge and guide in all things. I am not claiming that if reason fails to be able to justify a genuine revelation that we should reject it. Rather, we must consult reason to determine if the belief is from God. If it is rational to believe that it came from God, then reason certifies it as much as any other truth, and gives it legitimacy. If we have nothing more than the strength of our conviction to evaluate true propositions, then every belief that strikes our imagination will pass for a divine inspiration. If we fail to use reason as an objective guide to truth, inspiration and delusion, truth and falsehood, will appear equal and it will not be possible to distinguish one from the other.

15. Belief is not proof of revelation. If an internal sense of assurance (or any belief we take to be inspired by God) is consistent with the principles of reason or the Word of God—which is *proven* revelation—it is rational and we can safely accept it as true and a justifiable ground for belief and action. If a belief is *not* justified by reason or Scripture, we cannot assume it is a genuine revelation—or even a true belief—until we have some evidence that it is true *beyond* our believing that it is true. As evidence for this consider the holy men from antiquity who had divine revelations: they had evidence *beyond* their subjective confidence in the belief that demonstrated their revelation was from God. They were not on their own to justify that they had a genuine revelation, they had *visible signs* to demonstrate who the author was. Further, when they had to convince others, they were given a power to demonstrate they had a genuine commission from heaven: they had visible signs to warrant the authenticity of their message. Moses observed a bush that burned—but was not consumed—and he heard a voice from the fire. This was evidence *beyond* a subjective desire to go to Pharaoh and bring his kinsmen out of Egypt. But even this was insufficient evidence for Moses. He did not go until God gave him *further* evidence—turning his staff into a snake—which he took to be sufficient to demonstrate to the Egyptians that he had been sent by God. Similarly, Gideon was commanded by an angel to rescue Israel from the Midianites, but he demanded a visible sign that the command was from God.⁸ These, and many other examples from the lives of the prophets, are enough to prove that they did not think a subjective “seeing”, or the internal persuasion of their own correctness, was sufficient evidence, without further proof, that the revelation they received came from God (*even though the Scriptures do not mention this demand for evidence everywhere*).

16. The required criteria of a divine revelation. I would like to be clear that in the argument I have presented I do not deny that God *can*, and sometimes *does*, enlighten our minds in the apprehension of certain truths, or encourage us to do certain things, by the direct influence and assistance of the Holy Spirit *without* extraordinary signs. However, in those cases we have both *reason* and *Scripture* which are unerring guides to know if God is moving us. Wherever a belief

⁸ Judges 6:16. Gideon also demanded evidence directly from God that the mission was indeed His will. 6:36-40.

is consistent with the written word of God, or an action conforms to the dictates of reason or the Bible, we can be certain that it is justified as is. Though perhaps it is not an immediate revelation from God operating on our minds, we can be sure that it is warranted by the revelations that He *has* given us. But it is *never* the subjective power of our own persuasion that justifies our belief that it is a message from God. Nothing can do that except the written word of God or the standard of reason which is common to us all. Anytime reason or Scripture is clear about a proposition or action, we can accept it as divinely inspired. But it is *never* the strength of our belief that provides it with justification. The predisposition of our minds may strongly *suggest* an idea to us, and indeed that may be evidence that we created it. But such a predisposition will never prove it to be of divine origin or derived from heaven.

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