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Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693): Fathers and Conversational Friendship

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I imagine every one will judge it reasonable, that their Children, when little, should look upon their Parents as their Lords, their Absolute Governors; and, as such, stand in awe of them: And that, when they come to riper Years, they should look on them as their best, as their only sure Friends; and as such, love and reverence them. The Way I have mentioned, if I mistake not, is the only one to obtain this. We must look upon our Children, when grown up, to be like our selves; with the same Passions, the same Desires. We would be thought Rational Creatures, and have our Freedom; we love not to be uneasie, under constant Rebukes and Brow-beatings; nor can we bear severe Humours, and great Distance in those we converse with. Whoever has such Treatment when he is a Man, will look out other Company, other Friends, other Conversation, with whom, he can be at Ease. If therefore a strict Hand be kept over Children from the Beginning, they will in that Age be tractable, and quietly submit to it, as never having known any other: And if, as they grow up to the Use of Reason, the Rigour of Government be, as they deserve it, gently relaxed, the Father's Brow more smooth'd to them, and the Distance by Degrees abated; his former Restraints will increase their Love, when they find it was only a Kindness to them, and a Care to make them capable to deserve the Favour of their Parents, and the Esteem of every Body else.¹

For John Locke (1632–1704), life is like a pilgrimage. We were created and placed in this world to go about God's business. We each have a particular calling, such as to be a farmer or a scholar, but we also have a more general calling or duty as human beings, namely to worship God and to preserve ourselves and the rest of humankind to the best of our ability. The knowledge of this general calling is in principle available to each and every one of us if we would take the care to use

our natural faculties of sense and reason to study God's will revealed through natural law. While we are all adequately equipped to perform this task, we can benefit greatly from having friends accompanying us on this life's journey. As the passage selected above and others suggest, a child might eventually become to a father, and the father to his child, one, if not the best, of these friends.

The passage appears in Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), which was, according to the author, a modest treatise on the education of children ("The Epistle Dedicatory"). The book developed out of a series of private letters sent to his friends, Mr and Mrs Edward Clarke, who had sought advice from Locke on how best to raise and educate their son. While the main concern of this book is pedagogic, it has implications beyond, and as such sheds light on the nature and extent of fatherly authority. However, in discussions of paternal power within Locke scholarship, modern commentators typically focus on the *Two Treatises of Government* (1689),² while tending to turn to *Some Thoughts* only in passing to reinforce or to add small details to the points made in the former work. Historically though in the case of America, *Some Thoughts* rather than the *Two Treatises* seems to have left a clearer imprint on its eighteenth-century anti-patriarchal revolutionary culture.³ This essay therefore casts the spotlight on *Some Thoughts* in an attempt to draw attention to its unique contribution in this field, particularly on how it illuminates the father's role after the child matures, a subject that tends to be passed over in the scholarship. To see the significance of *Some Thoughts*, however, we first need to turn to the *Two Treatises* to set the stage.

Locke's main point in bringing up the discussion about paternal power in the *Two Treatises* was to show its irrelevance as a means of deriving political power. By contrast, paternal power had a different role to play in God's great design for humankind, namely to prepare one's offspring physically and mentally to undertake their natural duties. Locke's adversary in the *Two Treatises*, the Kentish gentleman Sir Robert Filmer, thought just the opposite: political power, indeed, absolute political power, was derived from paternal power. According to Locke, Filmer maintained that children were born in subjection to their parents, the act of begetting granting the begetter dominion over the begotten (I.50). This dominion – 'regal' or 'royal' power – is unlimited, and by this, fathers have power over the lives, liberties and estates of their children (I.9). Adam, by virtue of being the *first* father, together with God's blessing, was unique in this respect, enjoying paramount lordship over *all* his posterity, that is, the whole of humankind. This sovereign right enjoyed by Adam was then passed down to his heirs (how exactly it was transferred is

less clear), who are the present-day absolute monarchs. Thus, while enjoying absolute power over their offspring, fathers are nevertheless subject to absolute monarchs who are heirs to Adam's supreme power. But the key point stands: fatherhood gives birth to political power.⁴

Not only did Filmer hold that fathers derive political power from fatherhood, but furthermore, Locke notes, he and his followers suggested that a father's activity resembles that of God's. For 'even the power which God himself exerciseth over mankind is by right of fatherhood' (I.53). As God, the maker, created and ruled over mankind, so too fathers give life and exercise dominion over their offspring.

In his response to Filmer in the 'First Treatise', Locke begins by denying that there is a parallel between God and fathers, and so denies that fathers have the same sort of power as God. In the first instance, Locke rejects that fathers 'make' children in the sense that God does (I.52–54). In other words, God's creative work is different from our producing children, and so too the rights that follow from these respective acts. The former implies making something *ex nihilo* and fixing its nature, whereas the latter simply involves moving about pre-existing things. Creation gives the creator the rights concerning how the created should be treated. Fathers are not creators but merely the occasion, and so cannot determine how their children ought to be treated without reference to God's law. Thus fathers do not resemble God in act, and consequently, in power.⁵

Even if we do grant that parents make their children and so have absolute power over them, Locke notes that this would only mean that fathers have a conjoint right with mothers, and so would not warrant an exclusive power over their children (I.55). This point has been taken up by feminist scholars, leading to a vast debate over gender equality within Locke's thought. This essay, however, will focus not on this discussion but on the significance of Locke's job description of fathers.⁶

While the 'First Treatise' tells us what fatherly authority is not, the 'Second Treatise' gives a more positive account of what it is and what its extent is. Locke argues that the father's authority over his children is determined by the law of nature (II.56), and this law shows that he is not given power specifically by being the biological father (II.65). According to natural law, fathers conjointly with mothers are '*under an obligation to preserve, nourish, and educate the Children, they had begotten*' (II.56). This obligation arises from children being not the workmanship of the parents, but of God who wills His creation be preserved. Although children are born *to* a state of equality of natural freedom, being yet imperfect in body and mind, they are not born *in* it, and so parents must take

care of them until they develop the strength and rational capacity to subsist and subject themselves to the government of the law of nature (I.55–8). Thus parents' authority over their children during their minority originates from its being used for the children's good (II.63). The act of begetting itself does so little to establish any fatherly authority that should fathers not exercise guardianship over their children, they would quickly lose their power over them (II.65). Moreover, the power fathers have is only 'temporary' and so once his child comes into possession of reason, the father's empire ceases: the child becomes a fellow equal over whom the father as such has no power (I.65).

Thus there comes a time when the son leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife; but he is not thereby exempt from paying respect to his parents who have played a crucial part in God's great design. Children have a perpetual duty to honour their parents, inwardly in esteem, and outwardly in action, negatively by not compromising their parents' happiness and more positively by providing assistance and comfort (II.66). Parents, on the other hand, have a right to respect and support in proportion to their effort to raise their child (II.67). But as Locke tirelessly notes, the right to receive respect must not be confounded with a right to demand absolute obedience and submission from the child. At no time, does the father's power extend to the child's life or property.

Once the child grows up and leaves the care of his parents, that is to say, once he becomes the father's equal, other than the object of respect, what role is there for the father? The existing literature tends to be somewhat silent about this question, and it is here we should turn to *Some Thoughts* for insight. As the passage selected and others (§40–4, 95–7) show, Locke recommends that the father–son relationship in adulthood make a shift towards friendship: fathers should look upon their son not as a servant but as a friend, and the son upon his father not as a lord but as a friend, if not his best friend (§41).

What is it to be a friend in Locke's sense, then? What does friendship entail? For one, the relation is more than the friendship between George and 'innocent' Lennie we see in something like John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937).⁷ While at times the relationship between the two characters seems to be that of 'guardianship', we may say it is also that of 'companionship', both characters benefiting from the fact that they give 'a damn about' each other and have each other to 'look after'. On the other hand, Locke's idea of friendship involves more than filling in loneliness, more than keeping each other in company. His is first and foremost a relationship between equals (§97). Thus, for fathers to treat their grown-up children as friends is to treat them 'to be like ourselves', that is 'Rational Creatures' (§41). Therefore, children who do not achieve a certain

threshold of rationality must not leave the government of their parents (II.60). As rational creatures, people share a range of natural duties; and it is here that we see what the prime benefit of friendship is. A defining feature of friendship is 'love' and people's love of one's friends is often directed to 'those good things which they do love and which they cannot have without them [sc. friends]', and this is the 'conversation' they provide.⁸ To say one enjoys the conversation of friends in the early modern period could mean that one enjoys discoursing with others, rather like the modern sense, and also to enjoy the company of others. Locke seems to use it predominantly in the former sense, often adopting the separate term 'company' to express the latter (although the two concepts are closely related in his mind). Conversation in this first sense between friends is important because it gives a chance for one to re-examine one's thoughts, beliefs and prejudices. It often happens that we hold beliefs without having ever examined them, but with 'the assistance of a serious and sober friend' we might hope to question and examine these, and thereby serve the cause of truth. There is no reason why a conversation with a stranger cannot yield similar results, but a friend, the best of friends, is someone whom we can truly confide in, someone who takes us seriously (§96). While Locke warns against closing the circle to one kind of friends, intimacy might be helpful to bring the really important issues on the table, being a 'sure' friend he who we can 'freely Consult on Occasion' (§96, and also §41). Thus, while we are in general capable of attaining the necessary knowledge to perform our natural duties, we are not infallible. To this extent, we are equally inquirers, and so the conversation with a friend on this godly intellectual pilgrimage would be reassuring.⁹

The father's role as the best friend of his grown-up child has a theological uniqueness to it as well. As part of his effort to distinguish between political and paternal power, Locke, as we have seen, rejects that there is a resemblance between God's creation of humankind and fathers' participation in procreation. Locke further distinguishes divine power, which is the source of our moral, political and religious obligations, from paternal power, which is subservient to the former's ends, by making friendship uniquely an inter-human relationship as opposed also to a divine-human relationship. In the seventeenth century, it was not uncommon to list 'friend' as one of the Christian God's attributes and talk about having a friendship with God. Isaac Barrow, a mathematician and theologian, even suggests that this relationship with God should be familiar and conversational:

It is frequency of Devotion also which maintaineth that Friendship with God, which is the soul of Piety. As familiar conversation (wherein men do express their minds and affections mutually) breedeth acquaintance, and cherisheth good will

of men to one another ... so is it in respect to God; it is frequent converse with him which begetteth a particular acquaintance with him.

Moreover, friendship could exist in unequal conditions. For example, Robert Sanderson, bishop of Lincoln, defines friendship as faithfulness, 'faith and obedience' being 'those very things that qualifie us for [God's] friendship', and argues that friendship can exist between unequals, such as between God and man or father and child. The act of chastising or punishing by the superior, insofar as it was for the good of the inferior, could be understood as an act of love of a friend.¹⁰

By contrast, Locke's idea of friendship presupposes conversation between equals. Thus consistently, friendship does not figure greatly in Locke's idea of God. When Locke describes God's attributes, while we find words such as 'superior', 'supreme', 'creator', 'maker', 'omnipotent', 'omniscient', 'just', 'eternal', 'infinite', 'sovereign' and perhaps 'father', we do not find him mentioning 'friend'.¹¹ And in the handful of cases when Locke touches on biblical verses that suggest a friendship between God and men, in one case he does not make great play of the verse, while in another makes the application of the term 'friendship' to God indeterminate. Otherwise, if friendship is used at all to describe the relationship between God and men, the idea of familiarity and conversation is stripped away.¹² While fathers and children might eventually become friends, God always remains sovereign over us. God's character and role can encompass and overlap with fathers ('*he chasten'd them as a Man chastens his Son*' (II.67)) and the human race as a whole ('*Let us make Men in our Image*' (I.30, 40)), but it does not follow that fathers can thereby enjoy the same rights as God. Familiar and conversational friendship exists uniquely between human beings, and is particularly suitable in a father-son relationship.

Locke, we may say, is a man of distinction by virtue of his distinction-making ability. Famously, in his defence of toleration, he distinguished between the purpose of the state and that of the church. Likewise, in his rejection of absolutism, he distinguished between the nature of paternal and political power; between the nature of divine and paternal power; and in his description of paternal power, between the treatment of one's offspring in childhood and adulthood. For Locke, God is sovereign, and we are subject to His incomparable power and wisdom. We exist to undertake his business in this world. In God's scheme, the father's authority in the child's early years ought to be used to prepare and to send the child out into the world, so that

he can do what God has planned for him; and in the later years when he grows up, the father's rule would ideally change to friendship – to a relationship that is appropriate between equals, and perhaps to the best of its kind, intimate and familiar, thanks to the trust gained through the years spent together – whereby they can seek through exchanging insights what exactly God desires of them to do. Life is a godly journey. There may be 'trials'; we may feel 'weak and heavy laden'. But thank God, what a friend we have in our earthly fathers.¹³