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Courtney Weiss Smith

Wesleyan University, [csmith03@wesleyan.edu](mailto:csmith03@wesleyan.edu)

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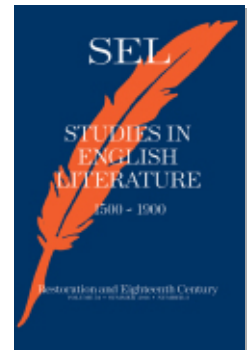
## Political Individuals and Providential Nature in Locke and Pope

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# Political Individuals and Providential Nature in Locke and Pope

COURTNEY WEISS SMITH

John Locke and Alexander Pope were political opposites; Locke was a Whig who made his career in the service of the archexclusionist first Earl of Shaftesbury, while Pope had strong Stuart and Tory commitments and famously reviled Robert Walpole's Whig regime.<sup>1</sup> Scholars often extend this to suggest that the two are ideological opposites. Locke endorses an emergent modernity, but Pope "nostalgically" holds deeply traditional ideas. In fact, the two are said to propound diametrically opposed notions of the political individual. Isaac Kramnick has argued influentially that—though Locke featured a new "bourgeois, liberal, and individualist" political agent who "stood alone, creating and shaping his own world and his own destiny"—conservative thinkers such as Pope affirmed a more traditional idea of the individual embedded in a natural patriarchal order.<sup>2</sup> For Kramnick, the two positions feature two fundamentally different ideas about how the individual relates to nature: Pope and his friend Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke worry that Locke's new, autonomous "liberal" individual plays "too great a role in manipulating his own world, interfering too much in a divinely ordained hierarchy and nature."<sup>3</sup> More recent scholars continue to draw on this way of imagining the eighteenth-century political landscape. Howard Erskine-Hill argues that Pope's understanding of political origins refuses the Lockean myth of "a clean break between man's original condition

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Courtney Weiss Smith is Assistant Professor of English at Wesleyan University. She is working on a book called "Empiricist Devotions: Scrutinizing Nature in Early Eighteenth-Century England," as well as coediting (with Kate Parker) a collection on "Eighteenth-Century Poetry and the Rise of the Novel Reconsidered."

and the beginning of civil society,” and, citing this formulation, Tom Jones contrasts the constructedness of social contract theories (including Locke’s) with Pope’s interest in “the emergence of artifice out of nature.”<sup>4</sup> This contrast has become pervasive, often structuring even more implicit assumptions. Pat Rogers’s *Political Biography of Alexander Pope* (2010) helpfully reminds us that Pope’s serious and sustained opposition to Walpole rose as much out of “intense personal feelings” as out of principled nostalgia, but Rogers still has Pope resisting both Walpole’s political program and “the dreams that the revolutionaries of 1688 harbored, under the inspiration of John Locke.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, we are told again and again, Pope is no Lockean.

Yet, while the two men certainly had different politics, strong contrasts between their notions of the individual are based on questionable (and now outdated) assumptions. This essay contends that Locke’s *Two Treatises* (1689–90) and Pope’s treatment of civil society in *An Essay on Man* (1733–34) figure the relationship between the political individual and nature in strikingly similar ways. It thereby seeks to redress what William Walker recently diagnosed as “a conspicuous *lack* of dialogue between the history of political thought and literary criticism”; Walker notes that this “lack” is especially “conspicuous” in regard to literary critics’ use of Locke.<sup>6</sup> I argue that Whig Locke and Tory Pope both accept the “modern” idea inherent in social contract, but neither imagines political individuals divorced from nature. They give consenting individuals agency and contract transformative power, but both also insist that God’s creation offers clues about how societies should work.

Indeed, I propose that this shared ground illuminates some of the most exciting recent theoretical work in eighteenth-century studies. Ecocritics and historians of science have been interrogating the degree to which humans master nature or even have control over its meanings. Very much against the grain of critical narratives about modernization and secularization, they propose that natural things might have had their own kind of agency and import in the period.<sup>7</sup> Locke and Pope, believing that nature had moral and political content, confirm these insights. Underscoring important links between nature and convention, both insist that the best societies are formed when individuals subordinate themselves to a suprahuman order encoded—but only ever glimpsed—in nature. This shared understanding, then, raises some far-reaching questions about the relationship between the political individual and the providential natural world in late-seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century contractarian thought.

In *An Essay on Man*, Pope dons the philosopher's mantle—seriously and influentially presenting his ethical system. (Philosophers such as Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant would later compliment the poem's ideas.)<sup>8</sup> The *Essay's* third epistle—which treats “*the Nature and State of Man, with respect to Society*”—addresses pressing contemporary political issues: How should civil societies work? What confers political legitimacy on their rulers? And, of course, what is the role of the individual?<sup>9</sup> Like Locke in *Two Treatises*, Pope answers these questions by narrating the origins of civil society. Indeed, like Locke's, Pope's story runs from a state of nature, through some key moments of social contract, all the way to the “well-mix'd State” of eighteenth-century England. Literary critics have long noted the Lockean features of Pope's story: Pope's “NATURE'S STATE” is peaceful, like Locke's, and distinctly unlike Thomas Hobbes's state of violent war.<sup>10</sup> Pope also features a Lockean sense that individuals come together to construct governments by and for themselves. The poem features two separate instances of human government construction and, again echoing Locke, proposes that “Government and Laws” emerged in reaction to tyrannical encroachments (3.209–10, 283–94, and 269–72). Pope also unequivocally endorses Locke's argument against Filmerian divine-right theories—“Nature knew no right divine in Men” (3.236). Pope's origin story is, in these respects, Lockean.

However, Pope's best readers—including Erskine-Hill, Jones, Brean S. Hammond, Fred Parker, and William Bowman Piper—underscore that the *Essay* also resists the conclusion that societies are autonomous human constructs. Pope interestingly emphasizes the active role of nature in the formation of human institutions.<sup>11</sup> He moves his political individuals out of “NATURE'S STATE” by showing—as he puts it in his note—“How far SOCIETY [is] carry'd by INSTINCT” (3.115n):

Each loves itself, but not itself alone,  
 Each sex desires alike, 'till two are one.  
 Nor ends the pleasure with the fierce embrace;  
 They love themselves, a third time, in their race.

(3.121–4)

Pope suggests that instinctive self-love, and instinctive sexual and parental drives naturally conduce to society (and his lines

perform this dialectical coming together, as the antitheses smooth out). Pope continues to argue that other God-given mental faculties—such as reason, sympathy, and memory—further encourage people to join into societies (3.131–46). His point is that society is natural, even encouraged by the God who created mankind. A bit later in the epistle, Pope describes the processes by which the natural family structure encourages even political society. Family groups conglomerated into larger groups; societies “Grew . . . and join’d”; and political society emerged from the “draw” of “Love” and “Nature” (3.202 and 207–8). It is at its start patriarchal: “The same which in a Sire the Sons obey’d, / A Prince the Father of a People made” (3.213–4). Pope’s origin story demonstrates that society is not an autonomous or arbitrary human construct.<sup>12</sup> For Pope, there is something natural, even divinely appointed, about family, community, and government.

Literary critics thus show how Pope keeps human institutions and conventions in touch with nature without conflating the two; instincts and familial arrangements encourage natural communities, which are then formalized by social contracts. They even explore possible influences on Pope: George Berkeley’s ethics, William Temple’s politics, and Lord Bolingbroke’s parallel version of society’s origins—which was written at the same time, and occasionally under the same roof, as Pope’s *Essay*.<sup>13</sup> (In this, more recent critics are again influenced by Kramnick, whose work—while propounding a limited view of Locke—is wonderfully nuanced on the conservative position of Bolingbroke and Pope.) Moreover, these insightful critics tend to reinforce the basic contrast between Pope and Locke. The usual assumption is that, whoever the primary influence was, Pope’s blurring of the boundaries between nature and convention constitutes a rejection of Locke. For example, Erskine-Hill, thinking of Locke’s “clean break” between nature and society, asserts that “[t]hrough Pope is sometimes close to specific passages in Locke his poem does not centrally affirm the Lockean myth of contract,” and more recent scholars such as Jones and Hammond echo his point in different ways.<sup>14</sup>

This formulation draws on a deeply entrenched liberal interpretation of—to paraphrase Kramnick—Locke’s world-and-destiny-shaping individuals. To be sure, the liberal interpretation finds sanction in Bolingbroke’s self-interested critique of Locke. Bolingbroke sometimes recognizes how close he and Pope are to Locke on questions of consent and contract, even explicitly discussing one way in which Locke emphasizes the naturalness of

society to humanity. Yet, at other times, Bolingbroke's discomfort with Locke's egalitarian tendencies leads him to downplay (even, in something less than good faith, disavow) his debt to Locke. A bit unfairly, he associates Locke with the Hobbesian position that society and even morality are "nominal natures, dependent on the will of men."<sup>15</sup> In our time, a liberal scholarly tradition neglects Bolingbroke's first point in favor of the more contentious second one, arguing that Locke's individuals are quintessential Enlightenment subjects or prototypes for capitalist men.<sup>16</sup> Pope thus seems anti-Lockean, for his political agent follows the promptings of created nature while Locke's autonomous modern agent breaks from nature, constructing institutions by and for himself.

This contrast, however, is based on a completely outdated understanding of Locke. For the last few decades, historians of political thought have been challenging the total autonomy of the Lockean individual. Scholars such as James Tully, John Dunn, Gopal Sreenivasan, and Ross Harrison argue that, "contrary to common misunderstandings," Locke treats political man not as an "isolated individual" but "in his various relations with other men and with God." Humans are, importantly, God's "Workmanship."<sup>17</sup> Because of this, Locke reasons, they are obligated to preserve themselves and others; they also have an obligation to use reason and nature to understand how God wants them to conduct themselves. Locke then explains what he understands of God's will; he acknowledges natural communities borne of instinctive sexual and parental drives, and contends that God placed mankind "under strong Obligations of Necessity, Convenience, and Inclination to drive him into *Society*."<sup>18</sup> Locke suggests that natural familial arrangements provided a useful model for rudimentary monarchies (2.106–7). The Lockean individual is made by God to live in society. In fact, Locke proceeds from a set of empirical facts about created humanity as God's "Workmanship" to determine natural laws founded in the nature of things, and he insists that human institutions try to mimic and formalize these laws. As Tully puts it, each government should "embody in its fundamental constitution an approximation to the normative structure of natural law," but Locke also allows a significant "degree of 'latitude' between natural law and its application."<sup>19</sup> Thus, for Locke the distinction between natural and conventional is quite blurred. Lockean individuals strive to construct societies in "approximation" of an always-just-inaccessible divine plan.<sup>20</sup>

The kind of "dialogue" between political history and literary criticism that Walker recently encouraged, then, reveals that

Tully's Locke is intriguingly similar to Kramnick's conservatives and Jones's Pope. Despite their different party politics, both Locke and Pope believe that God creates humans in ways that conduce to society—instinctive drives lead into communities, and natural family relations encourage government. For both, moreover, these natural societies are formalized by crucial moments of contract.

This “dialogue” also helps us better understand the stakes of such stories. Though some scholars have read Pope's dual emphasis on nature and consent as a mark of confused political thought, both Pope and Locke seem to have had very deliberate understandings of the implications.<sup>21</sup> Both want to insist that laws and rulers did not descend immediately from heaven. Individuals come together to create civil societies—this is the thrust of Locke and Pope's argument against Filmerian divine right. Yet both also want to resist Hobbes's conclusion that societies and laws are products of arbitrary human agreement guaranteed only by self-interest or force. They therefore try to occupy a compromise position that emphasizes links between created human nature and society. As J. B. Schneewind puts it, Locke was “concerned to combat both skeptical doubts about morality and enthusiastic claims to insight into it.”<sup>22</sup> Pope and Locke manage to remain skeptical about the infallibility of any human construct at the same time as they claim some kind of suprahuman sanction for these constructs. Nature (and the God that created it) has a plan for society, and humans continually work to approximate this plan.

Scholars tend to focus on how Locke and Pope imagine aspects of created human nature—instinctive drives and familial arrangements—conducing to society. In what follows, I argue that there is another looser and quieter way that Locke and Pope understand nature to encourage society. They suggest that the external natural world also contains meaningful hints and prompts to society, encoded by the God who created natural things. Each in his own way believes that the political individual should try to subordinate himself to a suprahuman order by heeding prompts discovered in metals, birds, fish, and atoms. Of course (true to their middle way between Filmerian divine right and Hobbesian conventionalism) Locke and Pope recognize that the interpretive process is fallible, prone to misreadings and backslidings as much as progress, but both seem to believe that people ought to look closely at nature as they try to realize God's will in their institutions.

Locke develops this possibility most fully in treating the creation of money in the *Two Treatises's* famous chapter on property. For Locke, “the *Invention of Money*” is a crucial moment of hu-



man consent: “Fancy or Agreement hath put the Value on [these metals], more then real Use, and the necessary Support of Life” (2.36 and 46). In fact, many scholars understand the creation of money as the paradigmatic moment of consent in Locke’s story. C. B. Macpherson reads this agreement as an instance of the autonomous individual ordering his world to suit his interests, and even scholars such as Tully suggest that money enables an “unnatural” accumulation that disrupts God’s plan for humanity.<sup>23</sup> At times, Locke supports this reading, asserting forthrightly that “Riches and Treasure ... are none of Natures Goods” (2.184). Yet, while Locke certainly allows that the creation of money involves a new degree of human involvement in the social order, he does not believe that this consent involves a “clean break” from nature. Indeed, in the chapter on property, Locke problematizes—specifically undercuts—this interpretation. He insists that, even if money is not one of “Natures Goods,” nature still played a role in its creation. He thus retains a divine sanction for economic society while allowing for human corruption.

Locke’s story begins with individuals happily coexisting in a state of nature. This state features a rudimentary form of private property. In the beginning Nature belonged “to Mankind in common,” but God also gave each man power over his own person, labor, and the products of labor (2.25). For Locke, the same law of nature that gives men this property also bounds the property that each person can justly appropriate: “As much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils; so much he may by his labour fix a Property in. Whatever is beyond this, is more than his share, and belongs to others” (2.31). The acorn that an individual gathers and the land that he tills belong to him—just as long as they are used to further God’s intention to preserve mankind. Locke suggests that people could have lived happily in this state *ad infinitum* were it not for the emergence of money.

In fact, Locke describes a utopia in which the state of nature does continue forever. He imagines “an Island, separate from all possible Commerce with the rest of the World, wherein there were but a hundred Families” (2.48). This island has plenty of animals, food, and land. However, there is “nothing in the Island, either because of its Commonness, or Perishableness, fit to supply the place of *Money*: What reason could any one have there to enlarge his Possessions beyond the use of his Family ... ? Where there is not something both lasting and scarce, and so valuable to be hoarded up, there Men will not be apt to enlarge their Posses-

*sions of Land*, were it never so rich, never so free for them to take” (2.48). People here remain forever in a happy community, everyone assured of more than enough. Because everything decays, there is nothing “fit to supply the place of *Money*” and therefore no possible “reason” for men to hoard or to exceed the natural bounds of use. There is nothing to make men “apt to enlarge their *Possessions*.” The social inequalities that cause men to create civil society would never be introduced.

The real world differs from this utopian decaying island in one important respect: there is something “lasting and scarce, and so valuable to be hoarded up.” In fact, in his influential economic writings, Locke repeatedly underscores that gold and silver bullion are especially “fit to supply the place of *Money*.” “The fittest for” use as money “of all other, is *Silver*”—“because it decays not in keeping, and never sinks much in its value,” because it can “be divided, and keep [its] value,” and because there is the proper amount of it distributed throughout the world. People value silver or gold “for its fitnessse,” and these metals have “been thought the fittest Materials” in “almost all Ages and parts of the World.”<sup>24</sup> Locke’s language of “fitnessse,” here, resonates with contemporary design arguments as well as with his own take on the laws of nature. Elsewhere, Locke argues that the natural world exhibits marks of its creator’s intentions: God ordained laws of nature that he wanted men to use as “the rule of our conduct and life”; he “published” these laws in nature, and gave men the mental faculties to discover them.<sup>25</sup> Using the idiom of design, Locke’s economic writings suggest that God made gold and silver such that they are especially “fit” to be used as money.

This economic argument relates interestingly to Locke’s description of the rotting island. There is something “fit” to be money. And, in its negation, Locke’s passage suggests that the existence of such a thing provides a “reason” for men to enlarge their possessions. It actually makes men “apt” to do so. In concluding his discussion of the utopian island, Locke further underscores the inexorability of the connection between the nonperishable thing and its employment as money: “Find out something that hath the *Use and Value of Money* amongst his Neighbours, you shall see the same Man will begin presently to *enlarge* his *Possessions*” (2.49). Locke suggests that human attention to the properties of metal actually encourages a different kind of community. Because gold and silver exist, men are “apt” to make them valuable so they can enlarge their possessions. They “will” heap up goods in a way unimaginable if a nonperishable, somewhat scarce substance did not exist.

Of course, Locke follows his emphasis on the inexorable connection between nonperishable thing and its use as money by again asserting that money “has its *value* only from the consent of Men” (2.50). Consenting individuals play a crucial role in constituting value and governments, but these individuals are not entirely autonomous or separated from nature. Instead, people manage to create a community by discovering and heeding prompts contained in the providential natural world. Their consent to value is “voluntary” but “tacit”—even pushed forward by mindful attention to metallic substances (2.50). This community-forming power of bullion functions in Locke’s argument as an analog to those “Obligations of Necessity, Convenience, and Inclination” that God put men under “to drive him into *Society*.” For Locke, God’s providential care of placing men into families is matched by his creation of gold and silver as instruments encouraging men to enter political society.

These prompts to society do not disturb the fundamental truths that government is humanly constructed, that monetary value is conventional. Men make the choices, and their choices are sometimes misguided (at one point Locke condemns a kind of fall by which “vain Ambition, and *amor sceleratus habendi*, evil Concupiscence, had corrupted Mens minds” [2.111]). Yet, at best, individuals’ choices realize a suprahuman order. Locke wants to keep society and its institutions in touch with nature without conflating the two: individuals make governments, but nature itself encourages human contracts, human economic and social arrangements.

Pope’s *Essay* propounds a similar scenario for similar reasons. After Pope’s mythical civilization-builders instinctively and naturally move from the state of nature to patriarchal communities, they continue to progress by attending to prompts in the external world. At the dramatic center and philosophical heart of the *Essay*’s third epistle, Pope has the “voice of Nature” rise up in a *tour de force* monologue that gives literal voice to the ways nature helps direct people to social institutions (3.171). This passage is often ignored altogether or dismissed as “childish,” “unsatisfactory,” or silly, but we are now in a position to see that Pope here quite seriously delineates his understanding of a relationship between the natural world and government-building individuals.<sup>26</sup> Pope suggests that “[O]bservant Men” manage to get into civil society by heeding clues encoded by God into “Great Nature” (3.199). They sometimes get it wrong, but ideal societies can be constructed by looking carefully at bees, birds, and atoms.

Pope's "voice of Nature" is a reworking of *De Rerum Natura's* famous personified Nature. When Nature speaks in Lucretius's Epicurean poem, however, it is nature imagined as an accidental combination of atoms, as the frailty of matter and the mortality of all things in a world without God. Pope departs from his poetic predecessor by emphatically Christianizing "Great Nature."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Pope's "voice of Nature" begins her monologue by speaking in the language of the scriptures. In Proverbs 6:6, Solomon exhorts, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise."<sup>28</sup> This is an important biblical precedent, drawn on in much contemporary physico-theology, for the idea that nature provides clues for how men ought to behave: ants teach us to be provident. Pope's "Nature" stays close to the syntax of this Proverbs passage and renders its point as a general rule: "Man" should "Go, from the Creatures thy instructions take" (3.171–2). Pope's "voice of Nature" speaks of the complex ways that creation bespeaks its creator's will.

Pope then allows the "voice of Nature" to specify these "instructions":

"Learn from the birds what food the thickets yield;  
 Learn from the beasts the physic of the field;  
 Thy arts of building from the bee receive;  
 Learn of the mole to plow, the worm to weave;  
 Learn of the little Nautilus to sail,  
 Spread the thin oar, and catch the driving gale.  
 Here too all forms of social union find,  
 And hence let Reason, late, instruct Mankind:  
 Here subterranean works and cities see;  
 There towns aerial on the waving tree.  
 Learn each small People's genius, policies,  
 The Ant's republic, and the realm of Bees;  
 How those in common all their wealth bestow,  
 And Anarchy without confusion know;  
 And these for ever, tho' a Monarch reign,  
 Their sep'rate cells and properties maintain."

(3.173–88)

Nature's monologue expresses the central idea that nature directs and humans approximate, affirming Pope's middle way between government as arbitrary human convention or unmediated divine message. Nature is an agent two times over. Nature's "voice" is all imperatives—"Go"—and nature (lowercase) contains hints

and clues that get a more subtle kind of instructive agency. “[T]he birds” and “the beasts” teach what foods people should eat and which plants work as medicines. Bees, moles, and worms provide lessons in “building,” “plow[ing],” and “weav[ing].” Political systems come from insects. Nature provides these insights, so the resulting society has a foundation in God’s plan for creation. Humans play a role as well, but when all is working according to God’s design—as here—nature is doubly active and humans are doubly subordinate. People passively receive orders to actions that require them again to subordinate themselves. They “take,” “Learn,” “receive,” “find,” and “see,” but, in all these actions, they receive their “instructions” “from” and “of” natural processes. They find them in nature.

Pope reinforces this distinctive relationship between people and nature at the passage’s conclusion: “Great Nature spoke; observant Men obey’d; / Cities were built, Societies were made” (3.199–200). “Men” necessarily play an important role in building and making communities. In fact, like Locke, Pope recognizes human agency by allowing for a plurality of possible “Societies,” possible approximations of Nature’s instructions. God does not prescribe institutional arrangements but offers several models for “forms of social union.” Bees exemplify an ideal monarchy where individual liberties and property rights are respected (“tho’ a Monarch reign, / Their sep’rate cells and properties maintain”), while ants provide a useful model for a republic, “Anarchy without confusion.” In the lines that follow this passage, Pope has these societies slowly “join” together in *ad hoc* agreements that climax in a moment of formal social contract: “common int’rest plac’d the sway in one,” who is chosen for his “VIRTUE” (3.202 and 210–1). Human agency, however, is curiously elided. The moment of social contract occurs in obedience to nature’s commands, and political agents do not even get active verbs: “Cities were built, Societies were made.” When Pope allows people the agency necessary to form a social contract, then, once more it is only in “observ[ing]” and “obey[ing]” the dictates of the natural world. God offers hints and clues, mediated through nature. People pursue such hints as they try to order their societies.

Pope insists that people get closest when they are “observant.” Indeed, he treats this point in a more expansive, creative manner than Locke, revealing some of its intellectual underpinnings. Like Locke’s related use of creature examples to understand God’s intentions (about sex and marriage, for example), Pope’s interest in animal behavior is indebted to an ancient tradition found in

the work of Lucretius, Cicero, and Vitruvius—a tradition holding that civilization emerged from primitivism slowly, through close attention to the world.<sup>29</sup> Pope gestures to this tradition in his treatment of the nautilus fish. His lines propose that the nautilus offers humans a model for sailing; it provides analogs for the “oar” and the sail that can “catch the driving gale.” His note on these lines refers to Oppian’s *Halieutica*, a georgic poem on fishing that is firmly within this ancient primitivist tradition.<sup>30</sup> The note explains in properly scientific detail how the nautilus fish provided a natural prompt toward navigation. Nautilus fish “swim on the surface of the Sea, on the back of their Shells, which exactly resemble the Hulk of a Ship; they raise two Feet like Masts, and extend a Membrane between which serves as a Sail; the other two Feet they employ as Oars at the side” (3.177–8n). Particularized attention to the way this fish looks and moves can encourage and even direct technological progress. Here we can register Pope’s interest not only in a Lucretian ancient tradition, but also in a very contemporary emphasis on scientific precision. Pope imagines his ancestors looking closely at the canny mechanism in the feet of nautilus fish, the geometry deployed in beehives, the way the mole’s snout digs into the ground, and the “policies” governing anthills. For Pope, however, such close attention to empirical fact yields technological, practical, and even political information.<sup>31</sup> The way that Pope’s “observant Men” observe evinces a remarkable trust in the dense significance of things.

Pope, however, also carefully maintains his middle course between nature and convention by remaining alive to the ways that such creaturely wisdom is open for human misconstruction. Drawing on Michel de Montaigne’s skeptical essays—in which many of the animal examples in this passage can also be found—Pope has Nature close her monologue by chastening human pretensions, asserting a firm sense of the limits of human knowledge and urging humility before God.<sup>32</sup> Man is invited to “Mark” the beautiful regularity of the world, “Laws wise as Nature, and as fix’d as Fate” (3.189–90). Pope underscores that humans ought to try, but will always fail, to proximate this exemplary regularity. The Voice of Nature exclaims, “In vain thy Reason finer webs shall draw, / Entangle Justice in her Net of Law”; human approximations of “right, too rigid” will “harden into wrong” (3.191–2 and 193). Human knowledge is fallible, human nature limited. People try their best to be “instructed by” nature, by animal “*Instinct* in the Invention of ARTS, and in the FORMS of *Society*” (as Pope’s paraphrase puts it), but they always miss the mark at least a bit (3.169n).

Thus, in this extended passage, Pope clearly engages traditions of thought about natural law that he shares with Locke—about both patriarchal kings and social contract—but he also draws on a Christian ontology; an ancient belief in the potential of careful attention to material processes; a new scientific privileging of such careful attention; and a skepticism insistent on the limits of human knowledge. He sees no contradictions in these assumptions, using them to forge an origin story that turns on “observant” people heeding hints in “Great Nature” and trying to construct governments accordingly.

Pope’s *Essay* continues to trace this process, even highlighting the fallibility of human approximations by offering three conjectural possibilities for the origins of religion. The best-case scenario is realized when natural objects prompt men to love the force at work behind them. Faith springs from an awareness of God as Creator, and mankind never strays from the light of truth: “simple Reason” saw “The worker from the work distinct,” and “Man, like his Maker, saw that all was right” (3.229–30 and 232). Another possible scenario ends with “TRUE RELIGION” but acknowledges the possibility of human error (3.235n). The naturally ordained leader of each little society cares for his people, who in turn love him immoderately and revere him as a God magically in control of nature. At some point, however, the people recognize the leader’s mortality, and they then see what they missed before—they, “looking up from sire to sire, explor’d / One great first father, and that first ador’d” (3.225–6). In this scenario, fallible men stray from the truth, but circumstances and the wisdom everywhere manifest in created realities lead them back. Finally, Pope acknowledges the possibility that people fall from truth altogether, perverting true religion and government. “SUPERSTITION and TYRANNY” happen when people turn their backs on nature and let their “FEAR” guide them in constructing churches and societies (3.235n). These people “invert the world, and counter-work its Cause” (3.244). Pope’s explanation of false religion and government thereby accounts for these historical facts without taking away any of the divine sanction from true religion and government.

At this point in Pope’s origin story, humanity is in a precarious position. The worst qualities in people, their fear and cowardice, have obscured the ordained dictates of nature. Pope’s story then concludes with a second moment of voluntary government-construction; in this doubling Pope clearly recognizes Locke’s overarching point about how people retain the power to resist



and restructure their governments. Even more clearly than Locke, though, Pope insists that the moment of consent to institutionalized society is motivated by nature:

'Twas then, the studious head or gen'rous mind,  
 Follow'r of God or friend of human-kind,  
 Poet or Patriot, rose but to restore  
 The Faith and Moral, Nature gave before.

(3.283–6)

Pope asserts that institutionalized society is the work of men, but the work of men in approximating an order that has somewhat faded. As “observant Men obey’d” the voice of Nature’s “instructions” earlier, here the “Poet or Patriot” mimics an order that “Nature gave before.” Men exert themselves—they “rose,” but only to “restore” natural religion and morality. They “Relum’d” nature’s “ancient light, not kindled new” and “If not God’s image, yet his shadow drew” (3.287–8). True statesmen re-illuminate the spark of this flickering order or re-trace its outline as they construct societies.

Pope then focuses on another clue that “Nature” offers government-building individuals. He explains that governments should be instituted such that “jarring int’rests of themselves create / Th’according music of a well-mix’d State” (3.293–4). In this, they mimic “the World’s great harmony, that springs / From Order, Union, full Consent of things!” (3.295–6). This description closely echoes Pope’s prior descriptions of nature and of the state of nature. The reader who has reached this point in the *Essay* has already been introduced to “Union” as an ontological principle that structures the universe. Pope invites his readers to “behold the chain of Love / Combining all below and all above” (3.7–8). “Union” or “Love” occurs at every level of reality. “Union” draws “single atoms” together—each is “Form’d and impell’d its neighbour to embrace” (3.10 and 12). “Union” even happens over time; matter blossoms then decays, but in decaying gives life to other forms (3.15–8). In his origin story, Pope extends his ontological principle into a social one, describing the state of nature as a naturally peaceful expression of the universe’s underlying principle: “Union” is “the bond of all things, and of Man” (3.150). Importantly, then, when humans construct their social institutions, they try their best to re-create the order of the created universe. The proper human government should preserve some semblance of the “chain of Love” that binds men together with each other and with the universe as a whole, that “Nature gave before.”



Pope's origin story gives real agency to political individuals. They build cities and make societies: they "join" together, "place" power, and "draw" out the contours of the "State." In fact, the third epistle concludes with a strong affirmation of human agency in the day-to-day workings of political institutions—"contests" about the most efficient and virtuous "Forms of Government" are naive if they do not consider which are "best administer'd" (3.303–4). Pope's entire conjectural history to this point, however, is a chronicle of how "Nature gave" these political, administering individuals a "Faith and Moral" and even a politics—of how government-building agents find rich resources in the natural world. God gives his creatures instinctual powers that guide them directly into society. Nature exhorts people to pay attention, and particular natural processes give them clues to the proper order. Natural realities direct people to true religion, and "the chain of Love" provides a model for "Th'according music of a well-mix'd State." Like Locke, then, Pope affirms a social contract that is not totally divorced from nature. Though Pope's version of the story gives nature a bit more explicit agency than Locke's, both thinkers insist that individuals construct workable social institutions only by cooperating with an order glimpsed in nature.

This contract requires close attention—a distinctive brand of close attention that couples a firm sense of the limits of human knowledge with a conviction that nature contains ethical, social, and political clues. Locke and Pope both suggest that such close attention to nature helped our conjectural, "observant" ancestors get into society. Provocatively, both also believed that such attention could *still* access meaningful information about society. There is not room here to broach the famous complexities of Locke's proposed system of demonstrable ethics or the nuanced ways that Pope's poem actually enacts the mode of attention featured in the origin story (moving from consideration of nature and human nature in the first and second epistles to what these empirical givens mean for mankind's notions of community and happiness in the third and fourth).<sup>33</sup> Still, as Pope describes the fundamental method of his *Essay*, he sounds startlingly like Locke. Where Locke's "workmanship model" seeks to "uncover God's intentions in making man by seeing what purposes man's natural attributes embody" and "what ends man and other natural phenomena can be seen to be designed to serve" (Tully's summary of Locke's method), Pope suggests that, "to prove any moral duty, to enforce any moral precept, or to examine the perfection or imperfection of any creature whatsoever, it is necessary first

to know what *condition* and *relation* it is placed in, and what is the proper *end* and *purpose* of its *being*.”<sup>34</sup> Both Locke and Pope start figuring out what man is supposed to do in the world by focusing on what man and his world are, how they were created. Their ethical writings both proceed through “observant” scrutiny of created realities.

In their histories of society, Locke and Pope highlight the stakes of a nature orientation of this sort. By showing that close attention to particular things played a formative role in society, they embrace a degree of human autonomy and remain skeptical about the infallibility of any human construct even as they insist that nature (and the God who stands just behind it) anchor society and morality. Locke and Pope’s brand of close attention to created realities similarly grounds their ethical systems more broadly in nature. Since all knowledge comes from nature, which comes from God, not just society but systems of ethics and religion have a kind of suprahuman sanction. Each thinker’s work on ethics becomes, then, his (always only approximate) attempt at understanding God’s will for how people should live.

Of course, we should remind ourselves about the very real political differences between Whiggish Locke and Tory Pope. For example, Pope likely shared Bolingbroke’s distrust of Lockean ideas about total equality.<sup>35</sup> Still, unexpected similarities in their most basic assumptions suggest that writers across the political spectrum—Whig and Tory, “modern” and “nostalgic” alike—could affirm the political individual’s engagement with providential nature.

It is a commonplace of political philosophy that social contract theories fundamentally uphold “the idea that political legitimacy, political authority, and political obligation are derived from the consent of the governed, and are the artificial product of the voluntary agreement of free and equal moral agents.”<sup>36</sup> These “free and equal moral agents” are not bound to others with all sorts of reciprocal ties; they are somehow autonomous—capable of reasoning, promising, choosing, and creating political authority. In one sense, Locke and Pope endorse this notion of the individual: such agents come together to construct governments and make laws. Neither thinker, however, wants to argue that the resulting moral and social arrangements are merely “artificial,” arbitrary products of human construction. Instead, both Locke and Pope maintain that the consenting subject exists in vital relationship with nature. The heroes of their origin stories are not autonomous

subjects who have mastered nature and who are eager to construct institutions based solely on their ideas. Their stories of social contract feature people heeding prompts in their own bodies and following hints in particular things as they attempt to proximate a divinely ordained, naturally manifest order. Their heroes are eager to respect and even subordinate political decision-making to a natural order and anxious to ground consent in something larger than the human mind even as they are aware of the difficulty of ever doing so perfectly.

This shared ground confirms recent work in ecocriticism and history of science that explores eighteenth-century ideas of an inherently meaningful natural world. This shared ground also opens up provocative possibilities for our understanding of contractarian thought and of the “modern” more generally in early eighteenth-century England. It suggests that the political individual’s autonomy involved a rather more complicated epistemological posture than we usually allow. In fact, it suggests that this individual crucially and empirically engaged the providential natural world.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Peter Laslett’s canonical introduction to John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, 13th edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 3–126. Subsequent references to *Two Treatises* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text and notes by treatise and paragraph number. See also Pat Rogers, *A Political Biography of Alexander Pope* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010). This article does not purport to treat the relationship between Locke and Pope on questions of psychology or personal identity. For important treatments of Pope’s engagement with Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, see Ernest Tuveson, “An Essay on Man and ‘The Way of Ideas,’” *ELH* 26, 3 (September 1959): 368–86; Christopher Fox, *Locke and the Scriblerians: Identity and Consciousness in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988); and Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 1–53 and 138–89.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 98, 193, and 217.

<sup>3</sup> Kramnick, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Erskine-Hill, “Pope on the Origins of Society,” in *The Enduring Legacy: Alexander Pope Tercentenary Essays*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 79–93, 82; and Tom Jones, *Pope and Berkeley: The Language of Poetry and Philosophy* (Houndmills UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 158, 159, and 185n20.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers, pp. 173 and 226.

<sup>6</sup> William Walker, "J. G. A. Pocock and the History of British Political Thought: Assessing the State of the Art," *ECLife* 33, 1 (Winter 2009): 83–96, 86.

<sup>7</sup> For insightful instantiations of and commentaries on ecocriticism and the history of science in eighteenth-century studies, see Christopher Hitt, "Ecocriticism and the Long Eighteenth Century" *CollL* 31, 3 (Summer 2004): 123–47; and Helen Thompson and Natania Meeker, "Empiricism, Substance, Narrative: An Introduction," *ECent* 48, 3 (Fall 2007): 183–6. For the relationship between nature and politics more generally, see Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993); *The Moral Authority of Nature*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004); and Ursula K. Heise, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism," *PMLA* 121, 2 (March 2006): 503–16.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the praise by Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant—and, more generally, a convincing argument for Pope's philosophical seriousness—see Harry M. Solomon, *The Rape of the Text: Reading and Misreading Pope's "Essay on Man"* (Tuscaloosa and London: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1993), pp. 1 and 23.

<sup>9</sup> Pope, "Argument of the Third Epistle," in *An Essay on Man*, ed. Maynard Mack, vol. 3.1 of *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 11 vols. (London: Methuen, 1950), p. 91. Subsequent references to *An Essay on Man* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text and notes by epistle and line number.

<sup>10</sup> Pope, 3.109–302—"well-mix'd State" can be found at 3.294, and "NATURE'S STATE" is featured in 3.147–60. Mack's edition notes many of these Lockean resonances.

<sup>11</sup> See Erskine-Hill, pp. 79–93; Jones, pp. 116–48; Brean S. Hammond, *Pope and Bolingbroke: A Study of Friendship and Influence* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1984), pp. 57–8; Parker, pp. 86–137; and William Bowman Piper, *Reconcilable Differences in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1999), pp. 113–43.

<sup>12</sup> A. D. Nuttall, *Pope's "Essay on Man"* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), p. 116, insightfully suggests that Pope's patriarchal origin story has a source in Locke. For my reservations about Nuttall's reading of Pope's origin story more broadly, see note 21.

<sup>13</sup> For Pope's borrowings from or parallels to George Berkeley, William Temple, and Lord Bolingbroke, respectively, see Jones, pp. 132 and 136; Erskine-Hill, pp. 80–3 and 88–91; and Hammond, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Erskine-Hill, pp. 91 and 82; Jones, pp. 157–60; and Hammond, pp. 89, 138, and 153–5 (though note his insightful comments on some methodological similarities). Sarah Ellen Zweig, *The Fringes of Belief: English Literature, Ancient Heresy, and the Politics of Freethinking, 1660–1760* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2008), p. 137, is indebted to such work, in the way she imagines the contemporary intellectual landscape. She, however, contrasts Pope's kind of "conservatism" with not Locke's but Voltaire's sense that morality is "a secular initiative in a world that man must at least attempt to determine and create for himself" (p. 145).

<sup>15</sup> Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke, *Minutes or Fragments of Essays*, in *The Philosophical Works of the Late Right Honourable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke*, 5 vols. (London: David Mallet, 1754), 3:409 and 4:66–75; ECCO (2d edn.) 10927. The intricacies of Bolingbroke's influence on Pope's reading of Locke require more space than I can give them here. I would suggest that—despite Bolingbroke's own critique of Locke—he shares with Locke and Pope a fundamental way of understanding the relationship between nature and social contract.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Kramnick, p. 193; C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 208–11; and the many works these two influential texts have helped shape.

<sup>17</sup> James Tully, *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and His Adversaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 11, 4. Tully echoes John Dunn's groundbreaking argument that religion is central to Locke's political thought (*The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of "The Two Treatises of Government"* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969]). Gopal Sreenivasan, *The Limits of Lockean Rights in Property* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 21–92, and Ross Harrison, *Hobbes, Locke, and Confusion's Masterpiece: An Examination of Seventeenth-Century Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), chaps. 6–8, pp. 163–244, confirm and extend Tully's "workmanship model." This kind of work, along with Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke's "Two Treatises of Government"* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), influentially challenged the liberal caricature of Locke as bourgeois hero or emblem of Enlightenment man.

<sup>18</sup> Locke, *Two Treatises*, 2.77.

<sup>19</sup> Tully, pp. 168 and 166. Jeremy Waldron's important critique of "workmanship" interpretations of Locke's property chapter does not challenge the overarching importance of Locke's sense of humanity and nature as God's creations (*The Right to Private Property* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988], pp. 137–282). For more recent discussions of Locke's links between political individuals, God, and nature, see Sreenivasan, pp. 21–92; Harrison, pp. 163–244; J. B. Schneewind, "Locke's Moral Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 199–225; Francis Oakley, "Locke, Natural Law, and God—Again," *History of Political Thought* 18, 4 (Winter 1997): 624–51; Alex Tuckness, "The Coherence of a Mind: John Locke and the Law of Nature," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37, 1 (January 1999): 73–90; and Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations of John Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002). Robert P. Irvine, "Labor and Commerce in Locke and Early Eighteenth-Century English Georgic," *ELH* 76, 4 (Winter 2009): 963–88, draws on Waldron's argument as he offers an intriguingly different way of thinking about the differences between Locke and Pope than that explored in this essay.

<sup>20</sup> This conclusion about Locke was an influence on and harbinger to exciting new work that has been revisiting and reemphasizing the centrality of God and religion to the most "modern" thinkers and trends of the eighteenth century. For a thoughtful overview, see Dror Wahrman, "God and the Enlightenment," and Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the

Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *American Historical Review* 108, 4 (October 2003): 1057–80.

<sup>21</sup> Miriam Leranbaum, *Alexander Pope's "Opus Magnum," 1729–1744* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 60, and Nuttall, pp. 112–28, read Pope's dual naturalistic and constructed scheme as a mark of his confused thinking, but I follow and extend the work of Jones, who "attempt[s] to identify a quality in the flaw" (pp. 185–6n20). I have found Bolingbroke's *Minutes*, 3:397–410, 4:1–17 and 40–75 the most helpful context for Pope's own sense of this "quality."

<sup>22</sup> Schneewind, p. 219. See also Tully, pp. 99–105 and 157–76; Dunn, "From Applied Theology to Social Analysis," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 119–35; and Kramnick's enormously helpful discussion of the conservative position in chap. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Macpherson, pp. 208–11 and Tully, pp. 146–54. This reading is pushed to its extreme in Constantine George Caffentzis, *Clipped Coins, Abused Words, and Civil Government: John Locke's Philosophy of Money* (New York: Autonomedia, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Locke, *Locke on Money*, ed. Patrick Hyde Kelly, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 1:323, 2:423–4 and 374.

<sup>25</sup> Locke, *Questions concerning the Law of Nature*, trans. Diskin Clay (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 101, 211.

<sup>26</sup> Erskine-Hill discusses the scarcity of scholarship on this portion of Pope's poem—the situation has not changed appreciably since Erskine-Hill's intriguing 1988 article. For condemnations of this passage as "childish," "unsatisfactory," and silly, see, respectively, Whitwell Elwin's edition (London, 1871–89), p. 416; Leranbaum, p. 60; and Thomas R. Edwards, *This Dark Estate: A Reading of Pope* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1963), p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001), book 3, lines 931–64. Pope's *Essay* as a whole can be read as a Christianizing of Lucretius. For example, Pope's history of society reworks book 5, lines 963–6 and 1012–23; for other links, see Leranbaum, pp. 38–63.

<sup>28</sup> Proverbs 6:6 AV.

<sup>29</sup> For Locke's use of animal examples, see *Two Treatises*, 2.79–81. Erskine-Hill convincingly argues for the ancient tradition's influence on Pope, pp. 83–5 and 88.

<sup>30</sup> Reuben Brower, *Alexander Pope: Poetry of Allusion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 228, notes that Pope's ants and bees have ancestors in another text in this tradition, Virgil's *Georgics*.

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Pope's creature examples might have also been influenced by two of new science's most influential propagandists; Francis Bacon suggests that "Beasts; Birds; Fishes; *Serpents*, rather than *Men*" ought to be considered "the first Doctors of Sciences" (*Of the Advancement and Proficiency of Learning or the Partitions of Sciences* [Oxford: Leon Lichfield, 1640], pp. 221; EEBO STC [2d edn.] 1167.3); and Robert Boyle argues that nature provides "a School of Virtue": "*Serpents and Pigeons* teach "prudence and inoffensiveness," for example (*Some Considerations Touching the Usefulness*

of *Experimental Naturall Philosophy* [Oxford: Hen. Hall, 1663], pp. 50–1; EEBO STC [2d edn.] B4029). Exciting work in the history of science has suggested that a related kind of analogizing is even crucial to the period's most serious scientific methodologies; see J. E. McGuire's groundbreaking "Atoms and the 'Analogy of Nature': Newton's Third Rule of Philosophizing," in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 1 (1970/71): 3–58; and, for more recent work in this vein, William Lynch, *Solomon's Child: Method in the Early Royal Society of London* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 70–115.

<sup>32</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "An Apology for Raymond Sebond," in *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 489–683, 508–9.

<sup>33</sup> For Locke's demonstrable ethics, see Schneewind; and John Colman, "Locke's Empiricist Theory of the Law of Nature," in *The Philosophy of John Locke: New Perspectives*, ed. Peter R. Anstey (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 106–26.

<sup>34</sup> Tully, p. 45, and Pope, "The Design," in *An Essay on Man*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Bolingbroke, 4:68.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Riley, "Social Contract Theory and Its Critics," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 347–75, 347.