

# John Locke and the Atheists: Sociability in the Natural History of Peoples

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*Abstract:* Locke's social philosophy is developed considering reports that make up the knowledge about distant peoples. Throughout the work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke brings several mentions of the travel reports to different lands of the terrestrial globe, Brazil, Siam, China, Africa, Middle East, peoples of the north. This strategy of the *Essay* has the function of basing a diversified picture of the beliefs and customs of peoples throughout the globe. About the moral framework of peoples, we question the following, does Locke's philosophy allow us to sustain that morality and sociability depend of knowledge of God? Within these discussions, the problem of the existence of the atheists and atheist societies was present both in travel reports and in the works of English philosopher himself. This fact denotes, we think, that Locke understood that the atheist is effectively a natural condition of humanity. Therefore, how could these ideas be reconciled with the exclusion of the atheists in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, is it possible to sustain or not the intolerance of the atheists? This paper aims to develop the thesis according to which beliefs in deities can be developed, including the idea of God. However, this does not necessarily correspond to a civilizational advance, nor does it have a universal consensus, it may just be a moral rule better suited to a particular social life.

*Keywords:* Locke, atheists, natural history of humanity, travel literature, diversity of peoples, toleration.

## 1. *Introduction*

John Locke's social and moral thought has as one of its characteristics the use of the travel literature in the search to trace a kind of natural history of peoples that can support a coherent social and moral philosophy. On this, Locke devoted much of his attention to studying the customs, beliefs, and forms of social organization of peoples around the world and which were the object of

the reports of navigators and adventurers. The thesis that this paper aims to defend is guided by what we call John Locke's anthropological atheism, which could also be called natural atheism. This means verifying the historical existence of peoples that Locke calls atheists, as well as the permanence of atheists even in Christian societies.

The thesis of the atheistic naturalness of humanity is supported by Locke from reports that compose a vision about peoples who would be in different stages of sociability. By investigating the way in which the English philosopher structures the natural picture of peoples, we can determine with greater clarity the figure of the atheist present in these reports and, at the same time, the meaning of this social and anthropological category within Lockean social philosophy. Through this guidance, we can launch questions motivated by the following dilemmas, if God is necessary, why is his idea not innate? Why does it not receive a universal consensus from humanity? Why does sociability not depend on belief in the existence of God? After all, if such a belief were necessary, how would it explain the existence of peoples without God? This is a thorny issue in Locke's moral thinking, and his apparent conclusion to define the atheist as a dangerous individual only further blurs these dilemmas. This is one of the reasons why Locke was accused of having unorthodox positions on religious dogmas, despite condemning atheism in works such as *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689).

There is, in a way, a difficulty on this subject because if atheism is natural and the sociability of peoples does not depend on any idea of God, we would be in flagrant contradiction with certain aspects of Locke's moral philosophy. And this dubiousness is present in several important works by Locke such as *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *Second Treatise of Government*, but, for Locke's interpreters, the issue takes shape with the statement in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* that atheists should not be tolerated. According to Locke, "those are not all to be tolerated who deny the being of God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist"<sup>1</sup>. This sentence is often used to emphasize a Locke whose morality would derive from the existence of belief in God and therefore the atheist should not be tolerated since he would be naturally immoral, someone who would not respect the ties that unite individuals in society<sup>2</sup>. Despite being an

<sup>1</sup> J. Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, in *Id.*, *The Works in Ten Volumes*, Th. Tegg, London 1823, vol.6, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> As A. C. dos Santos says, "there was always the link between the atheist and the libertine, the heretic or a profane monster, who has an obscure instinct, founded on ignorance. It never hurts to re-

important passage, if analyzed in isolation, it answers very little to the questions raised above. Even if we suppose that atheists could not be tolerated at all — those are not all to be tolerated—, this position already comes up short in the question of knowing who is an atheist or not, initially, because it is possible that the denial of God occurs only in thought, without being externalized; moreover, what would it mean *are not all to be tolerated?*

It is necessary to consider that Locke always has in mind that many forms of religiosity do not profess the Judeo-Christian belief in God, such as idolaters and pagans, among other possible forms of religiosity. Which, even having some kind of divinity, are unaware of the existence of God, according to the traditional attributes of Western theology; and among peoples of Christian tradition, and other monotheistic religions, this notion of God is more diverse than univocal<sup>3</sup>. In this regard, would Locke be claiming that only atheists who externalize an atheist movement could not be tolerated? Could atheism as a simple fact of thought be avoided?

In this paper, we will explore these questions from the way in which Locke investigates the diversity of atheists in the history known and reported by the writers of travel books, beliefs in idols, forms of mysticism, all of them unrelated to monotheism. As the author of the *Epistola de Tolerantia* had in mind in defending that,

Now, whosoever maintains that idolatry is to be rooted out of any place by laws, punishments, fire, and sword, may apply this story to himself: for the reason of the thing is equal, both in America and Europe. And neither pagans there, nor any dissenting Christians here, can with any right be deprived of their worldly goods by the predominating faction of a court-church<sup>4</sup>.

It is in this context that the more general question of toleration must be inserted, based on the way in which Locke understood human nature, the customs of peoples, beliefs and traditions. In other words, the intolerance of the atheists, or even the thesis that the atheist is an unsociable being, collides with an unequivocal fact, namely, the existence of several atheist peoples in Locke's

member that in 1677, the English Parliament made atheism a capital offense, and in 1697, through the Blasphemy Act, condemned polytheists, false Christians, and anyone who blasphemed the doctrine of the Trinity". A.C. Dos Santos, "O espírito do ateísmo em Locke", in *Filosofia Unisinos* 15 (2014), 3, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of this argument, see the paper: S.H.S. Silva, "História natural e ateísmo antropológico em John Locke", in *Cadernos Espinosanos* 38 (2017), 107-26.

<sup>4</sup> Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, cit., p. 36.

call of the *history of mankind*. We then arrive at the limit situation of the argument and enter into the realism of the Lockean conception of history in which what is observed are more the varieties of customs, beliefs, disbelieves, and every possible kind of morality, something that denotes the diversity of human types. In this way, the moral solution of Locke's thought is not, in fact, to be religious or a believer in a Divinity, but, as he will say in the *Letter*, that people were honest, peaceful, and hardworking; and "If a heathen doubt of both Testaments, he is not therefore to be punished as a pernicious citizen"<sup>5</sup>. It is symptomatic that these facts are denied, and that we remain in the most conservative readings of Locke as a mere religious moralist, incapable of understanding the diversity inherent in humanity.

It is this information that leads him to enter the reports about the most diverse peoples, beyond the simple smoke of English and European chimneys because, otherwise, one could not talk about humanity or human nature. Thus, Locke's contact with travel reports, which encompassed practically the entire known world up to his time, revealed to Locke an incredible and often surprising diversity. Locke realized, for example, that the absence of the monotheistic God in the culture of traditional Brazilian peoples did not compromise the sociability of these peoples, however diverse their customs were. We can, according to Locke's position, affirm that these peoples were atheists because they did not have a monotheistic conception of divinity, but were knowledgeable of natural right and natural laws without which it is impossible to live in society. The accounts of the diversity of peoples allow Locke to advance his ideas in this direction, and these positions appear in works such as *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *Second Treatise of Government*, in many passages of the *Letters Concerning Toleration*, in the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, a work that Locke contributes to the elaboration.

Other arguments could be added to these, such as the question of understanding that cannot be determined by external measures<sup>6</sup>, the distinction between religion and state, etc. But we want to pay attention to the argument of the relativism of customs, the result of a historical naturalism supported by anthropological accounts of travel literature. Above all, from the analysis of passages of works published by Locke, where we will give emphasis, to the first

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> About this, see the book: S.H.S. Silva, *Tolerância Civil e Religiosa em John Locke*, EDUFS, São Cristóvão, 2013. Especially the second chapter: "Religious Toleration", where we investigate Locke's theses about toleration as an inner principle, of the way individuals form beliefs and ideas, something that, according to Locke, cannot be changed by external measures.

Book of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and to the general thesis that structure the *Second Treatise of Government*. We will delve into Locke's reception of travel literature to investigate the category of the atheist and what position he plays in his works. In this way, our thesis is that the English philosopher constructs what we can call anthropological atheism, which is a naturalistic qualification, supported by the natural history of peoples. With this, we can correctly define how Locke's social thought was developed, revealing the complexity of his moral theory, beyond the simple sentence that atheists cannot be tolerated because of their atheism.

To accomplish this task, we will begin by highlighting the interpretive tradition that has been forming on the subject of travel literature in Locke (1); then, we will investigate the atheist as a natural category of humanity, a thesis built from travel reports (2). We will deepen the theme of atheistic societies with reflections on how Locke elaborated the theory of the state of nature (3); finally, we will defend a position on the place of the atheist in the Lockean theory of toleration (4).

### 1. *Locke and travel literature: philosophical use and interpretive tradition*

Locke had an extensive number of documents relating to travel accounts, both books and engravings. But this theme has always been marginal within the traditional studies of the English philosopher. However, since the 1950s, debates began on the foundations of travel literature in Locke's philosophy. Hideo Suzuki's paper on Locke's ethnographic theory (1956) reflects this interest, shortly after Maurice Cranston's *John Locke: A Biography* (1957) mentioned Locke's collection of ethnographic prints. Another fundamental study to understand this interpretative bias is the paper by William G. Batz, which defends what he called the "historical anthropology of John Locke", encouraged by Peter Laslett who had already pointed out, in 1960, Locke's interest in this kind of literature in the composition of the *Two Treatises*<sup>7</sup>.

Since then, the research that highlights this characteristic of Lockean philosophy has been gaining strength, above all, with the fruitful publications of Daniel Carey on the subject. We can say that an interpretive tradition has been forming that investigates the ethnographic and anthropological bases of Locke's

<sup>7</sup> W.G. Batz, "The Historical Anthropology of John Locke", in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35 (1974), p. 669.

philosophy, from the way in which travel reports are used in several of his works. More recently, many scholars have developed interests in this topic, such as Ann Talbot, Patrick Connolly, Mariana Françaço, Antônio dos Santos, and many other scholars. These studies have raised fundamental aspects that support Locke's theses on the most diverse topics, from moral and social issues to investigations of what Locke calls natural philosophy. In fact, through these studies of Lockean anthropology and ethnography, the themes are mixed in such a way that both the speculation of natural philosophy and the political, moral and epistemological themes emerge together from the discussion of travel accounts.

Travel accounts are important both in political and social works, such as the *Two Treatises of Government* and *Letters Concerning Toleration*, and in works on the theory of knowledge, such as the *Essay*. In political and toleration works, travel reports allow Locke both to conceive the real possibility of the existence of a natural state, as he himself will affirm when mentioning the forests of Brazil, in the New World, and to investigate the natural diversity of beliefs and customs, something that pulverizes any possibility of universality of beliefs founded on the Judeo-Christian trunk. In *Essay*, this theme is fundamental for the constitution of the natural human being, as elements of its physical and intellectual constitution because only from this constitution will it be possible to define the human and affirm the limit and extension of its understanding.

In the specific case of the *Essay*, his anthropological perspective in the formation of the theory of human history stands out. Resorting to what he calls the *history of mankind* means diving into the investigation of the history, social and moral life of the most diverse known peoples. For Lockean philosophy, these are fundamental data without which the theory of the *Essay* and the thesis of the historical reality of the state of nature in the *Second Treatise* would not exist. Travel literature allows accessing the state of these diverse peoples regarding the use they make of their ideas, something that structures their societies and the basis of morality.

Such interest in collecting materials that portrayed diverse peoples made Locke come to own a large collection of travel books, one of the largest of his time. According to Ann Talbot, who carried out a thorough study of this library, of the approximately 3,641 books in her library, "275 works that could be classified as travel or geography"<sup>8</sup>. In addition, Locke also had an extensive collection of the ethnographic prints that portrayed the life, manners and

<sup>8</sup> A. Talbot, "The Great Ocean of knowledge": *The Influence of Travel Literature on the Works of John Locke*, Brill, Leiden 2010, p. 3.

physical features of the most diverse peoples. Mariana Françaço published a detailed study of this material “[...] depicting indigenous peoples from Brazil, Angola, the Cape of Good Hope, Japan, China, the Indonesian archipelago (Java, Ternate, Amboine, Macassar), Malaysia, and a person labelled as ‘Tunquinese’ (probably referring to the Gulf of Tonkin, an arm of the South China Sea, currently part of Vietnam)”<sup>9</sup>.

Therefore, Locke had a great fascination for acquiring these materials, and through them, he aims to compose a true “natural history of man”<sup>10</sup>, based on the experience of those who described the diversity of humanity, a fundamental aspect for the construction of the history of empirical knowledge of peoples. Without this, Locke’s philosophy as we know it would not exist, and it is through these accounts that we can effectively know the thorny issues that were at the basis of his thinking, as in the writing of the first book of the *Essay*, in which Locke highlights a natural feature of humanity, too polemic for the philosophy of its time, namely, the atheism.

## 2. *The atheist as the natural type of humanity: reflections on An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Locke’s best-known works were published in 1689. The *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, a work written in different periods, with sketches dating from 1671 (Draft A and B) and 1680 (Draft C), had its complete version only published at the end of 1689, with the edition dated 1690<sup>11</sup>. Accordingly James Tyrrell, “recalled some years later, the discussion has been ‘about the principles of morality and revealed religion’”<sup>12</sup>. A vast work covering a wide and diverse content, the *Essay* received wide attention in the 18th century, had four editions published during Locke’s lifetime and the final version was writ-

<sup>9</sup> M.C. Françaço, “Inhabitants of Rustic Parts of the World: John Locke’s Collection of Drawings and the Dutch Empire in Ethnographic Types”, in *History and Anthropology* 28 (2017), 3, p. 349.

<sup>10</sup> D. Carey, “Locke, Travel Literature and the Natural History of Man”, in *Seventeenth Century* 11 (1996), 2, p. 260.

<sup>11</sup> According to Roger Woolhouse, “Toward the end of May— 1689 —, urged by his friends he said, Locke came to an agreement with the bookseller, Thomas Basset to print and publish *An Concerning Human Understanding* [...]. On December, Locke announced (triumphantly), ‘today, as I hope, the last sheet of my treatise on Human Understanding has been printed’ [...]. The book (carrying the date ‘1690’) was on sale within a week or so [...]”. R. Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 272 e p. 279.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.



ten in four books: 1) against innate ideas; 2) the origin of ideas; 3) words and things; 4) knowledge and opinion.

In the *Essay*, Locke undertakes a characterization of the human and its progress in obtaining knowledge, therefore, he asserts that, even though there have been different types of societies throughout human history, humans would not stray too far from the dictates of natural law. Furthermore, Locke irrevocably affirmed his will to free humanity from the desire for a universal knowledge of questions “to which our understandings are not suited [...]”<sup>13</sup>. The limitation of human knowledge, very small compared to the totality of the corpuscles of matter<sup>14</sup>, does not interfere with humanity’s duty to know the rules of moral truth. Locke conceived the human understanding similar to the “line” of a ship whose length reveals, even without being able to scrutinize the depth of the ocean, the navigable limit of the waters. This metaphor is very illustrative and deserves more attention because it is directly related to the moral conduct of men. So,

It is of great use to the sailor, to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean. It is well he knows, that it is long enough to reach the bottom, at such places as are necessary to direct his voyage, and caution him against running upon shoals that may ruin him. Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct. If we can find out those measures, whereby a rational creature, put in that state in which man is in this world, may and ought to govern his opinions, and actions depending on thereon, we need not be troubled that some other things escape our knowledge<sup>15</sup>.

These measures consistent with the possibilities of reaching our understanding are the rules established by the law of nature, which correspond to the basic teachings of life in society.

Starting from these relatively optimistic assumptions about the powers of human reason, we find, in the first book of the *Essay*, several passages in which

<sup>13</sup> J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P.H. Nidditch, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, I. i. 4, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, I. i. 5, p. 45. Locke was an adherent of the corpuscular theory of matter in agreement with Robert Boyle, with whom he was a collaborator at the Royal Society. According to Locke, “I have here instanced in the corpuscularian hypothesis, as that which is thought to go farthest in an intelligible explication of those qualities of bodies” (*ibid.*, IV. iii. 16, p. 547). By corpuscles, Locke understood “[...] minute and insensible parts [...]” that makes up the material substance (*ibid.*, IV. iii.11, p. 544). For the discussion of corpuscularism and experimental method in Robert Boyle’s philosophy, see: L. Zaterka, *A Filosofia Experimental na Inglaterra do Século XVII*, Humanitas, São Paulo 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Locke, *Essay*, cit., I. i.6, p. 46.



Locke defends that there is no innate content in human minds. Locke engages in a real battle against the theory of universal consensus which, among other things, consisted of a thesis used in religious arguments, whether to affirm the innate idea of the Judeo-Christian God and the religious morality that follows from that idea. Although not referring to a particular interlocutor, Locke was refuting the traditional ideas defended by philosophers called Cambridge Platonists, whose most prominent figures were Ralph Cudworth, Henry More and Benjamin Whichcote. In other words, in the English context, the universal consensus thesis was intended to confront any possibility of holding the atheism as a natural possibility. According to Daniel Carey, “Cudworth, together with his Cambridge colleague Henry More, argued that universal consent constituted a proof that the soul possessed an idea or inclination toward God [...] introduced his supporting evidence without qualification, citing a familiar mixture of classical and contemporary examples, including the peoples of India, China, Siam, Guinea, and, [...] Peru, Mexico, Virginia and New England”<sup>16</sup>. In this way, Locke, by collapsing the scope of universal consent, in addition to the immense fight he fought with theologians<sup>17</sup> and theistic philosophers, also allowed to sustain their philosophy within the framework of a completely original method, in which morality will derive from reason and, even though God exists and having instituted laws of nature, the morality is limited to the simple understanding of the law and not to the difficult knowledge of God. It seems to me that this is also the position of Daniel Carey, “in the *Essay*, he confirmed not only the diversity of moral principles but also that

<sup>16</sup> D. Carey, “Locke, Shaftesbury, and Bayle and the Problem of Universal Consent”, in P. Müller (ed.), *New Ages, New Opinions: Shaftesbury in his World and Today*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt 2014, p. 207.

<sup>17</sup> This is the case of the immense exchange of barbs between Locke and the theologian Edward Stillingfleet who wrote the work *Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1697), in which the prelate of Worcester associated the *Essay* to the religious heterodoxy of John Toland. In general, Stillingfleet accused the *Essay* of threatening metaphysical notions of fundamental theological doctrines such as the trinity, the soul, and the existence of God. According to Stillingfleet, “[...] the ingenious Author of the *Essay of humane Understanding* (from whence these Notions are borrowed to serve other purposes than he intended them) that he makes the Case of *Spiritual*, and *Corporeal Substances* to be alike”. E. Stillingfleet, *Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, Printed by J. H. for Henry Mortlock, London 1697, p. 239. Locke wrote three open letters to Stillingfleet, who had the opportunity to replicate the two initials because he died in 1699, the year of publication of Locke’s third Letter. In the Bishop’s first reply, the theme of universal consensus, rejected by Locke, is rescued with a kind of accusation against Locke as a detractor of religion, or even of atheism, “and what then would you think of one who should go about to invalidate this argument?” E. Stillingfleet, *The Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to Mr. Locke’s Letter Concerning Some Passages Relating to his Essay of Humane Understanding*, Printed by J. H. for Henry Mortlock, London 1697, p. 89.

entire peoples exist without a belief in God”<sup>18</sup>.

Furthermore, since nothing is innate, Locke opens the possibility for the diversity and difference of the types and manners of human societies. For this, it is necessary that the innate theory be denied in two senses, in speculative and moral principles. For example, the fundamental speculative principle of identity: “whatsoever is, is; and it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be”, or that a triangle is necessarily a figure of three angles. Likewise, there are no innate practical principles in the mind such as, for example, “that one should do as he would be done unto”<sup>19</sup>. In turn, moral and speculative principles can be easily demonstrated that they are not innate by resorting to the following sources:

a) History of mankind:

“I appeal to any, who have been but moderately conversant in the history of mankind, and looked abroad beyond the smoke of their own chimneys. Where is that practical truth, that is universally received without doubt or question, as it must be, if innate?”<sup>20</sup>.

b) Natural condition of children:

“A child knows not that three and four are equal to seven, till he comes to be able to count seven, and has got the name and idea of equality”<sup>21</sup>.

c) Relativity of customs:

“The great variety of opinions concerning moral rules, which are to be found among men, according to the different sorts of happiness they have a prospect of, or propose to themselves”<sup>22</sup>.

If all knowledge is acquired, inevitably, the idea of God is not innate either. In fact, Locke extends this conclusion to wider contours, when he states that “I grant the existence of God is so many ways manifest, and the obedience we owe him so congruous to the light of reason, that a great part of mankind give testimony to the law of nature [...], without either knowing or admitting the true ground of morality; which can only be the will and law of a God [...]”<sup>23</sup>. This passage is fundamental because it summarizes what Locke understands by natural sociability, but it turns out to be a fact completely unnoticed by many scholars of his philosophy and insist on the more traditional interpretation of

<sup>18</sup> Carey, “Locke, Shaftesbury, and Bayle and the Problem of Universal Consent”, cit., p. 210.

<sup>19</sup> Locke, *Essay*, cit., I. iii. 4, p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, I. iii. 2, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I. ii. 16, p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, I. iii. 6, p. 68.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, I. iii. 6, p. 68.

Locke as a thinker of religious morals; even if that is so, the situation is much broader, as it involves the natural condition of individuals who are naturally atheists. And most importantly, this condition, as Locke himself stated in the *Essay*, allows a large part of humanity to witness the law of nature without actually knowing its creator.

This is because, according to Locke, individuals are rational creatures that possess in germs the faculties necessary for social existence and the appropriation of natural goods. This characteristic opens the possibility for a variety of peoples, a consequence of the combinations of elements that follow certain standards of reasonableness, where the individuals would be like the corpuscles of this diversified social fabric called mankind. Knowledge of this diversity of beliefs, customs and social structure in the history of mankind was revealed to Locke, above all, by the travel literature that flooded the Old World with descriptions of distant peoples. Travel books provided the details of distant societies, with peoples living in a state of nature, many of them existing in full natural sociability, but completely atheists. Such atheistic societies, emphasized by Locke, corresponded to peoples understood as uncultivated and also among those who developed art, science and philosophy, as is the case of China.

Throughout the first book of the *Essay*, the existence of peoples who had no notion of God is a thesis assumed by Locke as a scientific fact— a kind of anthropological atheism— grounded in the descriptive sources of travel literature. The references to Garcilaso de la Vega about the cannibalism practiced by the Caribbs of Peru and the Tupinambás of Brazil, who “had no name for God, no religion, no worship”<sup>24</sup>; and this fact should not be understood as the absence of shared reason. The America was always characterized by Locke as a kind of paradise found, where natural sociability, in its purest state, could be verified. According to Ann Talbot, “at the same time as the *Essay*, demonstrated that Locke thought of all human beings as rational and capable of gaining a knowledge of the world and the laws of nature even when living in a state of nature. Savages were, for Locke, as rational as any other human beings”<sup>25</sup>. The absence of the innate idea of God would not compromise the social existence of these peoples; they did not degenerate socially because they did not know something close to the idea of God. But the existence of peoples without God, and even without gods, or worshipping elements distinct from traditional divinities, such as bodies of nature, even animals and types of anthropomorphisms, this challenged the defense

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., I. iii. 9, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Talbot, “*The Great Ocean of Knowledge*”, cit., p. 142.

of the necessity of this idea. Locke has in mind that, even without the notions of God and religion, men can live in society because they understand the just and the unjust through simple natural light. As reported by José de Acosta, a Spanish adventurer who traveled through America and wrote the work *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, about the customs of the “Chichimecas” — one of the first peoples who inhabited Central America —, “no tenían superior, ni le reconocían, ni adoraban dioses, ni tenían ritos, ni religión alguna”<sup>26</sup>. It is this idyllic vision of savage, atheistic and idolatrous America, in a complete state of nature or with the formation of governments still incipient, that permeates much of Locke’s considerations on the state of nature in the *Second Treatise*.

Not satisfied with these radical propositions for the time, Locke wrote yet another chapter in the first book of the *Essay* to return to issues concerning the diversity of peoples. In this regard, it is important to note that one of the fundamental consequences of this method is that “where the ideas themselves are not, there can be no knowledge, no assent, no mental or verbal propositions about them”<sup>27</sup>. This fact was demonstrated by the observation of the lack of knowledge possessed by the children about the need to worship God and “[...] the atheists, taken notice of amongst the ancients, and left branded upon the records of history, hath not navigation discovered, in these later ages, whole nations at the bay of Soldania, in Brazil, in Boranday, and in the Caribbee islands [...], amongst whom there was to be found no notion of a God, no religion?”<sup>28</sup>. Locke’s references to this famous passage come from various travel writers such as, *Histoire d’un Voyage Faict en la Terre du Brésil* (1578) of the French Calvinist adventurer Jean de Léry, and *Historia de la Provincia del Paraguay y de la Compañía de Jesús* (1673) of the Jesuit missionary Nicolás del Techo, French naturalized in Paraguay. According to Léry, “*Tupinambas de l’Amérique [...] en premier lieu outre qu’ils n’ont nulle conoissance du seul et vrai Dieu [...] ils ne confessent, ni n’adorent aucuns dieux celestes ni terrestres*”<sup>29</sup>. According to del Techo, among the peoples of America there were those who “had little knowledge of God and, consequently, practiced no worship [...]”<sup>30</sup>. As we can see, these accounts quoted by Locke were about peoples without the development of arts and sciences.

However, Locke makes it clear that the knowledge of God depends on the orientation of thought for this purpose, something that is not necessarily re-

<sup>26</sup> J. de Acosta, *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, Madrid 1894, p. 233.

<sup>27</sup> Locke, *Essay*, cit., I. iv. 1, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, I. iv. 8, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> J. de Léry, *Histoire d’un Voyage Faict en la Terre du Brésil*, La Rochelle 1578, p. 259.

<sup>30</sup> N. del Techo, *The History of the Provinces of South America*, Churchill, London 1732, p. 658.

lated to the level of cultural development of a civilization. This point is fundamental because the *Essay* asserts that there are peoples who, even living under the domain of the arts and where science flourished, even so, “[...] for want of a due application of their thoughts this way, want the idea and knowledge of God”<sup>31</sup>. The examples cited by Locke are China and Siam. These nations possessed arts and culture, development of commerce and philosophy, like Confucianism, but remains without God. Above all, through the reports of French diplomat Simon de la Loubère and Spanish historian Martín F. de Navarrete, “[...] will convince us that the sect of the *literari*, or learned, keeping to the old religion of China, and the ruling party there, are all of them atheists [...]”. Furthermore, speaking to the European society of his time, “[...] perhaps if we should, with attention, mind the lives and discourses of people not so far off, we should have too much reason to fear, that many in more civilized countries have no very strong and clear impressions of a Deity upon their minds”<sup>32</sup>. Even in religions where a correct teaching about the oneness necessary to the idea of God prevails, many individuals still imagine him as a lord seated in heaven watching his creation. Locke suggests that, even though God is an evident truth that can be extracted from the natural order, the human conduct does not require knowledge of the existence of God<sup>33</sup>. Faced with such difficulty, human reason can derive the dictates of morality, create bonds of social union

<sup>31</sup> Locke, *Essay*, cit., I. iv. 8, p. 87. In chapter X of the *Essay*, Locke is quite clear about the difficulties of knowledge of God, which even being something evident demands a series of endeavors of the limited reason of humans to understand something infinite and eternal. And it is this inability that leads to a diversity of conceptions of divinities, and even to having no notion of any form of divinity. Despite being a chapter to prove the existence of God, Locke’s conclusion is more skeptical than the idea of the chapter makes clear. So, “this is to make our comprehension infinite, or God finite, when what He can do is limited to what we can conceive of it. If you do not understand the operations of your own finite mind, that thinking thing within you, do not deem it strange, that you cannot comprehend the operations of that eternal infinite mind, who made and governs all things, and whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain”. *Ibid.*, IV. x.19. For a more detailed reflection on this subject, see: S.H.S. Silva, “Locke e a Crítica à Prova Cartesiana da Existência Necessária de Deus: Um Problema Moral”, in *Polymatheia* 4, (2008), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Locke, *Essay*, cit., I. iv. 8, p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> John Marshall, in his monumental: *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (2006), fails to resolve the tension between the condemnation of atheists in the texts on toleration and their rehabilitation in the first book of the *Essay*. This problem is common and stems from the more traditional interpretation by which Locke had condemned atheists in several of his works. However, the problem is not solved so simply. Even without increasing toleration for atheists, undeniably, Locke perceived the atheists naturally and as capable of morality. So Marshall was forced to admit, at the end of his book, that the “[...] recognition of existence of the atheist societies of Siam and perhaps China in the *Essay* brought Locke some way towards the positions taken by Bayle”. J. Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 704.

and minimal civility that allow the continuity of a society without the need for the idea of Divinity.

On this, let us take as a hypothesis that the naturally atheist man portrayed by Locke is that of the American societies which, in the *Second Treatise*, are understood, according to Batz, as “a universal prototype [...] in sketching the hypothetical State of Nature”<sup>34</sup>. Starting from our initial thesis that sociability does not depend on the knowledge or worship of God, we can demonstrate this by the parallel between the *Second Treatise’s* conclusions and the discussion on the diversity of peoples present in the *Essay*.

### 3. *Until the invention of money, the whole world was like America*

The appropriate starting point for entering Locke’s thinking on the state of nature are the conclusions established in the second chapter of the *Second Treatise*, whose title outlines its object: *Of the state of nature*. The path is traditional, the theory of political society must start from the questioning about its origin, something that leads him to the state where humanity naturally found itself. This natural condition consists of what is commonly called the state of nature, as opposed to civil society that originates through the consent of each individual.

According to Locke, the state of nature consists of a social condition of perfect freedom under the limits of the law of nature, as well as equality between beings who have the same mental faculties. In that chapter, Locke understands humanity universally, as the totality of “creatures of the same species and rank”<sup>35</sup>, which live a life without subordination or submission, in which the power of jurisdiction of the law of nature is reciprocal<sup>36</sup>. That way,

<sup>34</sup> Batz, “The Historical Anthropology of John Locke”, cit., p. 666.

<sup>35</sup> J. Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. by P. Laslett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, § 4, p. 269.

<sup>36</sup> The theory of knowledge developed by Locke portrays men with universally equal capabilities. However, it is more developed in some peoples than others due to education, habits and customs, which produce both a variety of opinions and the development of cognitive abilities. This understanding is part of his epistemological conception of the human species and anthropological of humanity that allow universalizing freedom and equality as a natural fact and not particular to a given society. It is always necessary to remember that in the premises of the first book of the *Essay*, Locke argues that all knowledge is acquired, but the germs of faculties are innate.

The state of Nature has a law of Nature to govern it, which obliges every one, and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions<sup>37</sup>.

The natural individual has the ability to understand the law of nature — which is, as we have seen from the *Essay*, fully adapted to the simplest understanding. As long as this set of general rules is observed, everyone will be able to judge and mutually preserve freedom, health, integrity, and property appropriated by work.

Thus, the right to execute the law of nature against its transgressors is placed in the hands of humanity, and whoever disobeys it “[...] declares himself to live by another rule than that of reason and common equity [...]; the tie which is to secure them from injury and violence being slighted and broken by him, which being a trespass against the whole species [...]”<sup>38</sup>. All humanity, due to the obligation to preserve the collectivity, has the duty to punish the transgressor as judge and executor of the law of nature. For Locke, it would be a *strange doctrine* to defend that in the state of nature everyone has the right to *punish* the transgressor and to *repair* the harm suffered. In other words, this “strange doctrine” would be based on the possession of these two natural powers — punishing and reparation—, and against any offense to the “right rule of reason”<sup>39</sup> “[...] may be punished to that degree, and with so much severity, as will suffice to make it an ill bargain to offend”<sup>40</sup>. The “strange doctrine” of judging and executing according to the law of nature allows the establishment of justice in the state of nature.

Since the perfect liberty of natural life can give rise to partiality in the judgment and execution of the law of nature, when that natural life is corrupted<sup>41</sup>, the institution of government consists in a kind of medicine which should cure the disease which threatens to destroy the human species in its natural existence. In other words, the state of nature degenerates into a *state of war* and

<sup>37</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, cit., § 6, p. 271.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, § 8, p. 272.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, § 9, p. 273.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, § 12, p. 275.

<sup>41</sup> The basic principle of the politics and theory of knowledge is the appeal to the foundation of morality. The state of nature theorized by Locke is moral and based on two pillars: the theological institution according to which God, when creating the world, established laws to regulate human coexistence. Here then is the second aspect, even though they are not innate laws, men discover them by reason because are rational laws adequate to the mental powers of humanity. The moral and social nature of primitive communities is the result of divine legislation and of the power of human reason to understand these universal laws of conduct, even without knowing the existence of God.



enmity every time an individual declares himself against the rights of others, something that occurs not because humanity is incapable of living the natural morals, but because of inequality result of the invention of coin. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the difference established by Locke between the state of nature and the state of war— especially when mentioning the Hobbesian who had confused these two situations— because while the state of nature is peaceful, the other is of mutual destruction. Locke states in the chapter *Of the state of war*, the “want of a common judge with authority, puts all men in a state of nature: Force without right, upon a man’s person, makes a state of war, both where there is, and is not, a common judge”<sup>42</sup>. As the state of war is more dangerous in the state of nature because there is no common judge, at a certain stage of development of a given society, the solution to this great difficulty is to establish the corrective ties of politics, and to live on artificial moral laws.

The main cause of the rupture with the natural order, a disaggregated element and cause of civil disorders, is the emergence of expanded appropriation still in the state of nature and not the absence of belief in divinities. Appropriation beyond the need for use is made possible by the emergence of money that allows the profit of all surplus value of production. The consequence of this mechanism is an inequality never before observed in the state of nature. In the fifth chapter of the *Second Treatise [Of property]*, Locke argues that “no man’s labor could subdue or appropriate all, nor could his consume more than a small part [...] enjoyment”<sup>43</sup>. It was the invention of money that introduced greater possessions and a right to them, breaking the law of nature that restricted appropriation to usufruct. The use of money is the way in which the measure of work is undone and the inequality of private possessions becomes dominant as a way in which “a man may, rightfully and without injury, possess more than he himself can make use of by receiving gold and silver, which may continue long in a man’s possession without decaying for the overplus [...]”<sup>44</sup>. As we can see, there are two different stages within the state of nature, one initially peaceful, without extended property, whose economy was merely subsistence and lacked the institution of money. According to Batz, “This is the first and purest period of the State of Nature, a ‘Golden Age’ before ‘vain ambition [...] corrupted men’s minds”<sup>45</sup>. The second period is that of *amor sceleratus habendi* where the most important event, which corresponds to the end of the first era, consists

<sup>42</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, cit., § 19, p. 281.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, § 36, p. 292.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, § 50, p. 302.

<sup>45</sup> Batz, “The Historical Anthropology of John Locke”, cit., p. 668.

precisely in the invention of money and the expansion of inequality<sup>46</sup>.

The most emblematic example given by Locke of the golden age was the situation of the peoples of America to justify the theory of the state of nature, “thus, in the beginning, all the world was America, and more so than that is now; for no such thing as money was anywhere known”<sup>47</sup>. America for Locke would correspond to primeval natural life, a fact of natural history that could be proven by the accounts of peoples who live in this vast territory, but which serve as a mirror that reflects the past of political societies. As Daniel Carey well pointed out, “[...] America exists as a kind of political embryo, offering us an insight into the development of civil societies in Asia and Europe”<sup>48</sup>. To this end, Locke uses the accounts of the Spanish explorer José de Acosta, in the work *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias* (1590), as a historical and anthropological example that would prove the factual existence of the state of nature. Ann Talbot also highlights this detail, *The Two Treatises* was not a utopia, “although he invited his reader to imagine an island ‘separated from all possible commerce’ when he considered the effects of money, reflecting the extent to which utopian models had become the accepted method of thinking about society”<sup>49</sup>. The simple and historical method of the *Essay*— historical plain method — corresponds to the use of the investigative orientation developed by Robert Boyle, and by the members of the Royal Society, to analyze the natural history and the characteristics of the peoples non-Europeans. Thus, “and if Josephus Acosta’s word may be taken, he tells us that in many parts of America there was no government at all”. Furthermore, “there are great and apparent

<sup>46</sup> In this regard, it is fundamental to consider that Locke was fully aware of the exchange of work for money that established the relationship between master and servant and expanded the extremes of wealth and poverty among those involved in production. Thus, in the *Second Treatise*, “the turfs my servant has cut [...] becomes my property”. A similar thought reappears later on, “[...] a free man makes himself a servant of another by selling him for a certain time the service he undertakes to do in exchange for wages” (§ 28, p. 289 and § 85, p. 322). In *Considerations on the Consequences of Reducing Interest* (1691), Locke states: “it is a requirement of commerce that there be as much money as is necessary [...] to be constantly exchanged for commodities and labor”. J. Locke, *Considerações Sobre as Consequências da Redução dos Juros*, Editorial Humanitas, São Paulo 2005, p. 114. It is a fact that the alienation of work increases inequality by the simple fact that the good produced ceases to belong to the worker and becomes part of the property of the purchaser of the work. In turn, the sale of work never corresponds to the value of what is produced, and they receive “only enough money to buy food, clothes, and tools”. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>47</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, cit., § 49, p. 301.

<sup>48</sup> D. Carey, “Locke’s Anthropology: Travel, Innateness, and the Exercise of Reason”, in *The Seventeenth Century* 12 (2004), 2, p. 276.

<sup>49</sup> Talbot, “*The Great Ocean of Knowledge*”, cit., p. 89.

conjectures', says he, 'that these men [speaking of those of Peru] for a long time had neither kings nor commonwealths, but lived in troops, as they do this day in Florida— the Cheriquanas, those of Brazil, and many other nations, which have no kings, but, as certain occasions are offered in peace or war, they choose their captains as they please"<sup>50</sup>. This being the natural and primeval stage of humanity, the government was introduced little by little as coin and commerce took over the relations between the people.

With the continuous growth of economic inequality and insecurity in the preservation of properties, the only way out for certain human communities to return to the peace of the past was to formalize an original contract, leave the state of nature and start a body politic. Hence, governments have no "other end but the preservation of property"<sup>51</sup>. But if this is indeed Locke's understanding of natural morality, which, as we have been highlighting since the beginning of this paper, does not depend on belief in God, how to justify the need for religion and what the reason for the attack on atheists in the *A Letter Concerning Toleration*?

#### 4. *Is it true that atheists cannot be tolerated?*

Answering the question raised above is never an easy task because, as we have seen, there are several interpretive possibilities; however, undeniably, the atheist for Locke is a natural type. But, it is possible to ask, what does Locke actually mean by the anthropological category of the atheist? In this regard, it is possible to give two answers about what Locke actually means by an atheist. In the first book of the *Essay*, Locke, against the theory of universal consensus, understands the atheist as one who has no idea of God. That is a natural anthropological type because everyone is born without ideas imprinted in their minds, and the human mind is like a *white paper*. A human type that represents this natural model are the Tupinambás of Brazil, "they have not so much as a name for God, and have no religion, no worship"<sup>52</sup>. But not just the Tupinambás because, as humanity is naturally atheist, the reports show the inexistence of the knowledge of God in different peoples. On account of these theses, we could even say that there were more atheists in the world at the time of Locke than people who believed in his existence.

<sup>50</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, cit., § 102, p. 335.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, § 94, p. 329.

<sup>52</sup> Locke, *Essay*, cit., I. iii. 9, p. 70.

As it requires discipline and guidance to be developed, it is much simpler for people to live without the notion of God than otherwise, and this also makes many peoples take as something divine worship of things that are far from an awareness of Divinity. Locke is very clear about this, “and custom, a greater power than nature, seldom failing to make them worship for divine what she hath inured them to bow their minds, and submit their understandings to”<sup>53</sup>. The ordinary customs of peoples extend this natural atheism— not having the idea of God— to even greater levels, such as belief in idols, “it is easy to imagine how by these means it comes to pass, that men worship the idols that have been set up in their minds; grow fond of the notions they have been long acquainted with there; and stamp the characters of divinity upon absurdities and errors, become zealous votaries to bulls and monkeys; and contend too, fight, and die in defense of their opinions”<sup>54</sup>. In this way, Locke is never surprised by the presence of atheists in the history of the ancients and in the reports that navigation discovered in the bay of Soldania, in Brazil, in the Caribbee islands, Paraguay, “amongst whom there was to be found no notion of a God, no religion”<sup>55</sup>.

But not only those nations in which science and letters did not help in the development of the idea of God because nations that had the advantages of science also have little advance in the notion of God. Locke cites accounts of the Siamites, Chinese, and European nations of his time, “in more civilized countries have no very strong and clear impressions of a Deity upon their minds”<sup>56</sup>. Locke warns, “the case of all gentilism; nor hath even amongst Jews, Christians, and Mahometans, who acknowledged but one God, this doctrine, and the care taken in those nations to teach men to have true notions of a God, prevailed so far, as to make men to have the same and the true ideas of him”<sup>57</sup>. Added to these data, all kinds of anthropomorphisms and polytheism, about all these, “as the abbe de Choisy more judiciously remarks, in his *Journal du Voyage de Siam*, it consists properly in acknowledging no God at all”<sup>58</sup>. In other words, they are all atheistic peoples because they do not recognize and worship the “true God”, or even have no idea about any worship. All are part of the natural typology of the atheist in its various degrees and levels, from those peoples without any notion to those who have wrong worship about God because, “they had no true

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., I. iii. 25, p. 82.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., I. iii. 26, p. 83.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., I. iv. 8, p. 87.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., I. iv. 8, p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., I. iv. 16, p. 94.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., I. iv. 14, p. 92.

notion of God, where unity, infinity, and eternity were excluded”<sup>59</sup>.

Back to our question, should all these types of atheists classified here be tolerated or not? The answer, of course, is yes<sup>60</sup>. It is a natural atheism of those who have not correctly developed the idea of God or even arrived at any notion of worship and deities. Otherwise, the greater part of humanity would be condemned to intolerance. Furthermore, virtue is linked to public happiness, and an individual who does not know God can be a just and virtuous person, according to Locke,

For God having, by an inseparable connection, joined virtue and public happiness together, and made the practice thereof necessary to the preservation of society, and visibly beneficial to all with whom the virtuous man has to do; it is no wonder, that every one should not only allow, but recommend and magnify those rules to others, from whose observance of them he is sure to reap advantage to himself<sup>61</sup>.

All this is because the people take advantage of just action, without it being derived from conscience in a Lawgiver who has prescribed them, they do so simply for the benefits they will reap by acting in accordance with public acceptance. And, “Justice and truth are the common ties of society; and therefore even outlaws and robbers, who break with all the world besides, must keep faith and rules of equity amongst themselves, or else they cannot hold together”<sup>62</sup>. So, to whom does Locke refer when he says that atheists cannot be tolerated?

We have reached the end of our investigation, and we will answer the question raised since the introduction of this paper. When Locke denies toleration to atheists in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, he is thinking of another kind of atheist and not one who simply ignores or has an erroneous view of divinity. The atheist that Locke denies toleration would be the one who destroys the religion, this atheist would be a kind of intolerant and that exists in societies of expanded appropriation and corrupted by *amor sceleratus habendi*. In this intolerance of the atheist, Locke has in mind all who persecute religions and who make of the atheism a weapon against religion and this is very clear in the *Epistola*. According to Locke, “those that by their atheism undermine and

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., I. iv.15, p. 93.

<sup>60</sup> This orientation can also be confirmed by the considerations made in the Constitution of Carolina on the toleration of the natives of that territory. In paragraph 97 of the Constitution there is the following clarification: “but since the natives of this place, which will be part of our colonization, are totally strangers to Christianity, whose idolatry, ignorance, or deceit does not entitle us to expel them, or to hurt them”, J. Locke, *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, Penguin Books, London 1993.

<sup>61</sup> Locke, *Essay*, cit., I. iii. 6, p. 68.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., I. iii. 2.

destroy all religion, can have no pretence of religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of a toleration”<sup>63</sup>. These atheists would behave like members of an intolerant church, bringing chaos and destruction to civil society. It would be a specific type of atheist, where the spirit of sect and enthusiasm would be reconciled in individuals who make their atheism a vocation to eliminate religions and persecute churches. In them there is not simply a lack or ignorance about God, but the bellicose denial that compromises the bonds of civility and community proper to life in society, similar to the case of intolerant churches.

The scholar J. K. Numao, in a paper entitled *Locke on Atheism*, claims that, with this position, Locke would be distinguishing two kinds of atheism, “ignorant atheist, an atheist who has simply no yet developed the notion of a God. I distinguish this kind of atheism from speculative atheism”<sup>64</sup>. In this regard, if we start from the definition that “the speculative atheist is the one who examines religious propositions and then denies them”<sup>65</sup>, as a kind of philosophy without God and without being propagated in attacks on religion, we could say that these would not be the atheists condemned by Locke. Especially, because this classification could include the materialistic philosophies of the ancients and other types of doctrine that are not based on the idea of God. This is what Locke argues about the Chinese sect of the *Literati* that “are all of them atheists”<sup>66</sup>. Thus, if speculative atheism is understood simply as the philosophical denial of God without the consequent persecution and attempt to destroy religions, it is possible to understand that they would not be encouraged, but they would not be persecuted either. This case is very similar to what Locke argues in *A Second Letter Concerning Toleration*, against Jonas Proast,

Which is just such justice, as it would be for the magistrate to punish you for not being a Cartesian, ‘only to bring you to consider such reasons and arguments as are proper and sufficient to convince you’ when it is possible, 1. That you, being satisfied of the truth of your own opinion in philosophy, did not judge it worth while to consider that of Descartes. 2. It is possible you are not able to consider and examine all the proofs and grounds upon which he endeavors to establish his philosophy. 3. Possibly you have examined, and can find no reasons and arguments proper and sufficient to convince you<sup>67</sup>.

<sup>63</sup> Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, cit., p. 47.

<sup>64</sup> J.K. Numao, “Locke on Atheism”, in *History of Political Thought* 34 (2013), 2, p. 260.

<sup>65</sup> Passage quoted from the book: *Experiência e Moral*, of the scholar Marcelo Primo, Appris, 2021, p. 143.

<sup>66</sup> Locke, *Essay*, cit., I. iv. 8, p. 87.

<sup>67</sup> J. Locke, *A Second Letter Concerning Toleration*, in *Id.*, *The Works in Ten Volumes*, cit., p. 75.

The speculative atheism as a mere philosophical opinion which does not compromise civil peace would fall within that broad scope of respect for the diversity of opinion which Locke advocates, and the arguments are the impossibility of changing one's opinion by external measures and the passivity and civility of a certain position. In this way, intolerance to the atheist would be restricted to a certain type of virulent atheist, envisioned by Locke, who could attempt against civil peace.

Finally, what atheist could be tolerated? The answer already appears in the second part of Locke's argument against atheists in the *Letter*, "as for other practical opinions, though not absolutely free from all error, yet if they do not tend to establish domination over others, or civil impunity to the church in which they are taught, there can be no reason why they should not be tolerated"<sup>68</sup>. As we can see, among the different levels and species of atheists, those who try to impose dominion over others, destroying and persecuting churches and religions, should not be tolerated. The others, whether through ignorance or error in belief, there is no reason not to have toleration. And this list of civil freedom would include idolaters, pagans, polytheists, anthropomorphists, materialists, and individuals without any kind of belief or philosophical position on life and the origin of the universe.

### *Conclusion*

This article aimed to scrutinize the true meaning of atheism in John Locke's philosophy, for that, we emphasize the way in which the English philosopher used what he himself called the history of humanity in order to establish a conception of the human in a more plural way possible. In this way, Locke pays special attention to the history and reports of atheist peoples present throughout the travel books. We start from the way Locke approaches these accounts to defend the thesis of the atheist as a natural anthropological qualification of humanity because all humans would be born without any idea of God. And even those who arrive at it have difficulties in qualifying and correctly understanding the meaning of a unitary, eternal and infinite God.

By means of Locke's qualification of the types of atheists, we try to solve the problem of atheist intolerance in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. We have

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 47.



divided the arguments into two levels to show that in fact Locke does not tolerate a type of atheism, that intolerant atheism, which destroys religion and social peace. In turn, breaking down the same argument, we argue that the *Letter* does not contradict the *Essay's* positions when Locke states that the error of belief can be tolerated as long as it does not aim to establish dominance and persecution of differences.

In the end, we think to correct an old interpretation of Locke's thinking about atheism, which simply states that Locke condemns atheists, but at the same time does not go into the heart of the argument and does not even relate this position to the important considerations of Locke on atheist peoples or people with heterodox beliefs of the most diverse types.

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